

A man in a white shirt and a woman in a purple dress are kissing on a ship deck at sunset. The man is leaning in, and the woman is looking up at him. In the background, a large cruise ship with four yellow funnels is visible on the water under a purple and orange sky.

His heart is no match for a
lady hell-bent on
making him *hers*.

MARRIED
TO THE DARK
MARQUESS

Dark Destinations, Book Four

ALLYSON JELEYNE

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**MARRIED TO THE DARK
MARQUESS**

A Dark Destinations Novel

Allyson Jeleyne

For Wibbus, who crossed the Rainbow Bridge during
the writing of this novel.

Dollie Madison
(2005 - 2022)

PROLOGUE

It was a sad legacy that led the Marquess of Granborough to seek out his bride overseas. His late father had squandered the family fortune on drink, cards, and women. Rather than economize, his mother had ordered frocks, jewels, and carriages until her credit was denied at every fashionable establishment in London. She then abandoned her debts for a life of luxury on the Continent.

The pox had taken Father, and Mother had remarried last spring. Giles was left with a crumbling estate, neglected tenants, and a Mayfair townhouse he couldn't step foot in for fear of his creditors. He'd stripped the cellars and emptied the coffers until there was nothing left worth selling, and still, the bailiffs hounded him.

Giles needed money to save himself from bankruptcy. He needed food, clothes, and a roof over his head. There was no honest industry in England that could provide that amount of wealth.

No, indeed, there was a reason men like him sought heiresses from across the Atlantic. New York was filled with plutocrats who loved nothing more than to spoil their pretty daughters. What father wouldn't bankroll the ultimate triumph—an old and noble English title—for his darling girl?

Thankfully, Giles' cousin Caroline had married the son of a Yankee diplomat. They'd taken up residence in the Vanderheid mansion on Millionaire's Row, and had warmly welcomed Giles upon his arrival in the States.

So excited had the Vanderheids been to flaunt their illustrious connection to the British aristocracy, they'd put him up in their finest guest apartments, fed him and fêted him. They'd secured invitations for him from every Knickerbocker neighbor, and thanks to their hospitality—for which he *was* grateful—Giles hadn't known a sleepless night or an empty belly in longer than he cared to remember.

It was Cousin Caroline who ultimately came to his rescue. She understood that Giles required heaps of ready money, which eliminated many of the oldest and best families who were too heavily invested in their own ventures to bail him out. He required a set of parents who were willing to sell their daughter to a stranger from a distant land, which again eliminated many of the Vanderheid's neighbors who preferred to keep their fortunes and their daughters among their own kind.

Clever Caroline had given this reception in his honor, under the guise of introducing him to *all* of New York society. Invitations had extended down Fifth Avenue, farther than the fashionable addresses bordering Central Park. She'd summoned the daughters of her new-money connections, recalled friends from their rustications in Tuxedo Park, and—discreetly—brokered invitations for those who couldn't gain *entrée* to the Four Hundred any other way.

Giles stood at Caroline's side in her in-laws' vulgar Fifth Avenue ballroom. Cousin Caroline had done her best to soften the marble walls with garlands of greenery and trellises of roses. She placed pots of orchids atop gilded French side tables and hid buzzing electric lamps behind China vases filled with tall, blue delphiniums. There was no soft candlelight to flatter the guests, but a quartet of three-tiered crystal Electroliers illuminated the ballroom, their brilliant light reflected by a dozen mirrored panels in a garish imitation of Versailles' precious Hall of Mirrors.

He resisted the urge to shield his eyes from the glare.

He shook hands with yet another industrialist as Cousin Caroline assessed the crowd. "Miss McKee is rich but hasn't yet grown into her looks. Miss Bruerton is beautiful, but not

quite rich enough for your needs.” She pointed out another guest in the reception queue, explaining, “Madeleine de Gruyter is both pretty and rich, but her mother will settle for nothing less than a ducal coronet.”

Giles scanned the young ladies scattered about the room, a sea of billowing white satin ballgowns and fluttering fans. They dressed bridal and appeared virginal, yet the finest clothes and brightest jewels could not disguise the fact that this was, for all its grandeur, a flesh market.

“What about her?” he asked.

He spied a vibrant girl in the center of a crowd of belles. At that moment, she tossed her head back and laughed, sending the plume of ostrich feathers in her coiffure dancing. The swain at her side offered champagne, which she happily took. The group of girls gathered around her seemed to pay court to her, as though she were a princess...

As though she were a marchioness.

“You’ve a keen eye, Giles,” answered Caroline. “She is lovely.”

The girl was attractive, lively, and of an independent spirit. He wagered she wasn’t the sort of woman who clung to a man’s coattails or tugged at his sleeve for validation. She wouldn’t need a husband to tell her who she was, for she was already coming into her own.

“Yes, who is she?”

“Louisa Thurston Reid has a million dollars upfront and another fifty thousand per year. She is not of the Four Hundred though—regrettably, her father owns a Westchester carpet mill.”

“Sounds dreadful.” Surely, for that price, her pedigree could be overlooked. “Introduce us.”

Miss Thurston Reid was hastily fetched. She stood before Giles, a vision in lily-white Worth, as he looked her over. At first glance, she had a fair complexion, an angular face, and a flawless profile. Her figure was trim and pert.

She curtsied, though she failed to lower her eyes in deference to his rank. “My lord.”

Giles too kept his eyes on her.

She was bold, direct. Unflinching beneath his gaze, which had pinned so many British debutantes when his bachelorhood had still held promise. Who was he now to skewer her so?

Miss Thurston Reid refused to yield to him. They studied one another in a silence that must’ve been awkward to anyone observing their exchange. Somewhere a glass shattered, and they both looked away.

The girl smiled slyly. “How fortuitous. I wasn’t sure who of us would break first.”

He disliked her flat, nasally accent, so different from the polished articulation of aristocratic ladies. But she spoke clearly and proudly, and he admired that. “Pencil me in for a dance.”

Miss Thurston Reid handed over her dance card. He scanned it—names filled the slots claiming waltzes, polkas, mazurkas, galops, reels, and even rags. Everything for the next hour was spoken for, and Giles dared not wait that long to take her in hand.

He crossed out some unlucky fellow’s name. “This waltz will do.”

She raised one perfectly-shaped eyebrow at this brazen disregard of the rules, yet she didn’t protest. “Very well.”

She allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor. They joined hands and began to spin in perfect step to “*Valse Romantique*.”

“Tell me something about yourself,” he asked.

“There’s nothing you don’t already know—or haven’t you heard of my million-dollar dowry?”

Lord, but she was forthright. Rather than feel insulted, Giles afforded her that same courtesy. “I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

A lesser woman might've faltered at such a frank admission, but not her. Miss Thurston Reid rounded a corner of the ballroom in perfect grace.

"You're a good dancer," he said, "but are you educated?"

She nodded. "Miss Brown's School for Young Ladies. If I grow bored of being a belle, perhaps a semester or two at Vassar College might liven things up for me."

"You want to attend university?"

She shrugged. "I want everything."

Spoiled creature. "No doubt you expect to get it—*everything*, that is. I wager you've something like a shopping list with boxes to tick for your many accomplishments."

"Certainly! Shall I boast of them to you? Between diamonds from Tiffany and frocks from Emile Pingat, I desire a degree in economics and a career in diplomacy."

"Were you an English deb, you'd hope for nothing more than a house in London and a husband's indulgence."

"I want that, too."

She smiled and Giles sighed. "In a simpler world, there'd be no need for this... grasping."

"Oh, yes. We'd all fall neatly into place."

"Falling into place is the English way. You'll learn that if ever you come over."

She laughed openly, as though he'd told a great joke. "I am obliged to you for the warning. I'll be certain to lower my expectations to suit your society *if* I decide to come over."

"Respectfully, Miss Thurston Reid, I am not the one queuing for an invitation to Mrs. Astor's ballroom, fighting to catch the eye of some titled bachelor." Never mind the fact that he *was* that desperate, titled bachelor.

"Then let's return to the matter at hand," she said. "Shall we continue our interview?"

“By all means.” He looked her over while they continued to dance. “You’ve a fine figure. Are you in good health?”

“As healthy as a horse, and I’ve got all my teeth, too.” She flashed her dentition.

“Good God, are you trying to frighten me off?”

“I’m only trying to make you laugh, my lord. You’re a somber waltzing partner.”

Giles refused to rise to that barb. He allowed the conversation to fall silent, leaving her to struggle and grope awkwardly for something to say.

In the end, she surprised him. “I find this insulting—queuing, chasing, and grasping, as you put it. Four hundred girls vying for one man, just because you’re titled and British. Just because your family was ancient by the time mine crawled off the boat. I’m rich, educated, and put-together, yet in New York, I’m just another face in the crowd. I feel certain, were I in England, things would be different...”

“Certainly.” She wouldn’t know anyone, wouldn’t be invited anywhere. Oh, she’d catch a husband, for she was pretty and chatty, and some men liked that sort of thing in a woman, but her prize would be a duller specimen than he.

Not every jewel needed polish to shine, but as his wife...

She never let him finish the thought. “Now let me interview you, my lord.”

“Very well.” Giles was content to play along.

“Let’s see...are you educated?”

He nodded, proud to have been afforded the privilege of a superlative education. His parents had not robbed him of that, at least. “Eton and Oxford.”

“Impressive, but were you a good student?”

“Not particularly.” He’d had other things on his mind, even back then.

“I’ll mark that down as a ‘no.’ ”

This amused him. She was a harsh critic of her potential future spouse—and rightly so.

“What can you offer me?” Miss Thurston Reid continued interrogating him even as the music stopped.

He reluctantly led her from the dance floor as he answered in all honesty, “Nothing you cannot buy for yourself twice over.”

This amused *her*.

“But, as Marchioness of Granborough,” he continued, “you’d be second in precedence only to a duchess. No more queuing for party invitations, as your name would be at the top of every guest list. No more chasing or grasping, as everything and everyone you desire shall be at your fingertips. Were you ever inclined to do good in this world, you could fund charities, open bazaars, sponsor orphans. There is no limit to what you could accomplish as my wife.”

Giles left her to dance with others, but was always drawn back to Louisa Thurston Reid. She was not shy or simpering. She’d made memorable conversation and seemed capable of running a large, demanding household. He liked the way she felt in his arms, and—were he to make a wife of her—Giles must desire her enough to take her to bed.

He would have to do it if he hoped to save the Granborough estate.

At the end of the evening, when the last lingering guests had been escorted from the ballroom and waved down Fifth Avenue, Caroline asked whether any belles had turned his head.

“Englishwomen are the true beauties of the world.” He lamented, “Who even are these American girls? The daughters of carpetbaggers and prospectors. I met one young lady whose family earned their fortune selling horse meat to the Army.”

Cousin Caroline laughed. “Oh, no, surely not!”

“I struggled to keep a straight face.”

“It’s true none of these girls hold a candle to Lady Venia Herbert.” His clever cousin leaned in to whisper, “What does your sweetheart think of your wife hunt?”

He shrugged. “What of it? She is married, and yet it has made no difference in our relationship.” Indeed, Venia’s marriage had made their relationship possible—at least the physical aspect of it, for unwed young women were off-limits as lovers. Only after securing a suitable spouse could one embark on an affair of the heart.

“I remember what a knot of anxiety you were on the day she said her vows. One wonders why you never asked for her yourself.”

The truth of the matter had been made plain to him from the very start. “She required a rich husband as badly as I need a rich wife.”

She’d got one, for Herbert was a shrewd investor with a blood-thirsty reputation. Giles had heard good men down on their luck plead for the sanctuary of debtors’ prison rather than owe the Herberts.

Venia had once offered to speak to her husband on his behalf, for Herbert was a practical, worldly man who lived to pamper his beautiful wife. The gentleman was all too happy to turn a blind eye to Venia’s *amour* so long as she remained discreet.

Giles would never accept Venia’s charity, nor would he transfer his debts to Herbert, so he’d traveled to New York in hopes of acquiring a bride rich enough to save him.

“You’ll find one here, Giles,” said Caroline, conspiratorially. “Take your pick, and you’ll be back in Lady Venia’s arms by Christmas.”

CHAPTER ONE

New York, 1894

Louisa Thurston Reid—Lady Granborough—stood on the top stairs of her family’s mansion. She looked down upon the wedding reception taking place below.

Her guests milled about the palm-lined foyer, ate fat wedges of cake, and toasted Louisa’s success. They wheedled conversation from His Lordship in the parlor, discussed the morning’s events with Mamma, and sympathized with Pappa over losing his daughter to the lure of old Britannia.

Behind her, Louisa’s attendants fussed about her suite of rooms, buzzing like honeybees as they packed her bags and prepared for her journey across the Atlantic. Her wedding dress, a delicious confection of cream satin, tulle, and Brussels lace, was the last item to be wrapped in tissue paper and tucked into her steamer trunk. She would wear it again when being presented at court, her husband had informed her.

For the past three months, His Lordship instructed her on what to expect—and what would be expected of her—once on English soil. Louisa struggled to remember to whom she must curtsy or whether a polite nod of recognition would suffice, how she must address her neighbors, where she must shop, and with whom must she never, ever dine.

Rules were different among the noble classes, where she and her husband would exist in separate spheres.

Louisa had always lived at the center of a crowd. She may not have moved among the highest echelons of Knickerbocker

society, but she was popular and respected within her own social set. How might the British blue-bloods feel about a twenty-year-old, newly moneyed newcomer joining their ranks when everyone in England measured their lineage in centuries?

Her friends understood none of her concerns. Her parents merely patted her hand and disregarded her fears, likely because they had no sage advice to give. Everyone she relied on for guidance focused only on the conquest she'd made and on the good she might do as the Marchioness of Granborough.

Her bridesmaids and classmates from Miss Brown's School joined her on the landing. They'd had their fill of cake and champagne, but were ravenous for any morsel of gossip concerning the day.

"You're the luckiest girl in the world," said Virginia McKee. "Your husband is so handsome!"

Louisa agreed. Reservations aside, she had done exceptionally well for herself.

Another friend, Claribel Bruerton, buoyed Louisa's spirits by offering, "His Lordship seems nice, if a little bored." She laughed. "I think he dozed off during the service."

It had been a very long, formal production of a wedding ceremony, complete with choristers and hymns, readings and sermons. Louisa's parents were so pleased with her match that they hadn't spared one moment of this Saturday afternoon. The festivities would carry on long after the bride and groom departed for their honeymoon.

The honeymoon! That mysterious event was all the belles could gossip over, dream of, laugh at, and speculate about.

Madeleine de Gruyter looped a slender arm through hers, forming a united front of school-girl friends. She whispered, "What has your mother told you about the wedding night?"

"Nothing," replied Louisa, who hadn't got a straight answer from anybody on what she might expect. "Apparently, it isn't for me to know, it is for my husband to show me."

She spied His Lordship far below, moving stiffly through the throng of guests. His hair was not quite blond, not quite brown, but something honeyed and in-between. He bent his head to consult his gold pocket watch, noting the time.

Noting her tardiness.

As if he sensed her presence, His Lordship glanced up, meeting her gaze from the foyer below. He possessed shrewd blue eyes and a grim, aristocratic mouth. Louisa had never seen him smile.

“Are you afraid of him?” Madeleine asked.

“I wouldn’t have married someone I was afraid of. Lord Granborough has always treated me with courtesy, despite our frequent differences of opinion.”

Virginia cast her a frightful glance. “Oh, Louisa, you mustn’t vex him so!”

It was true that he treated her decently, but there were moments when she caught him unawares, the shade fell from his eyes, and he appeared miserable. Louisa goaded him because she couldn’t abide that look—or the thought that she, and whatever circumstances that brought him to seek a bride abroad, might be to blame.

She turned from His Lordship to address her friends. “I guess I’d better go. If I wait much longer, we’ll miss the boat.”

Louisa held back her tears as she bid farewell to her classmates. The Thurston Reids had moved to the city while Louisa attended Miss Brown’s School. Her life and the lives of these girls were intertwined, and she could trace that thread from the first day she’d stepped foot in school to this moment now, starting her journey as a married woman.

She descended the stairs of her parents’ home, dressed in a blue ‘going away’ ensemble that had only recently arrived from Paris with the rest of her trousseau. Everything she needed to begin her life abroad had been stowed in thirty-two matching trunks, valises, jewelry cases, hatboxes, and portmanteaux, which were being loaded onto a baggage wagon and delivered to the Cunard pier.

Lord Granborough met her in the foyer. If he was annoyed by her unpunctuality, he gave no sign of it. As usual, his handsome face was inscrutable. Louisa couldn't fathom whether His Lordship was happy with her, or how he felt their wedding ceremony had gone. She only knew that he offered her his arm in that rigidly refined way he managed everything in his daily life.

“Have you all that you require, Louisa?”

Louisa—he'd given up calling her Miss Thurston Reid, yet she couldn't remember when the intimacy had started. She, however, had never been anything but formal with him. She'd only learned his given name a few hours earlier when she promised to love and obey him for as long as she lived.

She placed her gloved hand on his sleeve. “No turning back now, my lord.”

He guided her through the foyer, a space overcrowded with friends and family, guests, and faces she didn't recognize. A large party had traveled from Westchester, and Louisa assumed these were carpet mill people invited by her father.

Her parents stood by the door. The entire house had been festooned with palm fronds, lilies of the valley, and Niphetos roses. A bower of these sumptuous blooms framed the exit, and Louisa paused beneath it to kiss her parents.

How she would miss her dear father's drooping mustache! She'd loved to tease him and tug at it when she was a little girl. Pappa had only ever wanted what was best for her.

Mamma had always wanted *the* best for her. Mrs. Thurston Reid embraced her daughter with soft, plump arms that were open and ready for a hug.

Louisa's parents were warm and affectionate, if a bit busy and loud. They made for great company, though, and she would miss their laughter and easy conversation. Who would tease her, hug her, and love her now?

“Oh, my child,” Mamma said, softly. “My sweet child, you have grown into a beautiful young woman. Now, you are a wife!” She pressed one damp cheek against Louisa's to

whisper, “Just think, you may soon be a mother with a little girl of your own.”

Louisa knew, of course, that marriage brought babies. As Lady Granborough, she’d be expected to present her husband with an heir, but Mamma’s prediction alarmed her. She barely knew His Lordship, yet tonight she would share her bed with him. In nine months’ time, they might share a child.

Heavens, a woman’s life moved quickly!

CHAPTER TWO

They'd spent little time alone together, though he'd escorted her through all the tedious courtship rituals—drives in Central Park, Sunday promenades on the Avenue, luncheons at Sherry's. Through it all, Giles had grown to resent his new wife's fortune, despite needing it quite desperately.

The Thurston Reids spoke openly of money, which embarrassed him, chatting about who had what and how they'd come by it. Their friends discussed steam yachts with as much fondness as an Englishman would his prized horseflesh. And their homes! When these people grew bored of a place, they simply bought another and filled it with art and furniture they'd ransacked from the Continent. Even his mother-in-law, who was as kindly and sensible a lady as a fellow could ask for, had a gallery dedicated to showing off her Sèvres—the same of which any good Englishman kept in his china cupboard.

They disclosed all this to him, a stranger, with pride!

Of course, they were proud to add him to their collection. '*An English marquess in the family,*' they'd boasted. Penniless, but titled. Handsome, well-educated, cultured.

Giles had not let himself go cheaply.

Mr. Thurston Reid had laughed about it as they'd haggled over the wedding settlement. In the end, Giles had secured one million dollars for the Granborough estate, which would be made available to him after the honeymoon, and fifty thousand dollars per year, for the happy couple to share between them.

Louisa would also have funds of her own, from her personal investments, which was *not* the done thing in Britain, yet oddly common among American women—such a level of independence chafed, but Giles hadn't argued. The less he had to do with his wife, the better.

Nonetheless, he'd looked for her during the wedding breakfast, eager to toast their mutual good fortune. Louisa had disappeared upstairs to pack her trunks and change from her wedding dress into something more suitable for the journey.

He spied her atop the grand staircase, surrounded by a gaggle of school-girl friends. The new Lady Granborough had what these belles called 'snap'. She was attractive, elegant, and energetic. Feminine, yet self-sufficient. What was considered crass and loud in his culture was the ideal here.

For example, Louisa possessed a trousseau of sixty dresses, not to mention hats, shoes, coats, gloves, and lingerie. Even a fine lady's bicycle.

What use had an English marchioness of a bicycle? Would she pedal along the village lanes, red-faced and puffing? *Perspiring*? She didn't know how to sit a horse, but—Lord help him—his new bride thought nothing of splitting her skirts over a bicycle saddle.

The dreadful impropriety! It was indecent. He'd rather she took up roller-rinking instead.

Louisa descended the stairs to take his arm. There were no maidenly hysterics as she kissed her parents and bid farewell to the only world she'd ever known.

Giles shook hands with his in-laws and allowed a kiss from Mrs. Thurston Reid, whose tears dampened his collar. He sympathized with the mother being parted from her daughter and assured her it would not be forever. Louisa's parents could come over for the christenings of her children, and even holidays. He wouldn't like Louisa to be alone on Christmas.

The bride and groom left amid cheers. Her friends and family wished them well, flinging handfuls of rice over Louisa's 'going away' ensemble of blue velvet trimmed in

sable. Giles didn't know any of the gathered guests besides Cousin Caroline and her husband, who—for lack of anyone else—had served as his best man.

The Vanderheids had been so ecstatic over that development that they'd offered the new couple use of their fine town carriage and horses. The glossy conveyance awaited them at the bottom of the steps, covered in flower-streamers. Giles made a mad dash across the pavement and lifted Louisa onto the squabs.

She waved at the onlookers like some fairytale princess as the door closed, the carriage juddered, and the high-stepping horses paraded down Fifth Avenue. Women, children, and reporters jogged alongside the carriage, soon joined by mounted policemen in a bizarre cortège.

Giles found it all an intrusion. He slunk back against the seats, drawing his tall hat down over his eyes. “Lower the window shade or our faces shall be splashed across every newspaper in the city. We'll never escape the press.”

Louisa seemed to revel in the attention her wedding had garnered. What bride wouldn't have done? “I don't mind the press coverage, as nobody will care about me after this. I consider it my one moment in the limelight.”

“You ought to know that Englishwomen abhor such attention-seeking behavior...”

She smiled. “Am I an Englishwoman yet, my lord? Surely, I have to cross some longitudinal line in order to make that claim. I've never even stepped foot in your country.”

“You were English from the moment you signed the register at St. Thomas',” he told her. “You're Lady Granborough now.”

Louisa lowered the window shade, mimicking him. “*Lady Granbruh.*”

“That's right,” he teased. “Practice enough and you'll have the pronunciation down by the time we dock in Liverpool.” Giles claimed no tender feelings for her, but he liked her well enough to bant and spar.

His new wife seemed to enjoy their little games of back-and-forth, as well. Louisa relaxed beside him, resting her weight against his shoulder as the carriage bumped along. The lowered shades created a rather cozy, somewhat drowsy atmosphere.

She idly petted the sable trimmings on her frock. It was a fine piece of tailoring, hugging her figure like a second skin. Aside from the ridiculous leg-o-mutton sleeves, every inch of fabric was drawn against her as tight as a drum. Giles couldn't help but appreciate her little dips and curves.

He draped his arm across the seat-back, letting his gloved hand fall at Louisa's side. "It has been a long day."

"I am exhausted," she said, slumping against him. "I tossed and turned all night last night, too anxious to sleep."

"No second thoughts, I hope." He'd never imagined she might wish to withdraw from their engagement. Then again, he hadn't bothered to ask how she felt about any of their proceedings, as negotiations had been very business-like with her father, and wedding details were planned down to the minute by Mrs. Thurston Reid.

Giles assumed Louisa had a hand—and a say—in all of it, all along.

"It was more like stage fright, really," she explained. "When I was younger, Mamma insisted I take piano lessons. To progress to the next level of instruction, pupils had to perform a short repertoire in front of their friends and family."

Louisa turned in the pit of his arm to face him, confessing, "I was so nervous! I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. I just knew I'd forget all of my lessons, embarrass my teacher, and disappoint my parents. *That* was how I felt last night. But, as with my piano recital, once I put all my practice, training, and preparations into place, everything went perfectly." She beamed at him with pride. "I never missed a stroke."

Her radiant, smiling face hovered very close to his. "I didn't know you played..."

“Oh, I don’t. Not really. After mastering ‘*Kinderszenen*’, the piano held no more appeal for me. I only did it for my mother, anyway.”

He regarded her with horror. “That is a terrible analogy for a wedding!”

“Let’s say I moved on to greater challenges.” Louisa laughed. “What about you, my lord, any nerves or second thoughts?”

“No,” he answered without a moment’s hesitation, “you are exactly what I wanted.”

If he could not marry the woman he loved, he would settle for the greatest consolation prize known to man. Yet that comparison was unfair to Louisa, for she was no second-place trophy. In many ways, she was Lady Venia’s equal, and in others—Giles began to fear—she was superior to any woman he’d ever known.

The carriage slowed to a crawl, jammed up among wagons, delivery vans, pedestrians, and other voyagers. Over the creaking of cartwheels and the whinnying of horses, stevedores shouted in their New York drawl. Giles needn’t peek from the shaded window to know that he’d reached the Cunard dock. His ears rang from the clangor.

The carriage door swung open, flooding the interior with light, and heat reflected off so much steel, and the oily stink of a shipyard. Their borrowed coachman deployed the steps, offering his assistance to Lord and Lady Granborough.

They descended from the conveyance amid the bustle of the pier. Giles extended his arm to his wife, who placed her gloved hand upon his sleeve. She walked straight and proud at his side, never once faltering, though she must’ve felt every eye upon her, and heard the speculation whispered about her.

Who was she? Where had she come from?

More importantly—*Where was she going?*

Customs and Immigration agents doffed their caps and waved her through. They bowed and scraped, and cleared the gangway so that she and Giles could ascend alone.

Had this young woman on his arm been a match-stick girl, the crowd would've parted for her, but Louisa was a Fifth Avenue princess, an English marchioness, and, now, a warrior queen preparing to cross the ocean and conquer whatever awaited her on the other side.

CHAPTER THREE

“*RMS Campania* offers the most luxurious passenger accommodations available,” the cabin steward explained as he escorted Lord and Lady Granborough to their stateroom suite. “She’s been in service for only a year.”

Louisa was unsurprised to learn the ship was new, for its inner workings and outer appearance were modern, yet *Campania*’s interior—or, at least, the first-class interior—harkened back to the ‘good old days’ of opulence, imitating the grandeur of the lost courts of France.

Long passageways were paneled in rich, dark mahogany, embellished with gilt scrollwork and painted plaster moulding. Electric lanterns hung from the ceilings in regular intervals, casting a soft glow through their frosted-glass shades. Satinwood furniture upholstered in velvet and brocade was bolted to the floor, which was covered by thick carpets to muffle any engine noise.

Ignoring the rambling steward leading his enthusiastic tour of the ship, Louisa knelt to examine the carpet pile with her fingertips. It was machine-made on an Axminster loom.

Lord Granborough paused at her side, regarding her with some amusement. “Are they sufficient?”

She stood and dusted her gloves. “They’ll do.”

People often cut corners on carpet. Fine furnishings and expensive ornamentation delighted the eye, yet decorators rarely focused on that which lay underfoot. Louisa could judge in an instant whether a homeowner or a department store

owner possessed a discerning eye for detail just by feeling the quality of their floor coverings.

The Cunard Company had not economized here, which meant they were unlikely to have economized elsewhere. She appreciated such consistency when, for the next five days, her life floated in their hands.

She and His Lordship caught up with their guide. The steward directed their attention toward a ship's map as they passed through the Grand Reception area.

Three decks formed the first-class portion of the ship. The stateroom suites, along with the surgeon's office and purser's desk, were located on the main deck. One floor above lay the promenade deck, the busiest part of the ship. This floor held the smoking room, assembly room, and library, encircled by a wide promenade where guests could reserve deck chairs and blankets, or simply walk the circuit of the ship. The lower floor boasted the dining saloon and the majority of passenger cabins. Beneath that lay second-class and steerage accommodations, of which no details were given by the steward.

Down the corridor from the Granborough's stateroom suite stood a modern lavatory with hot and cold taps. Stationed there were both ladies' and gentlemen's bath-stewards, who would see to the scheduling of baths and shower-baths, provide clean towels, and oversee any other hygiene-related requests.

Louisa had grown up with indoor plumbing, yet feared she must renounce such creature comforts once she arrived in England. She'd been warned to expect frigid hip baths in the morning and midnight slogs to the outhouse regardless of the weather.

"Isn't it true," she asked her husband, "that you don't have flushing toilets or hot-water boilers?"

"Running water is a luxury most country houses can ill afford. If you find you cannot live without these modern conveniences, you may pay to install them at Granborough."

He waved his hand at the light fixture overhead. “You can put in electricity, as well.”

His ancestral home would be restored at *her* expense. “How very generous.”

“It shall be your home, Louisa. You must do whatever you feel necessary—whether that be improvements or advancements—to make yourself comfortable.”

“I think I’d rather live in London...”

Lord Granborough had told her once of his house in Mayfair, of the park and the parties, and the shopping and dining. The townhouse needed only a bit of ‘spiffing up’, yet his country seat required extensive refurbishment.

His mouth formed a grim line. “Well, yes, there is always London.”

Louisa hadn’t meant to insult him or his home. Truly, her questions had been asked out of genuine curiosity. She’d read the worst things about England, from the poor climate to the rampant poverty, and of the coldness which awaited her on the other side of the Atlantic.

Coldness of water. Coldness of weather.

Coldness of manner.

She only wished to be prepared.

Louisa looped her arm through her husband’s. She remained close to his side throughout the rest of their tour and made only the most polite inquiries, yet she breathed a sigh of relief when the cabin steward finally reached their stateroom suite.

“Here we are, my lord, my lady,” the man said, retrieving a key from the pocket of his white jacket. “Parlour suite twenty-five.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Their honeymoon suite was far superior to anything he'd had crossing over. Giles wagered these were the finest quarters on the ship, fit for a marchioness—even a spoiled one.

The suite held a curtained bedstead, sofa, and dining table for two, all furnished in the French fashion and upholstered in sumptuous red brocade. Candlestick sconces and a wide porthole window illuminated the little enfilade of rooms.

Louisa walked the length of their stateroom, no doubt tallying up the faults she found within. It annoyed him that she could not be satisfied with what he'd provided. It wounded him that she'd criticized his homeland, his customs, and his lack of plumbing.

She paused in the bedchamber doorway, as if something had just dawned on her. “Only one bed for the two of us?”

“Did you expect to sleep separately?”

Perhaps she *had*. His wife had never been alone with a man, he realized. Her innocence was amusing, enticing. Giles joined her in the doorway. He propped his elbow an inch above her head. She was forced to crane her neck to meet his gaze.

Louisa recovered her composure quickly. “The suite is smaller than I imagined.”

A knock sounded on the stateroom door. “Trunks!” called the staff from the corridor.

Giles was forced to abandon his wife as maids, porters, and stewards filed into the space.

Louisa directed her bags to be placed in the bedroom, announcing, “My dress-basket! This is exactly the one I wanted!”

Her Ladyship’s maid bobbed a curtsey, asking, “Shall I unpack for you, madam?”

“Thank you, but I’ll see to this myself.”

The luggage was delivered and, almost as quickly as they’d come, the Cunard staff excused themselves. With the click of a latch, they were gone.

Louisa crouched on the carpeted floor, careless of her rumpled velvet skirts. She opened the domed lid of her trunk to sort through the drawers, trays, and compartments within. Giles watched over her shoulder, spying frocks, corsets, stockings, wrappers, and fripperies at which he couldn’t begin to speculate. She unpacked jewelry cases that must be delivered to the purser’s safe, as well as toiletries that would be carried to and from the lavatory. He imagined her draped with diamonds, or damp from her bath, or simply undressing for the evening.

This would be a journey of discovery for them both...

His husbandly fantasies were dashed when he caught sight of something nestled deep in her valise. The blank, white face staring up from her folded petticoats sent a shiver down his spine.

He recoiled. “You brought your doll?”

“Prissy is a treasured companion from my childhood.” Smiling, she held the porcelain doll out for inspection. Louisa smoothed her miniature skirts and cradled her head as though Prissy were a precious thing. “I hope to gift her to my own little girl someday.”

Had he really married this child bride? A young woman who carried toys along on her honeymoon?

“I’m sure our daughter will prefer newer, better dollies and not your tattered castoffs.” Giles couldn’t understand why any grown-up would treasure something that once belonged to their parents. He’d sold everything that belonged to his late father, and then pawned the rest. “Put it away, Louisa.”

His wife did as he asked. Without a word of argument, she tucked Prissy back into her dress-basket and lowered the lid. He breathed easier with that play-toy out of sight.

Giles hadn’t meant to be snappish, but he hated childishness and sentimentality. A happy childhood was a foreign concept to him. At best, his parents had been cold and undemonstrative. At worst, they’d been neglectful. He did not wish to relive those memories now.

“Would you like to go above deck and wave ourselves off?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’ve been brave so far, but I doubt I could stand to watch it all slip away.”

He fumbled for some words to soothe her, as he hadn’t meant to wound her on their wedding night. “You’ve made your parents proud. You’re a credit to them, Louisa—to your friends, neighbors, and everyone who knows you. This crossing is but another step in your path to success. Think of it as playing *La Campanella*.”

She smiled at that. “I’m no virtuoso, my lord.”

“Perhaps not now, but you may be by the time we reach Liverpool. A transatlantic crossing is a fine way to hone your skills as a worldly woman. You’ll meet many different people this week in a safe environment. I daresay it might even be fun.” His wife laughed and he offered his hand to her. “If you’d rather not take part in the festivities, there is a stunning view of...New Jersey...through that window. Come, look.”

Louisa joined him at the porthole. They stood shoulder to shoulder, watching the busy river, full of steamers, barges, and tugs. Coal smoke smudged an otherwise blue sky, and seabirds drifted between the rooftops, funnels, and chimneys. Now and

then, a crewman's shout could be heard, coarse and loud, for not everyone aboard *Campania* traveled at their leisure.

The ship's horn screamed, making Louisa jump. Thankfully, she laughed at her skittishness.

"I thought you'd sailed before," he said, resting his hand on the small of her back. "Surely, at Newport—"

She settled in his embrace. "Cruising in Newport isn't the same as venturing halfway around the world."

Giles had little experience with women—none at all beyond Lady Venia Herbert—and realized he had no idea how to proceed with this unknown young woman to whom he'd given his name.

He wanted to touch her, finding excuses to drape his arm about her shoulders or place his hand on her spine. He hoped to be comfortable with her, and for her to feel comfortable with him when the time came to take her to bed.

Giles could not lose sight of his goal. There could be no question about the validity of this marriage, no opportunity for the Thurston Reids to renege on the settlement he so desperately needed.

Yes, the marriage must be consummated, but he didn't wish to hurt or frighten his innocent young bride. The fact that he had sold his lineage for one million dollars, and that she had promised her body in exchange for an old and noble title ought not to factor into the event.

With two more sharp whistle blasts, *Campania* cast off her moorings. The ship began to rock and groan as a brace of tugboats edged the hull away from the dock. Free of the harbor, the steam engines began to churn the water.

A cheer arose from the decks below Lord and Lady Granborough's porthole window. Giles wanted to weep as New York, and New Jersey, and this six-month ordeal was quickly put behind him.

Once underway, Giles decided to ring for dinner.

“I’m starved,” he said, leaving his wife at the window, for there was no turning back now.

Louisa watched as he buzzed the cabin steward. “What are you doing?”

“I’m ordering our supper. There is a menu on the table if you’re interested.”

She barely glanced at it, instead asking, “Aren’t we to join the other passengers?”

“Do you really want to, tonight of all nights?”

A wedding night—*their* wedding night—deserved privacy. Giles had no intention of sharing his meal or his bride with anyone else onboard.

CHAPTER FIVE

The table in their stateroom was laid with plate and silver. Cabin stewards poured wine into crystal glasses, served bowls of *potage fausse tortue*, and chicken fricasseed in a rich béchamel sauce with peas and carrots.

Louisa sampled it all, but tasted very little. She felt nervous to share a meal with her husband, though they'd dined together many times during their courtship. This was private. The setting was intimate. Later tonight, he would see her without her clothes on.

She made certain to save room for dessert—two slices of their wedding cake with generous scoops of French ice cream.

“What makes it French, I wonder?”

His Lordship looked up. “*Hmm?*”

“On the menu card, I read ‘French Ice Cream’. What makes ice cream French as opposed to...say, American?”

“The texture,” he replied, mashing it with his spoon. “This is far more sophisticated than your Central Park picnic fare.”

Louisa happened to like ice cream cones, egg creams, and fruit sherbets from street vendors and soda jerks near the park. As long as the flavor was delicious, who cared about the price?

“Maybe it comes down to a matter of taste,” she said. “Whatever it is, it pairs splendidly with our cake.”

It was kind of Mamma to pack a portion of their wedding cake for the journey. Louisa had been too anxious to eat at their reception and was glad to be sharing a nibble with her new husband—even though he didn't seem to enjoy his cake and ice cream.

“Not to your liking, my lord?”

He pushed it around his plate for her sake, rarely taking a bite. “No, it's fine...”

“Too much excitement and not enough sustenance is a recipe for a headache.” She stood and carried their dishes to the nearby sofa. She kicked off her shoes and curled up on the cushions. “There's no reason why we cannot make ourselves comfortable. Won't you sit and eat with me?”

Louisa would never have slouched or sprawled out in his presence during their engagement, but she wanted to relax now, to banish this stiff-upper-lip formality that was unnecessary between a married couple.

His Lordship eyed her as if she were a curious creature. “I'm afraid I have no appetite.”

“No appetite for cake and ice cream?” She laughed. “Now I've heard everything!”

Goaded, he rose from the table, muttering something about ‘chalk and cheese.’

“I am not certain those are the ingredients...”

He sat on the sofa and lifted her stocking feet into his lap. “It's a saying—chalk and cheese means we couldn't be more different.”

“I see.”

“No, you don't. But you will.” His hands smoothed her skirt hems. He seemed fascinated with the soft velvet and sable trimmings. His fingertips ventured beneath her petticoats, exploring the lace he found there. Palms traced her ankles, up her calves, over her knees. His Lordship untied her garter ribbons and lowered her silk stockings.

He stroked her bare flesh.

No one had ever touched her so intimately. The softest whisper of his fingers made her tremble. “My lord...”

“Was this not what you wanted, Louisa, when you invited me onto the sofa?”

She’d meant to flirt with him and banter. She knew nothing of seduction, yet Louisa angled her body on the sofa, heedless of her raised skirts and naked knees. She longed to hold him, to feel that same fluttering rush as their lips met when he’d first kissed her at the altar only hours earlier.

Louisa reached for him, cupping his chin, caressing his jaw. “I *do* want it,” said she, boldly. “Very much.”

Lord Granborough tipped his mouth to meet hers. This wasn’t the quick, chaste peck he’d given her before their wedding guests. His lips were warm, soft, and slackened. He kissed her lazily, as if they had all night to explore each other. His tongue teased, and his teeth nipped, and his warm breath fanned her cheek.

He urged her to open, and she willingly—wantonly—let him in.

This was her husband, strange as he was to her, and Louisa wished to please him. She longed for him to look at her with fire in his eyes, smoldering beneath her touch. She wanted to know him in a loverly way, to drink in his sighs as he offered up the most intimate parts of his body.

She clung to him, working her mouth in tandem with his. When he dipped his tongue to taste her, Louisa drew on it until he moaned.

He pulled back, marveling at her. Two shrewd, blue eyes searched hers. “You’re sweet,” said he, softly.

She smiled. “Cake and ice cream have their merits, my lord.”

“Then consider me ravenous.” He cupped one hand behind her head to ease her back onto the pillowed arm of the sofa. He stretched on the cushions beside her, tracing his palm over her bare knees. He angled his hips between her parted thighs and clutched her tightly against him.

Louisa's heart leaped in her chest. She glanced down to watch His Lordship's hand disappear beneath her velvet skirts, fingertips toying with the lace edge of her drawers. She saw pale flesh brush dark wool as their legs twined.

"God, Louisa," he groaned into her panting, open mouth.

They were sticky and sweet, flushed and breathless—and married! The promise of a five-day honeymoon emboldened Louisa to her husband's touch. She welcomed each kiss, every nudge and rub, and the curious friction that built between their bodies.

There was so much she did not know, yet she trusted Lord Granborough to teach her.

His fingers laced in her hair. His erection pressed into her pelvis, and she gasped at the sensation that steely ridge sent racing to the very heart of her.

If *this* was kissing, she couldn't wait to discover what lovemaking held in store.

She looked into his eyes, uncertain of how to ask for what must come next.

Suddenly, a knock sounded at the door.

Louisa groaned at the interruption. When Lord Granborough moved to rise, she pulled him back. "No, don't answer."

His mouth slanted into a grim line of annoyance. "I fear it might be important."

"On our wedding night?" She balked. "What could be more important than this?"

He nuzzled her nose. Cradled in her arms, His Lordship seemed disinclined to leave, yet the knock sounded again, insistently.

"You wouldn't want to miss a lifeboat drill, would you, dear?"

Louisa's eyes went wide. "A lifeboat drill?"

The thought of leaving their comfortable suite to face the icy North Atlantic made her shiver, but he was only teasing.

“You’re as safe as a lamb.” Her husband pressed a kiss to her ear and whispered, “We had better make ourselves decent.”

Lord Granborough carefully extricated himself from her between her legs. The sofa creaked as he stood and turned his back to her, putting his clothes to rights.

He gave her one last longing glance before reaching for the doorknob, sensing that whomever awaited on the other side would alter the course of their marriage from this moment forward.

Don’t open it! she wanted to say, but could think of no good reason to stop him.

It was only a door, after all. A mere intrusion to be easily dealt with. Whatever it was, they could face it together.

Her husband flung open the stateroom door and frowned into the passageway beyond. “Yes, what is it?”

CHAPTER SIX

A purser's assistant stood in the passage, clutching a bundle of envelopes. "Good evening, sir. Sorry to disturb, but these were left for you at the desk."

Giles took them from the fellow, and then closed the door at his back.

Louisa had lowered her skirts, returning to the respectable Fifth Avenue princess he'd courted. The only clues to her lapse in propriety were the kiss-swollen lips from which she asked, "What's all that?"

"Cards mostly," he said, flipping through the post. "Letters of congratulations, no doubt."

Many good wishes had been sent from his English friends and relations, one card issued from his mother in France, as well as a stack written by Louisa's various acquaintances. Sorting through this chaff, Giles soon came across an envelope with familiar handwriting—*Lady Venia Herbert*.

He stuffed it into his trouser pocket, and then handed the rest of the mail to his wife. He hunted for his greatcoat, making a hasty excuse, any excuse, to slip from their stateroom for a breath of fresh air.

How curious that her letter arrived on his wedding night. It could be no coincidence.

Giles hastened down the rocking, creaking corridor. He hadn't paid much attention to the cabin steward's tour this

afternoon, but one ship was built much like any other. After a few wrong turns, he soon found his way to the open deck.

He pushed through the doorway, abandoning the warmth of *Campania's* heated interiors for the frigid, starlit night. He wasn't alone, but those passengers who gathered at the railings or milled about the deck seemed content with their own business.

Giles walked toward a more secluded area, somewhere shielded from the icy winds whipping off the North Atlantic. He found a quiet corner and opened his letter, using the dull glow of a lantern to examine its contents.

Inside lay a photograph. He turned the likeness in his hands, allowing lamplight and moonlight to play across the familiar features of the woman he'd loved since...since he'd discovered there ever was such a thing.

Venia was darkly beautiful, her face and figure mature. She'd birthed children, though not his—her nursery belonged to her husband, as did her body, by law, yet there was a part of her heart that she kept separate, only for Giles.

He tucked the picture into his breast pocket. This reminder of what he'd been missing brought an ache to his chest, a queasiness worse than any seasickness. He suddenly had little interest in deflowering a doe-eyed virgin.

Giles read the letter, which had enveloped the photograph. He'd expected passionate words, yet found only calm assurance that he needn't trouble himself overmuch with his 'gaudy American' bride. Once the buccaneer was properly bedded and her dowry secured, he would be welcomed back to Herbert House with open arms. He would be pleased, she added in a hastily scrawled postscript, to learn that Herbert had purchased the Granborough debts!

Doubtless, Venia had thought to help. He'd lamented to her over these past months, venting his frustrations over his fiancée's rowdy friends and common parents, and the bizarre society in which they all moved. Venia would not have wished him to feel honor-bound to his new bride, or to suffer the

young woman's vulgarity any longer than was legally necessary.

In Venia's mind, she'd eased the yoke of bankruptcy from his shoulders by allowing him to pay his debts to Herbert. All the while, he could pack Miss Thurston Reid off to the country where her fortune—and her presence—could be put to better use.

“Damn it, Venia, what have you done?”

“Saved your skin, she has.”

Giles was startled to find two thugs lurking in the shadows. They hovered just beyond the circle of lamplight in which he stood. “Who the devil are you?”

He needn't ask. He recognized them as soon as they stepped into view, and had sworn never to find himself under their thumb.

“You work for Herbert,” he spat.

“We are associates of his, tasked with keeping an eye on his investment.”

“I never asked anyone to settle my debts, least of all Herbert. I do not consent to this exchange and want no part of it.”

“You act like it's a punishment, guv. Consider it a reward for your years of good service.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“How dare you!” Money was the root of all evil. It had destroyed his family and now threatened to cheapen what he and Venia shared.

Giles lashed out at the thugs, but it was two men against one, and they quickly overpowered him. The larger of the pair slammed him against the steel wall of the ship. They pressed his face into the paint until he couldn't curse, couldn't breathe. Could barely think.

Herbert had sent these hired toughs to frighten Giles, to ensure his loyalties remained firmly fixed—at least until *Campania* reached Liverpool, where his funds could be accessed and the debt could be satisfied.

When they released him from their hold, his mouth flooded with a dreaded metallic tang, which couldn't have been ship's paint or varnish. The bastards had bloodied his lip!

He fished for his handkerchief, pressing the clean linen to his mouth. "Your employer will get his money. Until then, keep away from me."

"Sorry guv, but we're on this tin scow together. We've got nothing but time, so we'll be watching you and that missus of yours."

Oh God, Louisa! He'd forgotten all about her. It was their wedding night and he'd abandoned her in their stateroom.

He hurried back to her, retracing his steps through the labyrinthine corridors of this first-class luxury liner. It may as well have been a galley ship hauling him toward his demise, for he'd been bested, bartered over, and bought. No good could come of this mess he'd got himself into.

Giles staggered from one stateroom to the next, counting the number plates upon the doors. He reached parlour suite twenty-five in near despair, jamming his blood-stained handkerchief into his coat pocket as his trembling hand groped for the doorknob.

The less Louisa knew of his humiliation, the better.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Had she any reservations about sleeping with her new husband, she needn't have worried, for the man in question was nowhere to be found.

Louisa undressed and readied herself for bed. She switched off all the lights save the bedside lamp and crawled beneath the sheets. She thumbed through one of the novels she'd unpacked until the stateroom door creaked open.

"Lord Granborough?" She placed her book on the night table. "Hello?"

His tall form, now curiously slumped and weary, emerged from the shadows. He shrugged from his greatcoat and slung it over one of the suite's brocade armchairs.

"There you are," said Louisa. "I was beginning to worry."

A pair of blue eyes snapped to hers. "Why?"

"Because you're my husband."

"Don't remind me," he muttered beneath his breath.

"I beg your pardon?" She couldn't believe her ears. Surely, she'd misheard him.

He waved her off as he stripped out of his jacket and waistcoat. "I said 'don't mind me'. I go off by myself sometimes. A man must have his privacy." His Lordship sat on the edge of the bed to remove his socks and shoes.

"Of course, my lord. I didn't mean to encroach..."

“Never follow me or attempt to pry into my affairs. I shall extend to you that same courtesy.” He rose from the bed to turn off the lone lamp before shucking his shirt and trousers. The room was shrouded in darkness as he climbed onto the mattress beside her. “Now, lie back.”

Louisa felt him fumble beneath the sheets. Cold hands—had he been walking on the deck?—parted her thighs, lifting her nightgown only as high as necessary to fit his naked body into the cradle of her hips.

Beyond that, Lord Granborough barely touched her. His free hand flattened onto the mattress beside her breast. His eyes focused on her forehead, refusing to meet her gaze.

His handsome, shadowed face grew tense, as if he were steeling his resolve. Louisa couldn’t fathom this change in him. Earlier, he’d seemed as eager as she to complete the marital act. She *wanted* him, and couldn’t understand why he no longer wanted her.

“Relax your body,” he said.

“I am trying. Maybe it would be easier if you embraced me as you did on the sofa—I liked that.”

“*Shh.*”

She felt him questing at her entrance.

“Almost there.”

He entered her with a low groan.

Louisa gasped from the bite of pain, the unfamiliar invasion as her husband began to mount her, and that slow, steady grind of his flesh against hers.

She searched his eyes, uncertain, yet he shut her out. He panted only inches away from the tip of her nose, though they may as well have been oceans apart. Wherever he’d gone, he’d left her far behind.

“Won’t you kiss me, my lord?” She lifted her lips to touch his.

He flinched from her seeking mouth. “No, I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“Then will you at least look at me?” She shifted on the mattress to meet his gaze.

“Don’t wriggle. I don’t wish to hurt you.”

“You aren’t hurting me—not much.” Louisa lifted her hand to stroke his jaw, to cup his cheek.

Wordlessly, His Lordship removed her hand from his face and, still gripping it, pinned it above her head. She felt her knuckles press into the pillow, his fingers laced tightly with hers, squeezing and flexing with every thrust. Louisa focused on that—squeeze and flex, squeeze and flex—until she felt the warm rush of his climax as he finished inside her.

He felt sick, as though he’d gone to bed drunk, yet he hadn’t touched a drop of spirits. A little ‘Dutch courage’ might’ve helped matters for once, Giles realized bitterly, as he sought the stranger in his bed.

Louisa faced the wall, curled up so small. After he’d spent himself, she had crawled to the farthest edge of the mattress to escape him, and had gone so far as to wedge a pillow between their bodies.

He, of course, was naked, cold and clammy, beneath the bedsheets. She’d been allowed the dignity of her nightclothes. Truthfully, Giles had not wished to witness exactly what it was he’d done to her.

He had offered her no kindness as he’d taken her. He’d labored hard for the pleasure that should’ve come easily with someone so lovely as Louisa.

Giles felt wretched. She was his wife, and someday the mother of his children, yet he’d used her. He would keep using her because she was nothing more than a bank balance to him.

She was a means to an end—that was what he'd told himself as he'd struggled through their consummation.

He reached for her to make some pathetic apology. How could a gentleman make amends for the awful thing he'd done? "Louisa..."

She flinched from his touch. "Don't."

His sweetly trusting, *wanting* wife had reached for him last night, yet Giles had rejected her. He hadn't wanted her comfort or her kisses. He had no use for her beyond the physical, and now she paid him back in kind.

She all but slapped his hand like an errant child.

"Oh, go away," she whispered.

Giles pulled the sheets and counterpane up over her shoulders and did as she asked. He slid from the mattress, hunting for his discarded clothes. By the bedstead, he found the shirt he'd hauled over his head, pulse pounding as Louisa had waited for him to join her. Next, the trousers and drawers he'd dropped, terrified to face her wondrous gaze. He had been the timid one last night, too tangled up in the letter, the debts, and the tussle he'd got into to make proper love with an enthusiastic virgin.

He finished dressing and rang for breakfast, hoping Louisa would be hungry when she finally dragged herself from the wallowing pit into which he'd pushed her. Giles left her in their stateroom, knowing he must set the tone of their marriage—there would be coupling, if only for begetting heirs, and civil behavior toward one another whenever they were together, but Lord and Lady Granborough's lives would be largely lived apart.

Once his debts to the Herberts were satisfied, this marriage would be a regrettable chapter in the sad story of his life. At the very least, he could save Louisa from the heartbreak of being dragged down with him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She was glad he was gone, though Louisa was grateful for the breakfast he'd sent her. She dared not show her face in the dining saloon, surrounded by curious onlookers, nor could she have sat across from him and kept her appetite.

Yesterday, she'd gone to the altar hoping to be worth more to him than her money. Fate must hold something greater in store for them than chilly courtesy and empty frivolity. That was not the life she wanted, and it was not the life Lord Granborough wanted either. It couldn't be!

The prospect of sharing the next fifty years with a barely civil stranger, making and raising children together, was too awful to contemplate. Louisa would never have agreed to marriage had she known the full truth of what she'd signed up for.

Of course, she hadn't known—none of the belles did. They were kept purposely ignorant of their fate, for no title or social position was worth *this* sacrifice.

She contemplated the foreverness of her situation as she bathed, cried, and bled. His Lordship hadn't harmed her. Physically, he had not been rough with her, but there were so many different kinds of hurt. Her husband had wounded her more by his neglect than anything else he might've done.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Please," she whispered to herself, "no more congratulatory letters."

She'd nearly dumped last night's post into the bathtub. She couldn't bear to read another line.

Louisa donned her dressing gown and answered, surprised to find a delivery boy in the passage. "Yes?"

The young man offered a bouquet of vibrant pink-red roses. "Flowers, madam."

She checked the card. Lord Granborough had sent her a dozen long-stemmed American Beauties. They were horrendously costly—two dollars a piece! No doubt she'd find the expense charged to parlour suite twenty-five's shipboard account, which *she* must settle at the end of the week.

She'd signed away her fortune and now her body to the mysterious Marquess of Granborough. It all too was easy to gnash her teeth and wail over what she'd got herself into.

Louisa tipped the delivery boy and carried the extravagant bouquet into her stateroom. She placed it on the bedside table. They were beautiful flowers, plucked at the height of their first bloom, yet they'd be withered and dull by the time she reached Liverpool.

She hated them. So much waste, so much loss—for what? It was a fleeting gesture from a careless man when a tender word and a patient hand might've meant the world to her.

In a fit of temper, she cast the flowers from the table, shattering the vase, and soaking the carpet at her feet. Cold water pooled between her toes. Broken blossoms littered the floor. She ought to ring for her maid to tidy the mess. Instead, Louisa dressed quickly, bundled up warmly, and fled the room. She slammed the door at her heels without so much as a backward glance at the destruction in her wake.

If a man could turn his back on the mess he'd made, a woman could, too.

Louisa traversed the paneled passage, only conscious of the rolling ship due to the delicate sway of the light fixtures overhead. Thick carpet padded the footsteps of other first-class passengers as they shuffled past, nodding politely to one another, bidding each other 'good afternoon'.

She soon reached the reception area. A peaked skylight illuminated the grand staircase like a beacon, and she ascended the polished teak steps, her heeled shoes clipping against the treads as she climbed.

Campania's promenade deck was bustling on such a fine autumn day. Music drifted from the assembly room next door, and the faintest odor of tobacco wafted from the nearby smoking room.

Louisa walked toward the exterior door, which a gentleman held open for her.

“Ma’am.” His eyes lingered over her figure for a moment longer than necessary.

A man’s appreciative gaze was nothing new to Louisa. One day before, she might’ve been flattered at such open admiration, but knowing what she now knew—understanding what *that look* meant between the sexes—filled her with indignation. She wasn’t some creature to be ogled and pawed at. She was a woman, a person. She deserved more than to be lusted over.

She emerged onto the shaded promenade deck. Wind whipped her skirt hems and pulled at the brim of her hat. Louisa was thankful for her warm woolen walking suit as she ‘took the air’ with a troop of like-minded strollers, and for the blessed sturdiness of the two jeweled hatpins keeping her *chapeau* affixed to her head.

Louisa joined the others walking the crowded circuit. Although there were plenty of seats, whether on benches bolted to the boards or the cane-backed loungers available to rent, she felt a distressing sense of restlessness. She dared not sit idly, riding quietly toward a fate that seemed so unfulfilling.

She fell in step behind a father escorting his young daughter. The silk ribbons in the girl’s hair fluttered, and her dainty gloved hands fussed with them. Apparently—Louisa couldn’t help but eavesdrop—the girl pleaded with her father to let her wear her hair up, “At least for dinner, Daddy!”

Putting up one's hair was such an important event in a young woman's life. Louisa recalled having that same conversation with Mamma and Pappa only a few years earlier. She had wanted to look as mature as she'd felt in those early days of womanhood, yet her parents had been reluctant to allow her to grow up too soon.

Louisa wanted to butt into the discussion and warn the girl not to rush toward adulthood. To take the time to learn and grow, and come to know herself as a person. To enjoy these precious days with her father, for they would pass in the blink of an eye.

Louisa suddenly felt every mile separating her from her family. She longed to turn back to them, to ask Mamma why she'd kept her ignorant of *so much*. Why had Pappa allowed her to marry a cold and mercenary man?

They had trusted Louisa to know her own mind, for she'd willingly wed Lord Granborough, and had been a champion of her engagement to the Englishman from the very start.

Promenading passengers moved around her, shouldering past her. She stepped aside, apologizing for blocking the walkway.

Louisa idled near a row of deck chairs. She stood within sniffing distance of an overly perfumed society matron swathed in sealskin. Only the woman's hat and hair, and her disapproving face could be seen over her furs.

She cast a chilling glare toward Louisa's fashionable form. Maybe the old woman disapproved of gigot sleeves and tailored skirts. Or maybe she was bitter over life's disappointments.

Louisa had only just experienced her first great setback in an otherwise charmed life. She glanced down at this matron, fearing the kinship they shared. After a lifetime of heartbreak and frustration, would Lady Granborough become as miserable as she?

She turned from this woman, refusing to accept this fate. She gathered her skirts and ran to the railing, sucking in

lungfuls of raw sea air. The autumn chill burned her face. The wind stung her eyes. She swiped at her cheeks with gloved fingertips, smearing saltwater across her face.

Poised between innocent girlhood and jaded maturity, Louisa searched the horizon for the strength to rise above her mistakes and for the will to find her own happiness, independent of life's circumstances.

She'd got herself into this marriage.

Now, she intended to see it through.

CHAPTER NINE

There was a fine chop on the water, with nothing standing between *Campania* and the horizon. Giles had gone to the forecandle of the ship to feel the wind in his face, where he'd spent the majority of the day stewing in self-loathing. But there was a curious thing about high speeds, sea air, and bright sunshine—it buoyed the heart. He found it impossible to remain grim.

He longed to find Louisa, to ask about the flowers he'd sent. If her spirits were still low, he might ask her to join him on the deck, where he was in a better position to make amends for last night's insensitivity.

Giles lifted his greatcoat collar against the breeze as he rounded a corner and made his way toward the more populated areas of the ship. The first-class promenade had grown crowded as the sun traversed the sky, and by late afternoon, the deck teemed with passengers enjoying the bright, brisk day. There was an air of conviviality that felt disconcerting to a man who'd just emerged from solitude.

He nodded politely to those who spoke to him. Doubtless, rumors of Lord and Lady Granborough's presence onboard had been whispered 'round the dining saloon at breakfast and gossiped about over tea in the assembly room. Passengers may have recognized his face from the photographic sketches in the weekly papers, or he may have drawn attention to himself simply by moving against the flow of foot traffic—most guests walked with their faces in the wind, while he'd turned his back to it.

Snaking his way through the crowd, Giles made steady progress toward the door. He intended to return to his stateroom suite and fetch Louisa, to bring her above deck and share these last golden rays of sunlight, yet he saw she was already there.

His wife stood at the railing, her skirts fluttering and hat flailing. If she weren't careful, the wind would take that feathered confection from atop her head and send it sailing.

He beat his way through the tide of travelers, never once losing sight of Louisa. She wore a belted blouse beneath a tailor-made walking suit, so tidy and smart as she stood against the backdrop of the North Atlantic. Giles wasn't the only fellow admiring her flawless profile, and he wagered that even if the others did not know *who* she was, they were attracted to *what* she was—a valiant, adventurous lady who roamed unaccompanied and refused to hide in her stateroom.

He touched his hat brim as he approached her. “Going to jump?”

“Of course not.” She balked. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“It's only that you look so solemn staring out into the sea.”

“I'm merely contemplating my life, not thinking of ending it.”

Giles understood her disappointment, for he'd felt that same bleak despair—the unfairness of it all! Why had he not been born a richer man?—as he'd braced himself to do what his circumstances required. “The reality of our marriage is not the stuff of dreams, and for that I am sorry, but the deed is done.”

Unlike English ladies, Yankee girls were freer to marry for love, knowing they had inheritances, investments, and loving parents to cushion them financially. So why had Louisa Thurston Reid married him? Not for love, they hardly knew one another.

She was likely as opportunistic as he.

“Did you receive the roses?” he asked. He’d gone to some trouble having them delivered from the florist, stored overnight in the ship’s cold store, and then presented before the first petal drooped.

“Yes,” she answered, dispassionately. “Thank you for the flowers, my lord.”

Giles didn’t like to see her unhappy. He sought to tease her a bit by asking, “Perhaps Her Ladyship would prefer chocolates next time?”

A ghost of a smile tugged at her lips, but faded before it could take shape. “Next time? Tonight, you mean?”

He longed to tell her that the act would never again cause her pain, that someday with the right partner, she would grow to enjoy it, but how could a gentleman explain the complexities of an aristocratic marriage to an innocent young woman from a wholly different culture?

He was sorry he’d hurt her, but couldn’t apologize for doing what was legally required of a husband and a wife. “Cheer up, Louisa, you’ll soon be with child.”

She looked at him with disgust. Americans didn’t understand the importance of breeding heirs, since they could—and often did—leave their fortunes to whomever they wished.

“Surely, the possibility of conception mustn’t come as a surprise to you. The sooner we do our duty, the better.” He leaned toward her to whisper, “Then we’ll be free.”

He’d be free of debt. Louisa would be free of him. She could live in peace and comfort for the rest of her days, raising his babies.

His words brought her little solace. “There is no such thing as freedom, Lord Granborough. Only a lucky few ever harbor that illusion.”

“Grim words for an American...”

“Let’s just say I’ve bitten into the apple or pricked my finger on the spindle. Either way, I now know how it feels to

be a wife—*your wife*—and it's a bloody disappointment.”

Louisa had every right to hate him for hurting her, for deceiving her.

Giles had hoped for a marriage of civility and convenience. An angry wife would make trouble for him, when what he needed most was an ally. “Things need not be miserable between us.”

She walked away from him, her woolen skirts sweeping against the deck boards, angry footsteps echoing against the steel walls of the ship. She headed toward the door, leaving him to jog after her.

If she returned inside, they'd never finish this conversation.

“Louisa!” He took her arm in his, drawing her against him. “Things needn't be miserable. We've time yet to find our way.”

His wife wrenched free of him. “I can make my own way.”

“Well, I can't.” She turned to listen as he confessed, “The sad fact is, I need you. I need your money. I need it now more than I did yesterday. Do you understand? There are circumstances which have arisen...” He huffed. Would he ever survive the shame? “My back is against the wall, Louisa, and there is no one left to help me. No one else to turn to. Believe me, you're all I have.”

His honest admission caught her attention, and she asked, “What are you proposing?”

“That we be friendly about this. We may as well make the best of it.”

“I *have* been making the best of it! I've dealt with your sour face, and your surly attitude, and your half-hearted seduction of me. I spent the first day of my married life sobbing in the bathtub because of your insensitivity, and the first thing you ask when you see me is whether I want to jump!”

“I’m sorry. The joke was in poor taste, but the gift of flowers I sent you was heartfelt—I ordered them in New York to be delivered this morning. I couldn’t possibly guess how our first evening together would turn out, but it was never my intention to make you cry.”

She cried now. Indignant little tears pooled in the corner of her eyes, and she smeared them as they spilled down her cheeks. She announced, partly to save face and partly to convince any nosey onlookers, “It is the wind! Oh, it’s the wind...”

His wife had more courage than some men. Her bravery and spirit were two of the reasons he’d chosen her over all other heiresses, for Louisa Thurston Reid possessed the backbone necessary to see this game through to the end.

“Of course, it is the wind,” he said, loudly. Intimately, he whispered, “Please, don’t cry.”

Giles searched his pockets for his handkerchief, but then he remembered...

None of this—his debts, the Herberts, those thugs who’d bloodied his lip—was her fault, yet fate insisted *she* pay for the bad hand he’d been dealt in life.

“I’d offer you my handkerchief, but I seem to have lost it.” He tugged off his gloves and dabbed her eyes with the pads of his thumbs. Her skin was soft, warm, and wet. Even now, after he’d been such a cad, she tipped her head back and trusted him.

“I will learn to be good to you,” he vowed, “if you’ll be patient with me.”

The dressing bell sounded. Passengers began to move toward the doorway, drawing nearer to where Lord and Lady Granborough stood. In a moment, there would be no more room for intimate conversation.

Would all of *Campania* witness their quarrel?

“Let me escort you back to the cabin.” Giles carefully extended his arm to her, praying she’d take it. She was still upset. She could turn on her heel and disappear into the ship,

leaving him standing with his arm in the air like some lovestruck fool. “Come now, Louisa dear, we must dress for dinner if we’re to make an appearance.”

She reluctantly laid her gloved hand on his sleeve. “Very well.”

“Thank you,” said he, softly. He’d been afraid she’d leave him hanging, but Giles ought to have known better.

Louisa would never let him down.

CHAPTER TEN

They returned to a stateroom littered with shattered glass and broken blossoms. His Lordship paused at their bedside table, frowning down at the destruction of his thoughtful, if poorly-timed, gift of flowers.

“What has happened here?” His eyes slid to search Louisa’s. She stood silent and defiant, yet in only twenty-four hours of marriage, he’d learned to read her well.

Oddly, he didn’t seem angry at what she’d done. He seemed amused. Impressed, even. “Louisa,” he teased, “you petulant child. Did you suffer a tantrum?”

She truly had been hurt by his callous treatment of her. Lord Granborough had made a hash of both the wedding night and their first day of married life.

Louisa knelt to pick up the pieces. Her skirt hems sopped up rose-tinged water as she searched through the wet pile of carpeting for each shining sliver of glass.

Her husband stopped her. “Don’t. You’ll cut yourself.”

Lord Granborough crouched beside her. His woolen trousers pulled taut over the muscles of his thighs, and Louisa recalled the sensation of those long legs sliding between hers. In the closeness of their cabin, the scent of his shaving lotion mingled with the heady fragrance of flowers, making her dizzy. She’d awakened with the smell of him clinging to every intimate inch of her skin.

He fell to his knees beside her, holding these jagged fragments of glass like a handful of diamonds. He offered her a dozen thorny, splintered stems of American Beauty roses like olive branches.

“Allow me to see to this whilst you dress.”

She met his gaze, remembering his promise: *“I will learn to be good to you if you’ll be patient with me.”*

Louisa wanted goodness. She was starved for sweetness—a gentle touch, a smile, however fleeting. She dreaded growing bitter, feeling shattered. How long could a woman be patient?

A day.

A week.

Her lifetime?

She only had one of those, and it was too precious to waste.

“You had better be worth it,” she warned.

Lord Granborough blinked at her. *“What?”*

Louisa dusted the last bits of glass from her fingertips into his open palm. The little sprinkles caught the light filtering through their porthole window and became luminescent, brilliant, even in their ruination.

She owed her husband no explanation for her words, just as she’d owed him no explanation for her actions. He had hurt her, so she’d lashed out, destroying the most fragile things she could find. She’d taken her pain, grief, and disenchantment out on the roses.

American Beauty, indeed.

She could tear this stateroom apart and write a cheque to cover the damage. Lord Granborough couldn’t write a cheque to cover his dinner. She held tight to that kernel of defiance, nursing it in her breast until it became a pearl—the seed of a pearl, still in the infancy of its irritation. Louisa placed that in his hands, too, though its weight was perceptible only to her.

She stood, unburdened. She held her head up, undaunted. Let His Lordship clean up the mess she'd made.

Louisa rang for her maid and dressed at her leisure. She emerged wearing pink chiffon adorned with sprays of delicate silk apple blossoms. She felt fresh, verdant, brand-new, and full of promise—like spring.

It wasn't an appropriate dress for the time of year, but Louisa was saving her rich velvet cloaks and lustrous satin frocks for later in the week. Tonight, she wanted to feel buoyant, as light as air, as if nobody could pin her down.

Lord Granborough sat on their bed, already dressed for dinner, nursing a series of nicks on his palm. He chewed at a splinter of glass that had lodged itself into one fingertip and stubbornly refused to surrender.

He frowned, and she sensed that he disliked her flouncy, fussy clothes.

She shook out her skirts, asking, "Is something amiss?"

"That's rather juvenile for a woman in your position," he said, fighting the piece of glass in his flesh. "You look like a schoolgirl, yet you're the Marchioness of Granborough."

True, she was dressed more like a debutante than a bride, but Louisa wasn't ready to abandon those fleeting days of freedom that came with being a *jeune fille*, and she wanted him to know it.

"Fancy bodices are the fashion," she argued. Sleeves grew larger every season, and New York girls had taken to stuffing their shoulders with padding to meet this trend. Louisa added, flatly, "I'm sorry they're not to your taste, my lord."

She wondered how English ladies dressed, or whether she ought to emulate them—that was what Lord Granborough wanted, wasn't it? A dispassionate English wife, as pale, dull, and doleful as himself.

He should have stayed in Britain.

Abandoning the splinter, he shrugged and said, "It's merely my opinion, Louisa. You may dress how you wish, but,

between us, I prefer your tidy little tailor-mades.”

“Tailor-made walking suits cannot be worn to dinner.” He knew this fact as well as she did. His Lordship was merely teasing her, maybe in his odd way, he was even flirting with her.

Louisa observed him in the dressing table mirror as she reached for her jewelry bag. She fished through it until she found what she sought. She held a double strand of pearls out to him. “Fasten this for me, won’t you?”

He slid off the bed and crossed the stateroom. The pearls coiled in his open palm, and he tested their heft for a moment, appreciating them, before clasping the twin strands at her throat.

The necklace had been made especially for her by the famous pearlers J. Dreicer & Son—a wedding gift from the belles.

“These are very fine,” he said, admiring her necklace in the mirror. The pearls complemented the dress, but Louisa wore them as a reminder of her dear friends back home. Lord Granborough’s fingers, still tender from picking up glass shards and rose stems, traced her bare skin above diaphanous layers of chiffon. Maybe she had hurt him, too...

She turned beneath his hands to face him. Even in heeled slippers, she only reached the level of his white bowtie and stiff, starched collar. Louisa had to crane her neck to meet her husband’s eyes.

“You are so beautiful,” he said, softly. “You needn’t dress to impress me.”

She smiled shyly, still unaccustomed to receiving compliments from this stranger. How could she know how to please him when she did not *know* him?

Louisa laid her white-gloved hand on the lapel of his dinner jacket. She smoothed the spotless fabric beneath her palm. Even a fool must admit that Lord and Lady Granborough made a striking couple. She was small, he was tall. She was money, he was class. Louisa had desired him

from the moment she first laid eyes on him in the Vanderheid's ballroom.

"Take me to dinner," she said, moving her hand to his sleeve.

He escorted her from their stateroom suite. Arm-in-arm, they walked down the paneled passageway, tilting with the slow roll of the ship. Dozens of diners milled in the reception area, meeting friends and making introductions. Louisa suspected that traveling across the Atlantic was a social event, and passengers liked to share the journey with those 'in the same boat' as them.

She and Lord Granborough knew nobody on board and made no effort to ingratiate themselves with the others as they made their way to the dining saloon. They descended the teakwood staircase, footsteps creaking on treads that protested under the weight of so much silk, and wool, and sable, and patent leather.

The couple descended to the lowest level of first-class accommodations. Here, the dining saloon was crowded with voyagers waiting for a seat at one of the long rows of rectangular tables.

Six hundred heads swiveled in Louisa's direction, straining to catch a glimpse of the pretty, young marchioness. Some lips whispered crudely of the spoiled American heiress who'd bought herself a title.

Would she ever again know a friendly face?

Louisa turned to the only person she knew. Surely, this was how he'd felt in New York, standing tall in a room full of jackals, staunchly fending off rumors of money-grubbing and disreputability. He must've been desperate. He must've been frightened. Somehow, through it all, he had found her.

His Lordship sensed her discomfiture. He laid his hand over hers. "It's nothing more than piano practice — "*Kinderszenen* ", I recall." He squeezed her fingers once, and then let her go. "You'll do fine."

She'd trained for this moment all her life. She had longed to be more than just a face in the crowd, and now she was *facing* the crowd.

As Lord Granborough guided her toward two open seats, she reminded herself that she'd wanted this, and as with everything else in life, what Louisa wanted, she got it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The first-class dining saloon offered the most elegant meal setting on the seas. Six hundred passengers sat at tables laid with white cloth and topped with greenery. Gilded ivory paneling lined the walls, and red velvet upholstery was emblazoned with Cunard Company insignia. At the center of the space, a stained-glass dome towered some thirty feet above the diners' heads. Guests could peer down from the assembly room above, where soft piano music played. After six months in the wilds of Fifth Avenue, he was relieved to return to civilization.

Giles led his wife through the space, noting the hushed conversation, and the gentle clink of silver, china, and glass. Diamond studs winked from starched shirtfronts and silk frocks billowed over chair-backs to pool upon the carpeted floor.

Lord and Lady Granborough found seats together at a table set for eight. The other diners stood to welcome them, and all the necessary presentations were made.

Tonight, they would take supper with Mr. and Mrs. Meyer, midwest department store owners and the richest passengers on board; Madame and Monsieur de Roubernon, a couple in their thirties who were returning to France; and the Misses Broome, two English spinsters on a Thomas Cook tour.

They all shook hands and offered pleasantries.

“Hello, how do you do?” asked the Meyers.

Next, the de Roubernons greeted them. “*Bonsoir.*”

“*Ravie de vous rencontrer,*” replied Louisa in her lovely schoolgirl French.

Giles clasped hands with his neighbors. “*Enchanté.*”

The Broome sisters were ecstatic to learn they dined with the most illustrious passengers on board. “Ah, honeymooners! We read of your nuptials in the paper!”

The table lifted their champagne glasses and offered their congratulations.

Louisa smiled and blushed prettily. “Thank you. You’re very kind.”

“We did wonder,” said Mrs. Meyer, sipping, “who we’d be sharing our table with. Of course, no one expects anything on the first night of a voyage. You were clever to take dinner in your stateroom. It’s more comfortable there.”

Giles leaned toward his wife to whisper, “We aren’t on the official passenger list, though the press must’ve sniffed out our whereabouts by now. Prepare yourself for vulgar questions by intrusive strangers.”

“People are merely curious. It’s harmless.” She had recovered quickly from her earlier bout of nerves. Of course, it was disconcerting to be stared at and gossiped about, and she’d face such scrutiny for the rest of her life, but Louisa wasn’t intimidated for long. Even in New York, she had endured being gawked at for her good looks and gross fortune, and supper aboard *Campania* was no different. She soon found her stride.

After champagne and canapés, the soup and fish courses were served. White-jacketed waiters buzzed around the table, dishing out food and refilling wine glasses. Though Giles drank mostly water with his meal, he enjoyed watching the other diners loosen up and settle into a comfortable round of conversation.

Louisa’s cheeks bloomed as she spoke excitedly with the de Roubernons about their home in France. “I would love to see Paris,” she said, “the real Paris, as there must be something beyond the *Rue de la Paix.*”

Their table-mates laughed. For most young ladies, that city began and ended at the fashionable shopfronts of Worth, Mellerio, Reboux, and Doucet. He wondered what Louisa might like to see or do there—picnic in the Tuileries, cycle the Champs Elysée, or simply wander the Louvre for an afternoon. He could give her supper at Café Terminus and take her dancing in the Bal Bullier.

As if she could read his thoughts, his wife turned to him, eyes sparkling, and asked, “What about you, my lord? Have you any dreams of Paris?”

Giles knew the city well, though his visits had never been as pleasant as his fantasies. “I’ve been over many times to see my mother who lives in Neuilly, just off the *Bois de Boulogne*.”

Louisa’s smile fell, and her eyes lost their luster. Two perfectly shaped brows furrowed into a frown, for she hadn’t known that his mother lived in Paris. Until their wedding day, he’d made certain his bride knew very little about his life.

How could he explain to the Thurston Reids that his mother was a grifter, a debt shirker, a thief? Some of Louisa’s dowry must pay Mother’s bills or the new Marchioness of Granborough would never be welcomed into the maisons and salons where she’d ordered her trousseau only a few months before.

“Your mother lives in Paris?” asked Louisa.

He stabbed a forkful of fish and ate it, feigning amusement. “Did you think she was dead?”

“You never mentioned her. She did not attend our wedding...”

Thank God for that! His mother would’ve found a way to make Louisa’s special day all about *her*.

“She did send a card,” he said. Louisa would not have known Mother’s French surname and likely thought it one of the dozens of congratulatory missives they’d received. The card’s contents were cool and concise, without any sentiment—as had been their relationship for twenty-six years.

The table grew quiet. Giles ate in awkward silence, wishing he'd kept his trips across the Channel to himself, and that he hadn't caused Louisa any embarrassment. He meant to spare her from the shame of his private life.

Thankfully, a sympathetic Madame de Roubernon came to their rescue. The woman leaned forward, baubles flashing in the electric light and bracelets jangling on her slender wrists as she reached for her wine glass. "How exciting to be in those early days of marriage, starting the great adventure of getting to know one another."

Louisa glanced at him, eyes searching his, doubtless wondering if she ever would get to know him, whether he would ever let her in.

Giles turned to her, offering, "My mother and her husband have a charming flat overlooking a street lined with chestnut trees. I am sure she would like to know you. We can go over in the spring."

"Thank you," his wife said. She could never fathom the Pandora's box of hurt, lies, and exploitation such a visit would unleash upon her sheltered Knickerbocker world, for his mother had championed his plans to take Louisa for all she was worth.

There were moments when Mother and Lady Venia Herbert were frighteningly similar in their selfishness and opportunism. Pondering that threatened to give him indigestion.

Dinner's main course was fillet of beef, roast potatoes, and gravy served with green peas and creamed carrots—an English Sunday roast *à la* Cunard.

From across the table, Mr. Meyer inquired whether the tailor's strike had impacted the Granborough's wedding preparations. Truthfully, Giles had paid little attention to the garment workers taking to the streets, but thousands of Jewish men, women, and children had protested that they must work long hours in unsafe conditions for four dollars a week. Even he must admit that their treatment was inhumane.

“My trousseau was ordered from Paris,” Louisa answered, “as were the toilettes of all of my attendants, so nothing was delayed as far as the strike was concerned. The customs duties on the trunks, however, were a headache in and of themselves.”

She deftly sliced her meat and brought the sliver of beef to her lips. She chewed for a moment, as if to weigh her words, and then admitted, “My father owns a carpet mill and employs seven thousand weavers. We disagreed on the issue of the tailor’s strike. I am pro-unionization, and stand on the side of all workers fighting for a better life.”

The Meyers relied on shopgirls, garment workers, deliverymen, and goods buyers to keep their department store running smoothly. They required wealthy patrons to make purchases, and that wage disparity between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ kept their doors open.

Louisa did not censor her thoughts to spare the Meyers’ feelings. “Not every employer takes care of his employees,” she said. “Why shouldn’t trade workers band together and look after their own interests? They deserve fair pay and humane hours, and...” she lifted her hands as if to display her frock and jewels, and elegant coiffure, “respect for fitting us all out so nicely.”

She charmed them all with her bright smile and plucky common sense. As a proper Englishman, Giles was horrified that his wife held opinions on such weighty matters, yet was pleased that she was intelligent, articulate, and confident enough to speak her mind. It was that push-and-pull he’d found so appealing.

On the first night he’d met her, she’d told him, “*Between diamonds from Tiffany and frocks from Emile Pingat, I desire a degree in economics and a career in diplomacy.*” Louisa might never attend university, but she had more money than anyone could spend in a lifetime. She could put her fortune to good use in Britain, and wield her power and privilege as Lady Granborough to foster relations between their two nations.

His wife would have her work cut out for her, yet Giles had faith that she'd succeed in whatever causes she put her hand to.

He studied her through supper, letting his roast grow cold. Dessert went ignored, though Louisa nibbled *gelée aux fruits* as she chatted with their table-mates. She looked delectable in pink chiffon and pearls, as light and sweet as candy floss. Although she was young, there was nothing juvenile about her appearance. Her apple blossom frock looked refreshing against a sea of darker clothing.

He had no right to criticize her choice of fashion. He had no right to keep her ignorant of his past—or of his plans for the future. He'd been so very wrong about a great many things lately and hoped someday to rectify that.

But not tonight.

Mr. Meyer and Monsieur de Roubernon passed a glance to one another, and then nodded their heads in Giles' direction. It was an invitation as clear as if it had been spoken, and all three men began to extricate themselves from the dinner table.

Louisa looked up from her jellied fruit. "I suppose this means you're retiring to the smoking room."

It was the custom in New York as well as in England, and this separation of the sexes shouldn't come as a surprise to her. Gentlemen could have their fun while the ladies enjoyed a more decorous end to the evening.

He stuffed his hands in his trouser pockets. "Do you mind, dear?"

Giles had retired with her father, the Vanderheids, and many other plutocrats during their courtship and engagement. He'd never bothered to ask her opinion until tonight. He hadn't cared, but was now making an effort to be kinder to her.

"No, I don't mind," she answered. "I want to finish my dessert."

He bent to kiss the top of her head and whispered, "I shall see you later, then."

With that, the trio of men made the long trek upstairs to the promenade deck, leaving Louisa and the other women three storeys below and half a world away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The ladies moved to one end of the table, laughing and chatting, and enjoying their feminine camaraderie. They were as happy to be rid of the men as the men were happy to dash off in search of cigars and cards.

Louisa had followed them once—after her betrothal dinner, in fact—curious to know what it was the menfolk were so eager to adjourn to. They'd gathered in the billiard room of the Thurston Reid's mansion, stripping their jackets and loosening their neckties. They'd slumped in armchairs and kicked their feet up on leather ottomans. Pappa had enjoyed a glass of bourbon by the fire, while other guests took brandy, whiskey, or coffee.

She had looked through the keyhole for Lord Granborough. He'd stood across from Pappa's chair, one elbow propped up on the marble mantelpiece, smoking a cigar. His face had been strained, his honey-blond head wreathed in tobacco smoke, and his eyes reflected the blaze. It was as if he was burning up, smoldering from the inside out, yet his agony had been visible only to her.

Louisa had feared that His Lordship was displeased with their marriage settlement, but her family had been generous. They'd desired a match with the marquess and weren't going to let anything so trifling as finances get in the way of Louisa's success.

That night had been the first time she'd seen the shade fall. Lord Granborough's mask had slipped for an instant, and

she'd glimpsed the rot concealed within. That look in his eyes hadn't frightened her. It had strengthened her resolve to marry the man—at last, she'd witnessed something true, something real and vulnerable about him.

He was only a man, after all. She wasn't marrying a noble institution, a vast estate, or a legacy as everyone seemed to believe. She was gaining a husband, possibly a friend, and an imperfect person who might someday prove worthy of her loyalty.

Tonight, Louisa had gotten a further glimpse at whatever plagued him. He'd kept her ignorant of his mother, or maybe His Lordship had kept his mother ignorant of *her*. Either way, it was clear to everyone at the dinner table that her husband had never intended the two women to meet.

She would not push the issue. Unlike the night of her betrothal dinner, when she'd peeped through the keyhole into a man's world, Louisa wouldn't sneak or spy. She would be there for her husband, standing upright and honest, whenever he was ready to reveal himself.

A waiter removed her dish of *gelée aux fruits* from the table. "Would you care for coffee, ma'am?"

She would be up late enough without the stimulation of caffeine. Indeed, coffee was the last thing she needed. "Champagne, please."

The fellow hastened to find a bottle.

Mrs. Meyer leaned toward her, eager to welcome their young tablemate into the conversation. "My maid heard from your maid that *you* have a bicycle stored in the cargo hold. What a statement of feminine independence! Tell me, do you intend to bring our American sense of empowerment to the old world?"

Louisa hadn't meant it as a declaration. She'd simply enjoyed the exercise and freedom of movement a bicycle provided. "I like the idea of traveling on my own, if only for short jaunts. It's convenient, and there is no need for a

coachman, who is just another man looking over my shoulder.”

The woman nodded. “We sell them at Meyer’s, reluctantly. My husband doesn’t understand the cycling craze, but he’s all too happy to offer bloomers, caps and veils, dusters, and split-skirts for our intrepid clientele. Any activity that requires a costly wardrobe is featured on our sales floors and in our catalogs.”

One of the Misses Broome inquired, “What does His Lordship think of your bicycle?”

“I never thought to ask, but I’m certain I’ll hear about it, as Lord Granborough rarely keeps his opinions to himself,” she said. “He won’t forbid me, if that’s what you are thinking.”

If he ever tried to curb her liberty, Louisa would not go quietly. She had intended a marriage of equality, a true union. A partnership in the business of life.

Pappa had insisted she keep her finances separate from those of her husband. He’d had a clause spelled out in her marriage contract—Louisa’s investments and annuities were hers alone to spend as she pleased. She carried her purse and checkbook with her, and must always retain her autonomy.

The waiter returned with an empty champagne glass. He placed it on the table, and then delivered a perfectly chilled bottle of Bollinger. The man poured her a glass, and Louisa offered to share her bounty with her neighbors.

All of the ladies took champagne. In a moment, the bottle was tipped empty and the waiter cleared the evidence. The music from the assembly room above grew livelier, and the remaining guests in the dining saloon spoke loudly over the din. This was hardly the hushed, genteel atmosphere that the men had abandoned only a quarter of an hour earlier.

Girls could have their fun, too.

The Broome sisters grew flushed and breathless. They deployed ivory fans to cool themselves from the rich food, overly warm room, and alcohol buzzing through their veins. With lips loosened by drink, the giddy spinsters chattered to

Louisa about her honeymoon, her handsome husband, and of the life awaiting her in their homeland.

“His Lordship is smitten,” one of the sisters said, all aflutter. “I observed you both through dinner, and he could not take his eyes off his pretty young bride!”

Louisa sipped her glass of champagne, barely registering the gossip. Unlike the spinsters, she lingered at the table because she knew what was coming later—yes, Lord Granborough *had* watched her all through the meal. When her husband returned to their stateroom suite after fortifying himself with smoke, drink, and bawdy talk, he would take her to bed. He would part her legs and take his pleasure inside her.

She downed her champagne and searched the room for a waiter. She’d been too generous and the bottle had gone too quickly. Surely, someone could fetch another before the service concluded for the night.

Madame de Roubernon suspected her plan. The beautiful Frenchwoman leaned toward Louisa to whisper, discreetly, “The wine won’t help. Have a warm bath instead.”

Louisa was mortified, yet also relieved because her mother wasn’t there to give her advice. In fact, Mamma had been no help at all in matters of honeymoons and husband-pleasing. She’d sent her daughter to the altar without a bit of practical knowledge. Madame de Roubernon, however, was worldly. She was willing to help, and Louisa was grateful.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed,” said the woman, noting her blushes. “*Presque tout le monde dans cette pièce a fait l’amour.*”

Nearly everyone in this room had experienced lovemaking.

Louisa glanced at all the faces, young and old, beautiful and plain, bold and bashful. She could not imagine them doing what she and Lord Granborough had done!

Her eyes alighted on the spinsters seated across the table. “Not the Broomes...”

Instead of finding husbands, they’d traveled the world.

Madame de Roubernon's eyes danced with knowing laughter. Poor Louisa wasn't in on the joke. "Not a wedding night, but perhaps they too have had a first time."

She felt terribly sheltered, for she hadn't considered the fact that women 'did the deed' for all sorts of reasons, some having nothing to do with marriage.

"Think of it as a sisterhood," said the Frenchwoman. She placed her gloved hand on Louisa's, carefully imparting one last piece of knowledge. "Go, luxuriate in your bath, and then put on something pretty, something *you* like. The sexual act is for you as much as it is for him."

Louisa pondered this, for what could she possibly gain from doing...*that*?

"Thank you, madame. I am feeling overtired, and I do believe a warm bath would help." She rose from her seat, bidding her neighbors 'goodnight'.

The Misses Broome were disappointed to see her go, as it was always such a treat to have a young person at the table. Louisa felt like an infant beside these enlightened ladies.

"Leaving so soon?" asked one sister.

The other declared, "But the night is so young."

"I'm sorry, but I really must get back or His Lordship will worry."

Louisa returned to her stateroom, stopping to speak with the first-class stewardess on duty, who bobbed a curtsy and went to prepare a warm, scented bath for the Marchioness of Granborough.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Giles reclined in an overstuffed armchair with his legs stretched out beneath the table in front of him. Waiters weaved between the groups of gentlemen gathered in the smoking room, serving them brandy and lighting their cigars.

A fire crackled in the blue-tiled hearth, casting warmth and light over the oaken paneling, the bronze lamps with amber shades, leather upholstered furniture, wooden tables, and chairs. Giles selected a Havana cigar from the humidor, allowed it to be cut and lit, and then filled his mouth with heady tobacco smoke.

The table was littered with crystal ashtrays, drinks glasses, cigarette cases, and pocket change. Gathered around this hub of masculinity sat Mr. Meyer and Monsieur de Roubernon, two young Englishmen, and a fellow from San Francisco who was traveling on business—this curious gentleman wore a gold nugget ring and claimed to have met Wyatt Earp, though Giles suspected he was a card sharp or a confidence man looking to make his fortune on the high seas.

It took a twister to know one, and Giles was a swindler of the worst sort.

Mr. Meyer puffed his cigar. “We’re thinking of getting a discreet poker game together, if you’re interested.”

“Count me out,” Giles replied, explaining, “I never play for money.”

One of the Englishmen goaded him. “Come, Granborough, you’ve blunt to spare.”

Truth be told, Giles feared he was born with a propensity for vice—gambling, drunkenness, dissipation. He'd watched his father waste and wager everything the family owned, heedless of the harm. The consequences of these actions were merely a tin can to be kicked down the road for someone else to deal with.

Even at Oxford, when he ought to have been carefree and gay, Giles had practiced the art of economy, rationing his allowance and taking his clothes to be mended or sold rather than enjoying jaunts to Savile Row on his father's unpaid accounts.

Yet those poverty-stricken days were behind him. He *did* have the blunt to spare for a card game or a harmless flutter now and then, but old habits died hard. He'd vowed to always temper his passions.

He owed it to Louisa, who deserved a decent, prudent husband. He must never waste her money.

Giles refused to be recruited for a poker game that was sure to end badly for him. If Meyer, de Roubernon, or any of the others couldn't see that this California businessman had intentions of lightening their pockets, they were fools.

A wise man knew where his best interests lay. Giles dragged himself to his feet, saying, "I had better get back to my wife."

There was a great deal of back slapping and elbow nudging as he placed his spent cigar on the waiter's silver tray.

Leaving the smoking room, he stepped into the passageway. Unbeknownst to him, the previous night's hired thugs were waiting by the door. They flanked him as soon as Giles crossed the threshold, and then followed him down the swaying corridor.

His heart raced at the sight of them. His stomach rolled, bringing up bad memories from the evening before, when his life had begun to spin out of control. Sweat pooled at the base of his spine, as if he were marching toward the guillotine and not simply striding the length of *Campania's* promenade deck.

“You best not lose Herbert’s money playing cards,” warned the larger of the pair.

“It’s not Herbert’s money—not yet, at any rate.” Giles kept a steady pace, praying he remembered how to get back to his stateroom. He didn’t wish to find himself stuck at a dead end with two bruisers, for he’d heard tales of broken fingers and shattered teeth where unpaid debts were concerned. “Whatever I have belongs to my wife.”

“Then perhaps we’ll discuss repayment with her...”

“You will never approach Lady Granborough!” He couldn’t imagine Louisa being shaken down by these two brutes. She’d be terrified. God help her if they endeavored to extract an alternative method of payment.

Giles couldn’t allow her to come to harm. He’d promised her the protection of his name and would sacrifice his fingers, his teeth, and even his eyes to keep her safe from Herbert.

The realization knocked him backward, and he stumbled against the paneled wall as if he’d been kicked in the gut. But he hadn’t been struck. No one dared touch him in the first-class corridor, where there were no shadows in which to hide. The truth was out in the open, for any passerby to witness.

He *cared* about his wife.

“The settlement of my debts shall be negotiated between the Herberts and myself,” said Giles, fighting for composure. He smoothed his waistcoat and tugged at his cuffs, erecting that icy façade from behind which he spoke to creditors, pawnbrokers, and other underlings. “It is no one else’s business, certainly not a woman’s.”

He dared not let them know he’d developed a weakness where his wife was concerned.

“Wasn’t it a woman that got you into this mess, guv?” asked the man. “I reckon Lady Venia might like to know what you’ve been getting up to, swanning your young bride ‘round the ship.”

“I don’t see how that’s any of her concern.” Venia had been married for eight years and bore Herbert three children.

Not once had she allowed Giles to feel jealous of the things he'd been denied simply because she'd chosen someone else.

He wanted a family and financial security, a home that wasn't in danger of falling in on his head. He wanted to walk the lanes of Granborough able to look his tenants in the eye. He wanted not to worry about Herbert's hired toughs harming his wife.

One could argue that Lady Venia *had* gotten him into this mess, and now he had no idea how to safely extricate himself from the web in which she'd snared him.

The men reached the reception area. Giles didn't believe they'd follow him down the grand staircase in full view of the ship's officers and first-class passengers, yet the thugs descended at his side, as brazen as if they'd belonged there.

Moonlight filtered through the skylight overhead to mingle with the candlestick sconces, illuminating each tread and riser as the trio ventured downward. They reached the main deck reception area, which led to the stateroom suites, lavatories, and the purser's desk. Surely, Herbert's henchmen would not follow him further.

Giles jammed his hands in his trouser pockets and turned to them, asking, "What is it you want from me?"

The one who'd bloodied Giles' lip the night before spoke. "Herbert is worried you'll skip out on your debts like your mother did, or that you and your missus will be in no hurry to reach London. We're here to ensure you stay the course."

"I never shirk a debt, your employer knows that. I shall deliver a cheque as soon as the funds clear. There can be nothing done before then, certainly not while steaming across the Atlantic. You hardly need to follow me to bed."

"Who's to say we ain't got the parlour suite next to yours," the other man said. He cupped his ear and grinned. "Up all night listening through a crack in the wall."

The thugs fell into guffaws of laughter, earning them a stern look from a dowager in silks and furs. Giles felt his face grow red.

How had these men managed to get to him? Was he not above their reach, safely ensconced in this first-class world? He ought to complain to the master at arms and have them detained. Of course, they'd be released in Liverpool, free to stalk and harass the Granboroughs until Herbert was satisfied.

With a fortune owed, and these hired thugs breathing down his neck, Giles feared there was no escaping this shameful business. He felt raw, defenseless. His nerves were on fire as though he'd been flayed alive, and he was screaming.

Screaming, yet silent.

Stoic, as his parents had forced him to be, for there was never anyone to help him. No one he knew was ever truly on his side, as they'd all had their greedy motives for birthing him, raising him, loving him, and leaving him.

Only one person had chosen him, and he had no idea what to do with her.

Giles turned his back on the pair of thugs. He walked the corridor to his stateroom, not checking whether they followed him, but sensing that they hadn't. They'd terrorized him enough for one night and would catch him out some other time, when he least expected it.

That was the trouble with fear—some nights, it sat on his chest like a millstone, weighing him down, pressing him flat, squeezing the life out of him. Other times, it barely registered, sneaking up on him, a thousand times more devastating in its surprise.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Louisa lay curled up on the sofa in their lamplit stateroom. She read a novel, as was her custom to pass the time, yet barely comprehended the words on the page. She was drowsy from her bath and cozy, clad only in her silk wrapper and nightdress, for she'd taken Madame de Roubernon's advice.

Her lingerie felt soft against her skin, trimmed in lace and threaded with ribbon. She liked pretty, dainty underthings, yet her silk wrapper was elegant, womanly, and wholly unsuitable for anybody's eyes but her husband's. It clasped beneath her breasts to hug her slight curves before falling from her hips in waves, pooling on the carpeted floor at her slippered feet. The heavy train dragged when she walked, making it impractical for...anything, really.

Louisa had blushed and balked at the dressmaker's sketches. She'd pleaded with Mamma not to embarrass her by ordering such a costume, and she must have looked silly wearing it now, with her loose hair tumbling down her back like a schoolgirl. But she couldn't resist idly stroking her fingertips around the low neckline as she thumbed through the book in her lap.

At last, the door to their suite creaked open, flooding the sitting room with light from the passageway beyond. Lord Granborough stepped over the threshold, and then closed and locked the door.

He appeared weary and stressed. Very nearly on the verge of tears. Once again, the careful shade had been lowered to

reveal the vulnerable human within.

She sat up, tossing her novel aside. “What is wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

His Lordship startled, as if he hadn’t seen her sitting before him. He was so far gone into that rotten place deep inside himself that her presence in his stateroom—and in his life—hardly registered.

He blinked at her. “Were you waiting up for me, Louisa?”

She slid her slippers off the sofa, resting them on the floor. Should she go to him or leave him be? “We share a room, my lord. I could hardly go to bed without you.”

“My apologies for keeping you up, then.” He fumbled with his necktie and plucked uselessly at his shirt studs. He’d have his clothes in knots if he weren’t careful.

Louisa pushed off from the cushions and crossed the floor to reach for him. “Here—”

“Don’t fuss over me.” He let his arms fall to his side.

“Let me help you.” She loosened his tie and freed him from his collar. She collected each gold stud in the palm of her hand as she slowly undressed him. Though his body was firm beneath her fingers, she feared he would collapse if she weren’t careful.

He allowed her to slip the studs into his dinner jacket pocket, and then strip the cigar-stinking wool down his arms. She placed everything on the nearest armchair.

“I have a valet for this,” was his only argument.

She smiled softly. “I know, but you also have a wife.”

His Lordship’s sad state tugged at her heartstrings. Tonight, Louisa longed to be a wife to him and a friend when he needed one most. She removed his white silk waistcoat and suspenders. Her face hovered a breath away from his open shirtfront, acutely aware of his blue gaze watching as she worked.

Lord Granborough cleared his throat. “This is pretty,” he said as he fingered the diamanté clasp of her wrapper. He flicked it open with ease, parting the silk to reveal her lacy, ribboned nightdress.

She gasped as he put his hands inside her wrapper, sliding his palms around her waist to pull her close. Louisa’s arms were trapped between them, and she rested her hands on his chest.

He buried his face in her hair, whispering, “If anyone were to ever hurt or bother you...”

She didn’t know what to say to such a thing, so she resorted to their usual banter. “Who would bother me, besides you?”

“I am serious, Louisa—if ever you felt frightened or threatened, you must tell me straight away. Dear, sweet girl, I shan’t let anything happen to you.”

Pressed against his chest, she felt the drumming of his heart. Surely, he felt the pounding of hers through her breast. What had caused this change in him? What was she to do with this tall man brought low?

Louisa pried her hand from his chest. She snaked her arms between their bodies. Emboldened, she moved the flat of his palm up her waist, skimming her ribs, to touch her breast.

He lifted and cupped the little mound, kneading and squeezing, and caressing until her nipples drew into tight buds. The sensation of a man’s warm hands on her flesh nearly knocked her breathless.

She’d felt desire before, oftentimes when catching sight of His Lordship on a good day, when he was handsome and teasing. When their bodies brushed on the dance floor, or those rare occasions when he’d draped his arm over her shoulder and let her sit close in the carriage.

He was her husband now. They’d lain together before. She knew what to expect and wasn’t frightened, and the heat that pooled in her belly hinted at a strange and dangerous promise of something more.

She lifted her lips to kiss him, but Lord Granborough wouldn't meet her mouth. "Go to bed, Louisa," he whispered.

Wordlessly, she crossed the sitting room and disappeared into their bedroom suite. She shed her silken wrapper and climbed onto the bed, not bothering to hide beneath the sheets. Louisa lifted her nightdress, spreading her legs to bare herself to his gaze. She closed her eyes and waited for him to join her.

For a moment, there was only the distant rumble of the engines. The gentle rocking of the ship. She took a breath, and then two, before she felt the mattress shift as her husband moved into place.

"Hold me," she begged of him. "Put your arms around me. I want to be touched."

Surely, a little affection wasn't too much to ask from one's husband.

This time, he listened to her. Large hands stroked her inner thigh. Fingertips caressed her breasts through her nightdress, and his thumb teased her nipple until she trembled. Soon, she was all a-shiver in the warm, dim, swaying cabin.

There was no pain when he eased inside her, only a delicious hunger as she welcomed him in.

Louisa put her hands on his shoulders as he pumped into her. She buried her face in his neck, breathing in the scent of tobacco smoke, shaving lotion, and sweat as he worked her. She marveled at the steady rhythm of his thrusts, his hands on her hips, pulling her against him.

He seemed desperate, clinging to her as though she were a life-preserver, and he a drowning man.

Louisa began to feel the stirrings of something pleasurable. She lifted her knees in response, instinctively drawing him deeper. That simple act seemed to spur him to a frenzy. Her husband was lost to anything beyond this new angle of her hips and the driving depths of each stroke as she took him in again, and again, and again.

"*Aaah—*" He finished too soon, moaning as his fingers dug into her buttocks, as his weight crushed her now-tender

breasts. He shook as he spent himself into her.

Panting, he rolled away from her. Lord Granborough stared up at the canopied ceiling, eyes swimming with some emotion Louisa couldn't begin to fathom, knowing he wouldn't bother to tell her. He'd got what he needed from her and now retreated behind the curtain.

She was left feeling needy, her body aching as though she'd been deprived of something precious. Disheartened, she tugged her nightdress down over her knees and did her best to ignore the warm, slack, sated man at her side.

Louisa's hopes for an affectionate marriage were dashed yet again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mid-morning sun filtered through their porthole window. Giles admired the sleeping young woman lying next to him. He knew she'd gone to bed unsatisfied, and he felt guilty that he couldn't grant her the physical closeness she desired. Louisa may have been his wife, but she could never truly be *his*.

He could never truly be *hers*.

That place in his affection belonged to another. It seemed the rights to his body had been bought and paid for—without his consent—by Lady Venia Herbert, and their affair now threatened to consume him.

Giles could not be both a lover and a husband to Louisa, though she alone deserved his fidelity.

Wives were for securing alliances, breeding babies, running households, and hosting parties. Mistresses were for pleasure, diversion, and respite from one's duties. He'd never known a gentleman to cross the two successfully and did not imagine Louisa would be interested in trying.

Let her pick a lover of her choosing—some sensitive fellow who could pet her and dote upon her as she deserved. Giles would be decent enough not to stand in her way.

For now, he needn't share her with anyone. He and Louisa had five blessed days together before they went their separate ways.

He wistfully traced her perfectly shaped eyebrows, her cheeks, her nose. He feathered a fingertip over her lips, her

chin. He longed to kiss all the angular points of her flawless profile. In the shell of her ear, he whispered, “Good morning, Lady Granborough.”

Her lashes fluttered. She awoke to find him hovering too near. Frowning, she turned from him, leaving the bed to search for the wrapper she’d discarded the night before.

He’d been so afraid last night—terrified, if he were honest with himself. Coupling with Louisa had been the last thing he’d wanted, but she’d proved a safe harbour.

She donned her dressing gown, fastening the little jeweled clasp beneath her breasts. Her loose, cascading hair was gilded in the sunshine as she crossed the room and rang for breakfast. She really was very pretty...

Giles stretched lazily beneath the bedlinens, recalling his wife’s knees lifting to cradle him, and her little puffs of breath on his cheek. She had been close to moaning in his arms. Against his better judgment, he wanted her back between the sheets.

“There is no reason to rise early, Louisa. Why don’t you take your coffee in bed?”

She flashed him an annoyed, wifely look.

Oh, yes, she was learning quickly.

He smiled at her, though she couldn’t see it, for she’d stooped to tug on her slippers. She was brave and defiant; uncowed, even by him. Giles recalled escorting her downstairs to dinner, how she’d faced six hundred strangers on his arm and charmed their table-mates by his side. Was there anything she couldn’t master if she put her mind to it?

“You were wonderful last night,” he told her. Louisa gaped at him, as if he’d said something crude. He realized his mistake almost too late and rushed to correct himself. “You were wonderful *at dinner*.”

“I liked being the center of attention,” his wife admitted. “Last night, people listened whenever I had something to say.”

“I don’t recall anyone ignoring you in New York.” Indeed, to his annoyance, Louisa had been at the heart of every gathering, invited to every party, sought out for every dance. He’d struggled to find her for waltzes, fending off swains trying to rescue her from their impending mésalliance.

Had she truly felt overlooked among the Knickerbockers?

“Nobody in New York cared what I thought about labor unions,” she said, “but I’m a married woman and get to have opinions now.”

He cared about her opinions. He sat up, clutching the linens to his chest, for he didn’t want to frighten her with his nakedness. “Do you feel that *I* don’t listen to you?”

Louisa crossed her arms over her breasts, debating how honest to be with him. “I think you have secrets, my lord, and you’d prefer it if I knew absolutely nothing about you.”

His perceptive wife certainly had him pegged.

Giles sighed. He’d only ever hoped to protect her. Keeping her safe was more important now than ever before, yet he hated hurting her. They were supposed to be allies. “I’m sorry for not telling you about my mother,” he said. “The truth is, we’re not close, but we are cordial. I couldn’t explain that in front of the others.”

She nodded, believing she understood. How could a pampered child fathom being forgotten at school and forced to rely on friends for accommodations during holidays? There were years when he’d scrimped together the funds for a train ticket back to Granborough, only to spend Christmas alone. Louisa imagined herself unheard or unseen, yet she had no idea what it felt like to truly be ignored.

“Since we are being honest,” she admitted, “you should know that I’ve followed you.”

“*When?*” Not last night, surely.

“The evening of our betrothal dinner. I wanted to know what men did in the smoking room, so I followed you, Pappa, and the others.”

He had no idea why she'd bothered to snoop when she might've simply asked someone, but perhaps an inquisitive, unmarried girl would never find the answers she sought. It was a man's world, after all, and gentlemen guarded their secrets closely. "Was your curiosity rewarded?"

Louisa shrugged. "I saw nothing more than smoking, drinking, and billiards playing."

Some fellows talked business, while others argued politics. As in *Campania's* smoking room, card games might be organized, but nothing fascinating happened between those walls. It was merely an excuse to relax outside the presence of ladies.

His wife took two steps toward him, and then stopped. After last night, Giles wagered she didn't wish to get too close. "Lord Granborough, there was something else—"

"Yes?" he asked.

"That night, you looked angry, devastated..." She struggled for the right word. "Cheated, maybe. I've always believed my father to be generous, but if you've found fault with our marriage settlement or with me..."

"No, Louisa, your father is a good man, though I suspect he doesn't like me much."

It was no surprise that Mr. Thurston Reid did not like him, for Giles was a fraudster and a sponger. Any fool could see that his intentions toward Louisa had been mercenary from the very start.

"Our contract dealings were perfectly agreeable." He offered his hand to her, palm up. "As for you, dear, I think you're *exquisitely* agreeable." Louisa placed her fingers in his, and he brought her knuckles to his lips.

He longed to be truthful with her. "I was angry that night, I recall, but not at you. I was devastated only because I'd found myself in circumstances that no decent man ought to ever be."

He'd been cheated by fate, forced to pledge his hand to a girl he barely knew to save himself from debts he didn't run up, and all the while his mother and his mistress goaded him

on. No one had cared if he'd hurt Louisa Thurston Reid in the process.

Giles could see the outline of her figure in her silken wrapper. She was a warm, soft, sincere woman. Holding her, he began to question whether he'd been cheated at all—or whether fate had dealt him a better hand.

A knock sounded at the door of their suite. Louisa spun toward the sound as though they'd been caught doing something naughty. She slipped her hand from his. "That's the cabin steward with breakfast."

"So it is," said he, letting his empty palm drop to the mattress. "Go and eat."

"Would you care for anything? Tea, toast?"

He shook his head. "Close the bedroom door. I think I'll lay abed a while longer."

She left him to break her fast in their sitting room, and Giles sank back onto Louisa-scented sheets. He heard her speaking and moving about next door, managing the stewards with ease. He lay there for a long time, wanting her, and waiting for her, yet she never returned.

When, at last, Giles impatiently threw open the door, Louisa's scandalized maid informed him that Her Ladyship had dressed and gone out for the day.

His bride had bolted.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bundled beneath a blanket, Louisa claimed a cane-backed lounge chair on the promenade deck. The ship seemed to pitch and roll more than usual, with rough seas sending a spray of saltwater over the railings. The day was brisk but not unpleasant thanks to a clear blue sky overhead.

She clutched a book in her lap, thankful that she'd remembered to snatch it up on her way out of the stateroom, otherwise, she'd have nothing to do but sit and think. Too much introspection was dangerous when one's marriage teetered precariously between failure and success.

The problem was that Louisa *liked* Lord Granborough. He could be pleasant and charming, and she enjoyed their teasing banter. She liked dancing with him, dining together, and generally being seen on his arm. He elevated her, and some selfish, flawed part of her delighted in being his marchioness.

Louisa enjoyed His Lordship's kisses—rare though they were—and his touches. She didn't mind going to bed with him, yet she longed for more affection, a deeper connection. Something significant lurked beneath the surface of their relationship, and Louisa feared that she and Lord Granborough would never know each other well enough to take the plunge.

Her husband seemed content to bob along, doling out crumbs of truth as it suited him, tossing crusts of intimacy at her as if she were a duck on a pond and he had better things to do with his time.

They were honeymooning on a steamship in the middle of the North Atlantic. What else was there to do but get to know each other?

She flipped the page of her novel, struggling to follow the story. Normally, the steady tramp of footsteps and chipper chatter of her fellow passengers didn't bother her, but between the shouts of crewmen and the creaking of deck boards, Louisa couldn't escape the sound of a crying baby.

She looked up, puzzled to find a mother pacing the deck with her fussy infant. The woman looked exhausted and overwhelmed, and maybe even frightened.

The mother paused by Louisa's chair, bouncing the little one. "Sorry," said the flustered woman, "I thought the cool air would soothe her."

Louisa put away her book, as there was no use trying to read. She knew absolutely nothing about children, but sensed this mother wished to chat. "Do babies like the cold?"

The woman smiled, emphasizing the lines around her weary eyes. "This one does. She's usually never happier than when she's swaddled in her pram on a crisp day." She lowered the blanket to show off the little girl's scrunched, screaming face.

"What is her name?"

"Emily," said the mother.

"Well, that's a lovely name! Hello, Emily, I'm Louisa." She smiled up at the mother. "And you are?"

"Mrs. Waldo," the woman answered. "Gladys." Some of the desperation faded from her face. Maybe the other passengers had little patience to entertain a worried mother and her fussy daughter. "We're traveling to join my husband in Liverpool."

"It must be difficult moving halfway around the world with a baby," said Louisa. "You are brave to do so."

Mrs. Waldo stepped toward her, bouncing Emily against her breast. "The others have complained about her crying," she

said, sadly. “I don’t know what to do. I’ve taken her to the ship’s surgeon, and he says there is nothing wrong with her, that she’s just a poor sailor.”

Was this woman confiding in her? They were of an age, but Louisa couldn’t help. She was in no position to give advice.

Thankfully, something seemed to catch Mrs. Waldo’s attention. The two women turned to find a tall, honey-haired gentleman striding the promenade deck. His Lordship wore a heavy greatcoat trimmed with astrakhan fur and a derby hat. He carried a cup and saucer in his gloved hands as steadily as if he were crossing a drawing room rather than navigating a swaying ship.

For all his inner faults, Lord Granborough was a fine-looking man. Even Gladys Waldo’s mouth went slack at the sight of this dignified nobleman.

He’d spotted Louisa and cut a path in her direction.

“That’s my husband,” she explained. “We’re on our honeymoon.”

Gladys gaped down at her. “*You’re* the honeymooners, Lord and Lady—”

Louisa nodded. “Granborough, yes.”

The woman’s demeanor changed. She bobbed, bowed, and began to back away. She looked as if she feared being keel-hauled for speaking to such an elevated personage. “My goodness! I am sorry. I had no idea!”

“No, no, please don’t go!” She did everything but grab at Mrs. Waldo.

By then, His Lordship reached them. He approached the two ladies, touching his hat. “Good afternoon,” he said. In his free hand, he balanced the cup and saucer, looking every inch the English aristocrat.

Louisa made the introductions between her husband and the stunned Gladys Waldo. Baby Emily bawled the entire time.

While the mother and child had her sympathy, this ruckus was starting to grate.

Lord Granborough's nerves, however, remained unruffled. He turned the full force of his charm on Mrs. Waldo, complimenting the baby and praising the mother's good sense to carry the child above deck for sunshine and fresh air. The British, it seemed, swore the outdoors cured everything.

He extended his gloved hand toward the pair, saying, "You look as though you need a moment to yourself. Her Ladyship and I shall be glad to dote upon your daughter, should you wish to rest your arms."

To Louisa's astonishment, Gladys Waldo hastily transferred baby Emily into Lord Granborough's care. "I haven't eaten all day. They asked us to leave the dining saloon due to her crying. If I could just get a sandwich—"

"Of course, you must get a sandwich," he soothed her. "Take, say, half an hour to enjoy your luncheon and return to us here. I promise we shan't move from this spot."

Mrs. Waldo hurried toward the door. She must have been desperate for a break.

Louisa frowned at her husband and his new bawling burden. "Five dollars says she doesn't come back."

"She'll be back." He rocked Emily in the crook of his arm, not the least bit worried. He offered the cup and saucer to Louisa. "This is for you, dear."

He'd brought her coffee, which she accepted warily. "Where did you find this?"

"I begged it off a waiter. I thought you could use it, as you looked positively frosty. Double cream and sugar, just how you like it."

Louisa was surprised he'd remembered her coffee order, though today her husband was full of surprises. She took a sip and set the cup and saucer aside. "Thank you."

He held the baby as if it were perfectly natural. Soon, Emily's frustrated screams became fussy little babbles as the

infant marveled at this calm stranger.

“Is borrowing other people’s babies a common occurrence in your country?”

“Not really,” he said, “but Mrs. Waldo looked to be at the end of her tether.”

His Lordship *did* have a heart beneath his icy façade.

Louisa was relieved to discover it. “I think she came to me for help, but I don’t know a thing about babies. I’ve never even held one.”

“Would you like to?” He threatened to shift Emily into her arms.

Louisa hid her hands beneath the blanket. “Thank you, no. I’d rather not.” Truthfully, she had no interest in little ones. “They’re too fragile at that age.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m a soft touch when it comes to babies.” He smiled as he cuddled the child.

Louisa’s breath hitched in her chest. Her heart must’ve ceased beating for a moment, because she stared at him, transfixed, as though she were seeing him for the first time.

Lord Granborough had never smiled in all the months she’d known him, yet he looked at her now with lips upturned and warmth shining in his eyes.

She’d thought him handsome before, but His Lordship was dazzlingly beautiful—there was no better word for this gleaming, golden-haired gentleman—clutching a baby to his chest. He was happy holding Emily and content to stand at Louisa’s side.

The scene was so domestic, so intimate, that she felt all ‘at sea’. She had not thought of Lord Granborough so sweetly, yet this was part of the deeper understanding she’d craved. He allowed her a closer look at the man she’d married, though Louisa shied away as surely as she’d done when he kissed her hand in their cabin.

His smile faded, and he became that shrewd, starchy nobleman to whom she’d pledged her body and fortune.

Whatever harmony that passed between them had been fleeting. They returned to the shallows of their marriage, leaving Louisa floundering in his wake.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Why did you leave me earlier?” His Lordship asked.

Louisa sighed, feeling wind-whipped and salt-lashed. During their courtship and engagement, they’d hardly shared a private moment, yet her husband expected her to be within arms’ reach whenever it suited him. Again, must she survive on crumbs while he enjoyed the feast?

When she gave no answer to his question, he confessed, “I waited for you, but you never returned. Do you not care to be alone with me, Louisa?”

“It’s clear I serve one purpose where you’re concerned.” She gestured to the infant in his arms. He wanted offspring as quickly as he could sire them. “Your motives do not exactly foster intimacy, my lord.”

“I told you, the sooner we do our duty...” Lord Granborough shook his head. “No, that’s not entirely true.” His blue eyes met hers on the breezy promenade deck, as open and honest as the sea was wide. “Having a family would satisfy my responsibilities to the estate, but I happen to like children. I’ve friends with them, you know, who put me up from time to time. I’m not the sort of guest who requires the youngsters of the house to be shut away out of sight—I remember all too well how that felt growing up.”

Louisa listened, enraptured as he revealed a small, sincere piece of himself.

“My childhood was lonely, unhappy. I have not fared much better in adulthood, I’m afraid. I want to leave a better legacy

than my forebears and should like to believe that all my suffering and sacrifice have not been in vain, because saving Granborough will cost me *everything*. Would it not be a balm to look out across the parkland and see one's little ones at play, safe and secure? When I am gone, the estate will continue to serve the county for generations. No man in my position could ask for anything more."

Lord Granborough desired a family.

Her husband shifted his squirming bundle, and then settled onto the deck chair next to hers.

"You cannot sit there," Louisa warned.

"Why not?"

She'd had to rent a lounge from the purser's desk.

"Because it is reserved."

His Lordship looked around incredulously. "By whom?"

"Some other passenger. It doesn't matter who. The deck steward will come by shortly and evict you."

"He wouldn't dare," he said, playfully joggling Emily in his arms. "I have a child."

A crew member had removed Mrs. Waldo from the dining saloon and she'd been holding a child, but maybe noblemen needn't worry about being bounced from chairs they hadn't paid for.

In New York, money had made the world go around, but on an English ocean liner, a peer held the ultimate power.

Louisa shrugged. "Suit yourself."

She returned her focus to the book in her lap, hoping he'd get the hint. Ignoring her cold shoulder, he shifted to read the title, " '*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.* ' "

A girl couldn't study *the Principals of Political Economy* every day. Sometimes, she wanted nothing more than to lose herself in a gripping tale. "I enjoy reading detective novels because Mamma would never allow them."

Her husband wrinkled his nose, saying, “Rebellious *and* bookish. Just my luck.”

He liked to tease Louisa, but offered no real criticism of her choice of books or her misbehavior. It was ungrateful to disobey her mother, who’d sought to shelter her from the worst of the world, for Mamma hadn’t wanted Louisa to read about murder and misery when she might use that time to improve herself in some meaningful way. But Louisa was a wife and was now entitled to freedoms, opinions, and knowledge that were forbidden to unmarried girls.

She gestured at the book she held. Everything she’d learned about England, she’d gleaned from Sherlock Holmes, whose storylines felt modern, up to the minute, and not sanitized for delicate sensibilities. “Is London really like this?”

“Like what?” His Lordship asked.

“Dreary, dark, criminal. With sneak-thieves and swindlers waiting to accost me at every turn. It rains a lot there, I’m told. Am I to be waterlogged and forever on my guard?”

She had imagined it a great adventure to marry a marquess and move halfway around the world. Now she was afraid. She couldn’t bear to think she’d made a mistake.

Her husband offered cold comfort, saying, “London can be bloody awful, but the countryside is lovely.” He extolled its virtues, telling her how much she would like living in Granborough. “There is plenty of room to ride your bicycle, and you’ll be busy playing Lady Bountiful of the county.”

Louisa listened, calmly and quietly. She’d noticed something about His Lordship’s plans—they were always framed as *‘I shall do this’* or *‘you will do that’*. Never *‘we’*. Never them, together. What did he intend to do with her when they reached England?

She would not allow him to pack her off to the country, separating before they’d had a chance to begin. She had not been brought up to expect everything, only to end up with nothing as though she should be grateful. Louisa refused to be a passive participant in her life or his.

Lord Granborough retrieved his pocket watch and checked the time. “Now, where is Mrs. Waldo?” He pivoted in the lounge chair to see the woman in question emerge through the ship’s door. “Ah, right on time. Were I a gambling man, you’d owe me five dollars.”

The harried woman—now refreshed—headed toward them. She marveled at the tranquil baby cuddled against His Lordship’s chest. “How did you get her to quieten down?”

“I merely whispered that you loved her and would soon return to her.” After transferring Emily safely into her mother’s arms, His Lordship was eager to take his leave. “I’d better go,” said he to Louisa. Ever the gentleman, he tipped his hat. “Enjoy your coffee, dear.”

She glanced at the forgotten cup and saucer, so kindly provided and carefully delivered simply because he’d feared she might be cold. She looked to Gladys Waldo, who’d been granted half an hour’s relief because Lord Granborough sensed the woman needed help, and to little Emily, who’d wanted the security of a steady hand in an uncertain world.

Mrs. Waldo seemed to read her thoughts, saying softly, “His Lordship is a good man.”

“Yes,” said Louisa, stunned, “he is.”

But was that goodness worth the gamble?

He returned to their stateroom suite, taking refuge in that luxurious enfilade of rooms where everything was ordered and in its place. He was still reeling from his interaction with his wife. Louisa didn’t like being alone with him. She did not enjoy it when he took her to bed, though he’d been careful and considerate each time.

He’d given her what he could, but it wasn’t enough. For Louisa, *he* would never be enough.

Giles felt a deep, aching guilt for marrying her. He'd known from that first night at the Vanderheid's ball that she was everything he wanted in a wife, everything he'd needed in a woman, and utterly wrong for the deception he had planned.

She wouldn't be satisfied with a title and would resent being dispatched to the countryside. Her money could make Granborough beautiful, and the children she gave him would make it a home, but she wasn't the sort of girl who dreamed of peerages, estates, and quiet family life. Had she never met him, Louisa Thurston Reid might've gone to college, traveled, enjoyed her youth with her school friends, and settled down when she'd felt ready.

He'd stolen a bright future from a vivacious girl, and he hated himself for it.

What about Venia, his mistress? Giles retrieved her photograph from his greatcoat pocket. She was sophisticated, beautiful, and mature. He ran his thumb over the image of her heavy-lidded eyes and lush mouth.

He had only ever been with Lady Venia Herbert. Until his wedding night, when he'd shared his body with his innocent American bride, Giles had known no one but Venia.

His boyhood sweetheart had wanted nothing more than the life she'd been born for and the future she'd come to expect. She'd wanted a husband who could give her security, while Giles could offer her nothing but a title and two generations' worth of debt. She desired houses, carriages, hunters, and jewels, all of which Giles had sold at the first opportunity. She wanted children, but not from Giles' degenerate ancestry.

Lady Venia had chosen a husband who could grant her every tangible desire, and Giles didn't blame her. He had simply adjusted his expectations and made the most of their stolen time together.

His lover was a married woman, which had never bothered him before—nor had it bothered anyone else in society, as marriages were arranged for practical reasons, and love was often found elsewhere.

Now that he had a wife of his own, however, the affair left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Fidelity might not matter to the Herberts, or to the 'polite' society in which they belonged, but it suddenly mattered very much to Giles. Perhaps he was coming around to the progressive, American way of thinking, but he couldn't imagine standing aside while some fellow made love to Louisa.

He didn't put Venia's photograph back in his pocket. In fact, he wished she'd never sent it, for it felt caddish to carry the likeness of another man's wife. Giles tossed the picture into his wardrobe trunk and slammed the lid.

It was time to stop chasing after Herbert's wife and start appreciating *his own*.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

From the promenade deck, she'd gone downstairs to the purser's desk. After speaking with the gentleman on duty, Louisa collected her jewels for the evening and headed to her stateroom.

She slipped into the empty sitting room, tossing her book and jewelry box onto the sofa. She unpinned her hat and shrugged out of her heavy coat, hanging them both on a peg. Louisa then passed through the suite of rooms toward the bedroom.

Her gloved hands, still stiff from the cold, reached for the knob and pushed open the door. She caught a glimpse of firm, bare thigh, and taut, round buttocks before she realized what she'd done.

She accidentally walked in on Lord Granborough pulling his under-drawers up over his thighs. "Oh! I am sorry! I didn't realize you were here."

He fastened the buttons at his waist. "Where else would I be?"

She shrugged. "You're often away in the afternoons."

"It's hardly the afternoon, Louisa. The dressing bell has rung."

"Is it as late as all that?" she asked. "I was too caught up in *'the Adventure of the Speckled Band'*, and had to know how the story ended. The hour must've run away from me."

“You needn’t justify yourself. Your time is your own to spend how you like.”

Lord Granborough seemed in no rush to don his trousers. He simply stood before her, bare-chested and bare-legged, with his feet braced apart as the ship rolled beneath them.

Louisa studied him. She’d never seen a man in such a state of undress. He was pale, lean, and muscular. His shoulders and chest were broad. His abdomen was flat. His knees, calves, and feet were masculine in a way she’d never expected.

No wonder mothers kept their daughters ignorant! The natural differences between men and women must be unfathomable to an untutored girl. Louisa was a wife, she’d coupled with this man, and still, his body surprised her.

“Where is your valet?” she asked.

“Sick, apparently. Today’s rough seas have done him in.” His Lordship watched her as she admired him, eventually asking, “Aren’t you going to ring for your maid?”

“Yes.” She remained rooted to the spot.

Louisa did not shy away from her husband’s body, though her cheeks warmed as she took him in. She’d seen paintings, statues, and sketches, yet here stood a work of art for her private viewing pleasure.

His Lordship propped against the bedstead and asked, “Are you curious, Louisa?” He opened his arms to her. “Come, give me your hands.”

Louisa left the doorway, crossing over the threshold to meet him in their bedchamber. Lord Granborough took her gloved hands in his and gently peeled the doeskin from her fingers. He brought her hands to his lips, enveloped in his own large palms to warm them. He blew a breath over her knuckles, inhaling deeply and exhaling steadily before he placed her palms against his heart.

She touched his firm chest, exploring down to his ribs, and toward the taut skin of his abdomen. Her eyes fell to the tented fabric of his drawers, but Louisa dared not venture further.

Nothing displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art could prepare her for *that!*

Her husband must've read her mind. He said, softly, "Much more curiosity will have us missing dinner."

She stepped back, blushing so hard her cheeks ached. Thankfully, he let her go, for she was far too bashful to go to bed with him now.

Louisa escaped into the sitting room to retrieve her jewelry box. "While I fetched my Georgian pearls from the purser's safe, I booked Mrs. Waldo into a roomier cabin on a quieter corridor—a berth with a window." She explained her reasoning, "Little Emily might sleep better with fresh air circulating. Even a sea view through a sunny porthole is better than a windowless box."

"That is an expensive gesture." His Lordship called from the other room.

It had been costly, but Louisa never let finances stand in the way of getting what she wanted. "I am not one to throw money at problems, but this seemed like the right thing to do. It feels good to help people, even in small ways," she said. "I also invited her to lunch. Nobody can complain about a crying baby seated with a marchioness."

She heard the shuffle of wool and starched linen as he dressed for dinner.

"I told you you'd enjoy being Lady Bountiful. Imagine all the good you'll do in Granborough."

Little did His Lordship know, Louisa wasn't going to the countryside without him. She had the funds to support them both in London and Granborough, but if he wished to have her help restoring his estate, he owed her something in return.

She wanted an affectionate, honest relationship. She wanted a *real* marriage.

Louisa dressed quickly, donning a powder blue satin evening gown. The dress was embroidered with butterflies and trimmed in cream-colored lace. She looped a long rope of

priceless pearls around her throat and tucked the excess length into her bodice.

Lord Granborough met her in the passage. He pushed off from the mahogany paneled walls and took her hand, for they must hurry down to the dining saloon.

They walked as quickly as decorum allowed. With her free fingers, Louisa lifted her hems to keep from tripping. She was grateful for years of dancing lessons that taught her poise and fluidity of motion. Otherwise, she might've tumbled down the grand staircase in a tangle of skirts, petticoats, slippers, and pearls.

“Was it worth it?” His Lordship asked. “Did you find the ending of *‘Speckled Band’* worthy of being tardy for supper?”

The plot had certainly been gripping. “Have you read the story?”

“Of course. I devoured that issue of *the Strand* when it first came out—everyone did.”

She grinned up at him, surprised to learn that her husband was a fan of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. “I don't know how Holmes does it. I can never guess the denouement!”

“Doesn't it irk you, always one step behind, never able to suss out the killer? Doctor Watson has my sympathy.”

Louisa laughed. “Yes!”

She adored this new, human side of Lord Granborough. He was a man who cared for others, who *took care* of others. He discussed her favorite detective novels without judgment of what a lady should or shouldn't read.

He kept hold of her hand as they reached the lowest landing. The first-class dining saloon opened up before them, already filled with voyagers settling into their seats. Waiters served champagne and canapés as the dinner bell chimed.

It was time to find their places.

Louisa searched the towering, gilded hall for any familiar face. She spotted the Meyers and de Roubernons at the far end of a long table. Both couples rose to their feet and hailed them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Giles escorted her toward their party.

“You’re late!” called Mrs. Meyer. “Luckily, we saved you a seat.”

Louisa allowed the woman to press a kiss to her cheek. “That’s kind of you, but I’m sure we could’ve squeezed in somewhere.” She slid onto her chair and glanced down the long table. “Where are the Misses Broome?”

Mrs. Meyer directed their attention to a far corner of the dining saloon, explaining, “The sisters were already seated elsewhere.”

Both Broomes waved cheerfully from their new group of table-mates. For two spinsters enjoying a chance to see the world, they wished to experience as much of the ship as possible. Giles did not care who he and Louisa sat with, so long as they were civilized.

Mrs. Meyer swiveled in her seat to introduce the young man who’d taken the Broomes’ place at the dinner table. “May I present Mr. Perry?” she asked.

Philip Sheridan Perry was a tall, thin, ruddy-looking fellow. He boasted a New England accent as he bowed and shook hands with Lord and Lady Granborough. “I have the honor of being named after General Sheridan.” He put up his fists, grinning. “You know—‘Fightin’ Phil’, famous for the Burning of the Shenandoah Valley.”

“I confess, I know little of American history,” said Giles. The United States Civil War had not been included in his curriculum at Eaton, though the other guests eagerly educated him on the finer points of Sheridan’s Ride.

Louisa took pity on him, steering their conversation toward the present. She sipped prettily from her champagne glass, asking, “What do you do for your living, Mr. Perry?”

The young man downed his drink in one gulp. “How kind you are for asking! I am an electric kettle salesman, and am on my way to Britain, where I’ll surely make my fortune among the tea-drinking masses.”

Monsieur and Madame de Roubernon conferred between themselves, as if they hadn’t understood the man’s words. Perhaps the idea was so novel that it didn’t translate.

Mr. Meyer laughed. “Electric kettles? What will they think of next?”

It came as no surprise to anyone why Philip Sheridan Perry had finessed a seat next to one of the world’s wealthiest department store owners. “No longer shall a woman be chained to her stovetop,” he explained. “She can make tea in any room of the house, even her boudoir!”

Louisa countered, “It’s not only women who make tea...”

“No, indeed, ma’am! The electric kettle can be used by anybody, anywhere there is an outlet. Plug it in at the office for when a meeting runs late. Even a bachelor like myself can have a comforting cup without touching the range.”

While Mr. Perry made his sales pitch, white-jacketed waiters busied themselves about the tables, ladling consommé from silver terrines to fill each diner’s bowl.

Madame de Roubernon spooned her soup, saying, “It would be convenient not to have to ring for a footman or wait for a steward.”

Too many servants made for too many eyes. If this elegant Frenchwoman was anything like his mother’s Parisian friends, Giles imagined she preferred to keep her afternoon entertainments discreet.

“Modern ladies must fend for themselves,” mused Madame, “*oui, même dans le boudoir!*”

If Mr. Perry understood the implications, he never broke his stride. The fellow marched on with his spiel. “It is well to consider it an investment to save you time and money. One less servant on the payroll. Why pay someone when you can do it yourself? Fill ‘er up, plug ‘er in, and after a few short minutes, boiling water is right at your fingertips.”

The other diners found the idea of electric tea kettles fascinating, but Mr. Perry wondered what the lone Englishman thought.

“I doubt the invention shall find much success in Britain,” said Giles, plainly. “Most English households do not have electricity, and aren’t interested in tangling themselves up with complicated wires.”

Few aristocrats could bear the expense of fitting their townhouses with electric lighting when gas was affordable and readily available. Queen Victoria had only installed electricity in Buckingham Palace over the past decade, and at great inconvenience to everyone at court.

Building electrical stations in the country was a near impossibility. Only someone as rich as Louisa could dare to be so extravagant.

Naturally, she liked the idea. “You must give me your card, Mr. Perry.”

Giles explained, “Her Ladyship is interested in all the modern conveniences.”

He wondered how his Fifth Avenue princess would fare at Granborough, where oil lamps and beeswax candles were still in use. He longed to discover how beautiful his wife would look in the soft glow of candlelight as she presided over his dinner table, or curled up in bed by the crackling warmth of a hearth fire.

There were moments when returning to Granborough had its appeal...

Waiters served the fish course, moving from guest to guest to offer portions of halibut in cardinal sauce.

Louisa took some of the flaky white fish, explaining to Mr. Perry, “My father owns a carpet mill.”

“Then you, my lady, understand the value of a dollar!” Mr. Perry produced his card, handing it to her with a flourish.

The interaction made Giles jealous and grumbly. He felt old-fashioned and outdated, for he couldn’t understand this Yankee craze for everything new. Hob kettles had been in use for hundreds of years and worked perfectly well. His staff—though, admittedly, a skeleton crew these days—made delicious tea. Should he put some poor kitchen maid out of work in the name of advancement?

He swiped the card from Louisa’s gloved hand. “I’ll take that, dear.” To her, he whispered, “What were you going to do with it, stick it down your bodice?”

“You’d better be dyspeptic, my lord, to be as sour as you are. What has gotten into you, tonight?”

She hadn’t been flirting with Philip Sheridan Perry, yet her attention toward the fellow had wounded him all the same. There was a gulf between them and he had no idea how to navigate it, for Louisa liked pretty, modern, expensive things, and Giles could offer her none of that.

“Forgive me,” he said, offering no explanation for his behavior. He groped for his wine glass and nursed it, allowing the conversation buzzing around him to swallow him up. He was happy to be left behind.

He spent the main course drinking and admiring his wife. She looked charming and youthful in her powder blue satin frock embroidered with butterflies. Lengths of cream lace fluttered at her bosom and over the wide gigot sleeves. A long strand of pearls looped around her throat. She toyed with the necklace, letting the lustrous pearls skate over her soft skin, dipping seductively down the front of her prim bodice.

She had no idea what she was doing, as she was chipperly adding to the dinner-table talk, but Giles grew thirsty for this

young woman who seemed so out of reach at the moment. He wanted to slip his fingers into the lace at her breasts, to run his palms in a whisper of silk down to her narrow waist.

Truthfully, he had never fantasized about her during their courtship, for his thoughts—and heart—had been engaged elsewhere. It was unseemly to harbour lustful thoughts about one's wife, yet Giles wanted her.

His desire for Louisa had nothing to do with the business of begetting heirs.

He reached for his napkin so that he might subtly adjust his trousers. The flush of wine warmed his cheeks, and the heat in his belly made him drowsy. He watched his wife through heavy eyelids as she ate her meal.

Giles forced himself to take a few bites from his plate to keep the tipsiness at bay. He hated being drunk, but lechery was a family trait, and he could hardly sink any lower than thinking carnal thoughts about a virtuous woman.

A virtuous woman whom *he'd* deflowered.

Her behavior earlier had surprised him. Louisa was shy and maidenly in the bedroom, but she also proved to be curious. He wondered if she would ever become adventurous, and prayed he'd be there to experience her bold transformation from a virgin to a siren, from a wife into a lover.

His mind flashed back to the night before, when she'd met him in their stateroom suite dressed like a courtesan. She had all but asked him to make love to her.

"Hold me," she had begged. *"Put your arms around me. I want to be touched."*

Giles couldn't reconcile the two women—this proper marchioness seated beside him and the curious enchantress of his bedchamber—yet she had been both, all along.

He'd been such a fool!

"Louisa..." He started to reach for her, to pull her aside after supper and have a heartfelt conversation about their marriage. To discuss what they both expected from this

relationship, because Giles didn't wish to disappoint her further.

Openness and honesty were the only ways forward.

Louisa turned from him. She laughed at something Monsieur de Roubernon said, though the joke was lost on Giles.

He feared that, were he not careful, Louisa would soon be lost to him, as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The dinner hour drew to a close. Soon, music drifted through the dining saloon from the stained-glass gallery above.

Mrs. Meyer glanced up at the sound of a jaunty polka. “Ah! They’ve opened the assembly room.” She turned her attention to her table-mates, asking, “Shall we dance?”

The group abandoned their desserts and made their way up the grand staircase. Louisa took Monsieur de Roubernon’s arm, happy to be included in this gay party. It reminded her of the dances she’d enjoyed with the belles—not the stuffy Knickerbocker balls, but the giddy, spinning, romps of her girlhood.

She longed to hear a rag and remember those carefree days of ice cream parlours and laughter, of nights falling into her bed just before dawn, euphoric with the promise of *everything*.

On the upper landing, the gallery of the assembly room overlooked the elegant dining saloon below. Louisa peeped over the railing to spy passengers sipping coffee in the gilded glow of electric lights. She beckoned the Misses Broome, who must shortly join the dancers above.

Waiters strolled between the tables and chairs to offer champagne or lemonade. In corner alcoves, entire parties gathered around silver ice buckets filled with bottles of Bollinger. The atmosphere was loose and lively, and Louisa gladly accepted a drink.

She sipped as she watched couples twirl about the makeshift dance floor. By day, the assembly room was a

genteel space for taking tea and listening to light music. Tonight, however, the piano player banged his way through a repertoire that wouldn't have been out of place in a Tenderloin dance hall.

Across the room, she found Lord Granborough deep in conversation with Madame de Roubernon. He leaned toward the sophisticated Frenchwoman, so dashing in his black evening clothes and white tie. He fairly gleamed and his blue eyes sparkled in a way Louisa had never seen before.

The polka transitioned to a waltz. Louisa watched her husband escort Madame de Roubernon onto the dance floor. He was charming with a champagne glass in his hand and a drowsy smile for his partner as he glided her across the assembly room. He held Madame's voluptuous figure in his arms while she laughed at some droll remark he'd made to amuse her.

His Lordship was a practiced flirt, yet he'd never smiled at or touched Louisa that way, even when he'd been pursuing her. Maybe he had never desired *her* at all...

"Care to dance, ma'am?"

She turned to find Philip Sheridan Perry at her side. He wobbled on his feet, for clearly, he'd indulged in too much wine. When he steered Louisa onto the dance floor, he held her too close.

"Don't grope me," she said, pushing his hand away from her spine. She'd had some experience dealing with drunken swains in New York and Newport, who thought they could be free and easy with young girls from new-money families.

Mr. Perry grew apologetic. It was a wonder that he could keep time with the music as he rambled and rounded a corner by the gallery railing. "Forgive me for being so bold, but I suspect Lord Granborough has married you for your money," he slurred. "It was in all the papers, even *Town Talk*. I bet you two have one of 'those kinds' of marriages."

Louisa's heart began to thump. She was alarmed, and it had nothing to do with Mr. Perry's wandering hands. "What

kind of marriage?” she asked, confused.

Her drunken partner glanced at His Lordship and Madame, who'd formed a cozy pair as they waltzed. “You know,” the man nudged, “an understanding kind.”

Philip Sheridan Perry hinted at something the worldlier women of society called ‘an open marriage’.

“You’re mistaken,” said Louisa. This could not be real. It couldn’t be true.

“Then I’m sorry.” Mr. Perry led her from the dance floor to the railing where she might catch her breath.

Her corset felt impossibly tight, and the long rope of pearls she wore threatened to strangle her. She propped her back against a gilt wood pilaster, sucking in air.

“Would you like a drink, my lady?” he asked. “It will calm your nerves.”

Last night, Madame de Roubernon had pretended to befriend Louisa. She’d told her that wine wouldn’t help, but a warm bath would ready her for His Lordship’s advances. The gall of that woman! Would Madame slip away for a soak before Lord Granborough retired this evening?

Louisa was furious. A red heat flamed her cheeks, and if she did not act quickly, that fire in her heart would blister over into white-hot humiliation.

Pappa had always encouraged her to dream big, to want something more. She was rich, intelligent, and attractive. She could have anything—*everything*—yet she’d wasted her chance at happiness by marrying an unfaithful hustler!

Louisa wouldn’t stand for it. She marched over to the piano player and called out over the keyboard, “I’ll tip you a five-spot to hear “*The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*”.”

“Yes ma’am!” The man laughed as he transitioned to the song.

She placed her hand upon the piano’s case. If Lord Granborough intended to carry on his affairs in public,

disgracing and demeaning his innocent wife, well...Louisa could humiliate him, too.

“The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo” was a jaunty tune about a once-poor Englishman who’d won a fortune at the casino in Monte Carlo. Louisa sang in the most exaggerated accent she could manage, slurring, and drawling, and rolling her ‘r’s. Unconcerned about saving face, Louisa grew more and more ridiculous with every verse.

*“As I walk along the Bois Boulogne
With an independent air,
You can hear the girls declare
‘He must be a Millionaire.’
You can hear them sigh and wish to die,
You can see them wink the other eye
At the man who brrrrroke the bank at Monte Carrlllloo!”*

She performed a rousing rendition, imitating Lord Granborough’s movements, posture, and manner of speech. It was a popular song, and everybody knew the words. The livelier parties in the assembly room soon joined in, unknowingly poking fun at her husband.

His Lordship slid over to the piano, his blond head practically purple with panic as he asked, “Louisa, dear, what are you doing?”

The passengers continued the song while she turned toward her husband to reply, “Don’t you like it? It’s a song for you, my lord. You’re a rich man now, but instead of breaking the bank, you’ve broken my heart!”

Lord Granborough looked as if she’d slapped him. “Louisa, you are being cruel.”

She clasped her hands behind her back and stared down her nose at him, exactly as he’d done toward her family,

friends, and countrymen for the past six months. Was she being cruel? “You started it.”

The song ended and everybody clapped. They gave three cheers for Lady Granborough before breaking into “*Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay*,” a bawdy music hall tune, without her.

Wide-eyed, Lord Granborough found himself alone at center stage. Louisa slipped from the assembly room, taking brattish glee in all the mischief she’d caused him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Giles hadn't been ignoring Louisa, he'd been avoiding her. He had overindulged beyond his one customary drink, drowning his guilt for marrying her, and hating himself for bringing her into this farce. For daring to have feelings for her when he'd assured Lady Venia that this would be a marriage in name only.

He had only ever wanted the money.

Tonight's sing-a-long reminded him of the first time he'd seen Louisa Thurston Reid at Cousin Caroline's party. She had been the center of attention then, too. Bright, boisterous, and gay, she'd caught his eye and he'd not been able to look away since.

Giles was attracted to her and was beginning to fear that Louisa felt an attraction to him.

"You've broken my heart," she'd said.

Louisa was hurt and jealous—and rightly so! She had lashed out at him in the way she knew would sting the most, for a gentleman loathed to be made a fool of.

The joke was on her. He'd been a fool for a long, long time.

He groped for the stateroom door, praying his wife had gone to bed without him. Inside, the cabin was shadowed and dark. Only the faintest stream of moonlight shone through the porthole windows.

Giles stripped free of his evening jacket and tossed it aside. He kicked off his patent leather shoes, heedless of any scuffs as he staggered through the sitting room toward the bedroom beyond.

Suddenly, the bedside lamp flicked on. With it came Louisa's unhappy glare. "Ugh!" She sniffed. "You reek of alcohol."

"I've been drowning my sorrows."

She took one look at his rumpled appearance and leveled a terrible accusation, "You've been with that Frenchwoman."

He'd never laid a hand on Madame de Roubernon. Lately, the very idea of infidelity was repugnant to him, and it was all *her* fault. Louisa had come into his life and flipped everything onto its head.

"So what if I have been?" he taunted. "You only married me for my title. You got what you wanted. You don't get to be jealous, Venia!"

She balked. "That's not my name!"

"*Be quiet,*" Giles hissed, drunkenly fumbling with his clothes, unable to believe the mistake he'd just made.

He'd been aching for her all evening, and Lady Venia Herbert hardly crossed his mind.

Louisa watched his fingers fight over the strained buttons of his trousers. She scrambled back against the pillows, as though she feared he might force himself on her. Did his lovely wife truly have such a low opinion of him?

"Don't touch me," she warned, clutching the counterpane. "Don't you dare touch me! You haven't earned the right—"

He stopped abruptly, letting the waistband of his trousers hang slack. "You wish to be rid of me, don't you?"

Louisa should hate him. He was the worst sort of man, despoiling a vibrant young woman to suit his greed. He was a cad for wanting her in spite of it all.

Giles collapsed on the bed, face-first into the mattress. “It’s no use. I’m worthless. Worthless. Worthless...”

The room spun as the ship swayed. He felt close to weeping.

Truthfully, he couldn’t be certain he *wasn’t* weeping. Everything was too awful.

“I have no desire to force you, Louisa.” He wanted her willing and needed her to be as eager as she had been the previous two nights. “If you say I’ve no right to touch you, then I respect your wishes.”

Could she blame him for growing accustomed to meeting her warm body in their bed and taking the pleasure she offered? He found solace in her sweetness. Their shared moments of intimacy were precious to him, and—truthfully—uncharted waters for a man used to the cool aristocratic marriages of his peers.

After a moment, Giles felt the bed shift as Louisa relaxed. His wife edged toward him, for she couldn’t bear to see him suffer.

“Here, turn over. You’ll strangle yourself if you sleep like that.” She roughly rolled him onto his back.

A hurricane brewed in his belly and he began to feel nauseous. “Don’t be so mean, dear. I am incapacitated.”

“Sorry,” she said, softening. He must’ve been pathetic to garner such sympathy. Her touch was almost sweet as she unfastened his waistcoat, collar, and cuffs. He arched his hips, allowing her to tug his trousers down his legs.

Giles recalled her curiosity that afternoon when she had watched him dress. Louisa had marveled at the man beneath the clothes. She’d touched his bare skin, and he had delighted in what a quick study she’d proved to be, making his heart race with only the press of her palms.

His breath hitched at the thought of her hands on him now. Had anything so innocent ever been so arousing?

Louisa undressed him to his drawers, but she daren't remove that last scrap of cotton. "Let me fetch your nightshirt."

He grabbed her hand, groping for an anchor, desperate for any port in the storm. "Never mind the nightshirt."

"You cannot sleep in your clothes...and it's far too cold to sleep without them."

He might've been trembling, but not because of the chill. He felt like hell as his head and heart tumbled in a tempest of his own making. He'd got carried away at dinner, growing jealous of Louisa and all her fresh modernity. She moved with the times, while he'd been stuck in the past for far too long. It was true he'd drunk himself squiffy and danced with Madame de Roubernon, yet the waltz had been innocent. His arms were ruined for any woman but Louisa.

He'd wasted precious time resisting his pretty wife. "Bundle me up in the bedcovers," he told her. "I shall be dead by morning."

She placed her hand on his forehead, as if to soothe him. "No, you'll only wish you were dead. I'm afraid you're pickled, my lord."

"It is all your fault. Your performance tonight was all anyone spoke of. They thought it an act. They couldn't see the truth in it."

He screwed open his eyes, watching both bleary versions of her blush.

"I behaved immaturely," she admitted.

Perhaps, yet she had captured the attention of every passenger in the assembly room as she'd put him in his place. If he hadn't spent six months trailing her down Fifth Avenue, he might've been surprised, but—as the belles had warned him—Louisa Thurston Reid had 'snap'.

"You were brilliant," he told her. After a long, swaying moment, he asked, "Can you ever forgive me?"

His wife's brows pinched. "For what?"

“Forgive me,” Giles said, releasing her hand and allowing his own to fall limply onto the mattress, “for breaking your heart.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lord Granborough snored when he was drunk. He groaned and shivered beneath the bedcovers, yet he perspired as though he fought a fever. His head would be reeling whenever he awoke.

Louisa hated to see him suffer.

Usually, they kept to separate sides of the bed, rarely bumping a knee in the night, yet Louisa couldn't leave him to face the morning alone. She kept the covers pulled over his hips and straightened his pillow when he'd thrashed it out of place. She soothed him with soft words, stroked his hair, and offered him support that he did not deserve.

Last night, he'd returned to their stateroom stinking of stale champagne. Bitter memories brought images of her husband flirting with Madame de Rouberton while Louisa had cried out for his affection.

She feared losing him before she'd truly made him *hers*.

Louisa dared not resign herself to failure when everything she'd ever wanted lay within reach.

Nestled against His Lordship's back, Louisa marveled at the comforting warmth of him. She touched his shoulder, his bicep. She was so curious about his body, as she'd only caught glimpses of him when they'd made love, and when she'd accidentally walked in on him dressing.

That peek at his bare backside had been a treat. She curved against him now, feeling the firm mound of his bottom through

his underclothes. She clasped his hips, taking pleasure in this secret perusal of his physique.

What of that stiff, male member pushing insistently against His Lordship's drawers? Louisa longed to explore it, too. His erection had caused her anxiety on their wedding night, even though he'd concealed it from her view. It had altered the chemistry of her body, and soon—she suspected—her waistline.

She did not wish to be an ignorant, pregnant, forgotten woman, banished to his country seat. She wanted a partner. She needed a lover. Above all, she desired her husband.

Louisa pressed her lips to his spine, kissing each vertebra. He stirred and snuggled against her. Mumbling, he guided her hands around his chest where they cuddled beneath the blankets. She thrilled at his big, manly body flattened against her smaller, softer self.

Lord Granborough was lost in slumber, seeking affection from a faceless lover. In that moment, she could be anybody to him—as worldly and experienced as Madame de Roubernon, or as genteel and sophisticated as the ladies he'd known in London.

Selfishly, Louisa would not allow him that fantasy. “Lord Granborough.”

His voice was thick with sleep as he replied, “*Hmm?*”

“It's me, Louisa,” she said, leaving nothing to chance. “Your wife.”

He shifted, though he did not push her away. “I should hope so. Who the devil else would it be?”

Smiling, she rested her cheek against his shoulder blade. His chest rose and fell with the rhythm of his breathing, and she felt his heart thumping beneath her palms. They lay together for a long moment, enjoying this new closeness.

His Lordship's fingertips stroked hers. “Louisa...last night was out of character for me. I never overindulge. It's what killed my father, and partly what ruined my family—too many years of gambling, drink, and woman.”

Why must he make her feel sorry for him when she had every right to be angry with him? He'd gotten drunk and misbehaved. He'd danced and dallied with a member of their party. He had humiliated her last night, and she worked very hard to forgive him.

There was a strain in his voice as he explained, "I couldn't have taken the bank at Monte Carlo, you see. I never touch cards or dice."

"You prefer to take your chances at the marriage altar, enjoying high stakes and higher standards." He felt he'd been dealt a losing hand. "I'm sorry about your poor luck, my lord."

"Why? You weren't the one born to a wastrel father and a spendthrift mother. You needn't have sold your inheritance off piecemeal to keep the bailiffs at bay." Lord Granborough pressed onward, feeling safe enough in her arms to bare a little bit more of himself. "I haven't a shilling that isn't already spoken for."

These were things she would have liked to know before she'd accepted his proposal. She might've understood him better!

She must have tensed, for he moved to stop her from pulling away.

"I apologize for being blunt." Her husband put his clammy hand out, touching her. "You're a good girl, Louisa. I am certain I don't deserve you."

For all his privilege, Lord Granborough hadn't lived a happy life. He didn't know the comfort of a loving family. Nobody offered him the safety and security that Louisa had taken for granted.

She'd learned something new about him, something honest and vulnerable—he rarely drank, never wagered, and feared bill collectors.

Had Pappa known about His lordship's troubles when he'd negotiated their marriage settlement? Louisa had been given her own investments and a share in their generous allowance. This separation of finances protected her from the worst of

Lord Granborough's woes. Maybe Pappa hoped that, delivered from whatever destitution her husband had suffered through, he would rise to be a better man.

Everybody deserved a chance at a better life.

Heartened by another rare glimpse behind the curtain, Louisa felt determined to save her marriage. Lord Granborough *would* be a good spouse, provided she built a firm foundation for him to find his feet. She'd never give up on him and was determined to fight for her husband and her happiness.

Louisa reluctantly untangled her arms from his. She was loath to leave him, half-dressed and drowsy in their bed, but there were things she hoped to accomplish before that night.

"I'm going out," she said, tucking him beneath the covers. "Shall I ring for breakfast?"

A sheen of perspiration dampened his brow. Food was the last thing he wanted. "Feed yourself, if you wish, but let me sleep."

She smoothed his hair back and massaged his throbbing temples. "Serves you right for over-drinking, but I won't scold you too much."

His incapacitation had broken down some of the barriers in their relationship. They'd been honest with each other—though unfortunately, it had taken alcohol to loosen his tongue. Louisa had enjoyed their physical closeness and the gentle brushes of intimacy that had passed between them.

"I'll check on you after my lunch with Mrs. Waldo."

First, she had a fight to win.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The purser's assistant gave Louisa the information she sought. He directed her downstairs to the lowest level of first-class accommodations. The majority of cabins were located on the saloon deck, and Her Ladyship would find Madame de Roubernon's berth past the forward staircase on the port side of the ship.

Louisa steeled her spine for their confrontation. Thanks to Mr. Perry's drunken admission, she now understood the concept of an 'open marriage', of doing one's duty while finding pleasure elsewhere. Madame de Roubernon—so worldly and wise—had taken advantage of Louisa's naivety. The sophisticated Frenchwoman likely enjoyed an understanding, aristocratic marriage of her own, and viewed the Marquess of Granborough as fair game.

Louisa had no intention of stepping aside and allowing another woman to make love to *her* husband. She would put her foot down, nip this flirtation in the bud, and remind everybody onboard *Campania* that regardless of society's custom, Lord and Lady Granborough did not have a marriage of convenience.

Their union had been hard-won, and Louisa refused to give him up without a fight.

She knocked upon Madame de Roubernon's stateroom door. After a shuffling moment, the knob turned and the Frenchwoman's face appeared in the opening. When she saw

Louisa, she threw open the door and cheerfully welcomed her in.

A curious reception...

“Madame, I must speak with you,” she said, crossing the threshold.

Once inside, Louisa was shocked to find two bunk-style beds. Unlike the Granborough’s parlour suite, these twin berth cabins were the typical accommodations on the ship. Spoiled, sheltered Louisa realized too late how far she stood above her fellow voyagers—of course, Lord Granborough had selected the finest suite for their crossing. Hadn’t he been hurt by her complaints about the size of the rooms and the presence of only one bed?

She faltered, losing her fury. Waistcoats and wardrobe trunks were scattered amid parasols and hatboxes in this cramped space. A gentleman’s freshly-polished dress shoes had been placed by the door.

Did two people occupy this cramped cabin, hardly better than Gladys Waldo’s windowless box?

“You share a stateroom with your husband?” asked Louisa.

Madame de Roubernon looked amused. “Do you not?”

The elegant woman wore a morning gown of soft alpaca trimmed in fur. Her coiffure had been pinned up in a simple style by a shell comb. This was hardly the brazen seductress Louisa had expected to find.

Confused, she powered on, determined to get to the bottom of her husband’s misbehavior. “Lord Granborough wasn’t here last night?” she asked. “You two weren’t...together?”

Madame de Roubernon laughed. “It would’ve been crowded, and my husband would not have approved.”

There could have been no room for a rendezvous here, where Monsieur de Roubernon would’ve lain on the top bunk. It had been far too cold and too rough to enjoy an assignation anywhere else.

Louisa sputtered, shamefaced. “I...am sorry.” Her cheeks flamed and tears scalded the backs of her eyes. “There has been some mistake... He led me to believe...that he...that he...”

She had accused His Lordship of having an affair and he hadn’t bothered to correct her.

Madame de Roubernon went to her in an instant, draping a soft, woolen arm over Louisa’s trembling shoulders. “I am sorry if your marriage is unhappy, Lady Granbrorough. It’s a pity, because you and His Lordship are well-suited.”

“We aren’t suited. I don’t know him at all.”

She led Louisa to the bottom berth and together they perched upon the mattress. This gesture reminded Louisa of the long, girlhood talks she’d shared with Mamma—and of all the practical, wifely knowledge her mother had denied her.

Louisa had so many questions. Why must a young bride be kept in the dark, only to be thrown to the mercy of her husband? Why would these women, who had once known that fear and ignorance, perpetuate the cycle of shame on their daughters?

She’d been cast into matrimony without a chart to guide her, yet no sailor would think of putting out to sea without the skills necessary to see himself safely to shore.

Madame de Roubernon understood all of this, listening as Louisa unburdened herself for the first time since leaving home, and answering her questions as best she could.

The problem with marriage—to her enlightened French mind—was men. “Most are worthless without a woman to guide them.” Louisa’s union, and all of the awkward, unfamiliar, unfulfilling exchanges she’d shared with Lord Granborough could be remedied with a little effort. “Show him what you want.”

“I don’t know what I want.” They’d only been intimate twice.

To Madame de Roubernon, Louisa’s innocence did not seem such a stumbling block. “Learn what you like,” the

woman said. “Touch yourself. Give yourself what he cannot. *Vous lisez le Français, n’est-ce pas?*”

Louisa nodded. “Yes, I can read French.”

Madame went to her portmanteau and searched for something. She retrieved a book, and then offered it for Louisa’s inspection. A quick glance at the first few pages brought a hot flush to her cheeks. The prose was florid. The illustrations were explicit.

She snapped it shut. “This is illegal!”

In the United States, obscene material was forbidden under the Comstock Laws, and to even possess such a novel was an act of defiance. Holding it in her hand felt liberating, illuminating. Maybe this book and the bounty of knowledge it contained about pleasure and agency was another secret shared between married women.

“Keep it, treasure it. No one will dare take it from you. Remember, you are a wealthy woman, and now, you are a powerful one. You needn’t rely on a man for anything—but you may bring him along if you like.” Madame de Roubernon winked.

Louisa blushed. “I do like him. I wouldn’t have married him if I hadn’t. There is greatness in Lord Granborough if one can see through the vain, temperamental, mercenary exterior.” She explained, “I catch glimpses of him now and then. I wish to be a strong, equal partner that he can rely on. I want to be the wife he trusts and the lover he craves.”

“Then show him you can see him, that you recognize the man he can be. But first—always first—remember what *you* are worth and settle for nothing less.”

At last, sage marital advice from a woman who had lived!

Louisa regretted the assumption of infidelity that had first clouded her vision. Her girlish jealousy had almost ruined a budding friendship with this worldly lady. Why had she confronted Madame rather than taken the matter up with His Lordship? If anybody deserved her rage for flirting drunkenly

on the dance floor while leaving his wife unsatisfied night after night, it was *her husband*.

“Why are you helping me,” asked Louisa, “when I accused you of something awful?”

“Because you are young, inexperienced, and untutored in the ways of the world. I wish there had been someone to give me advice in the early days of my marriage, as it would’ve saved me much heartache and humiliation.” Madame de Rouberton extended a helping hand, lifting Louisa from the bottom bunk. After safely seeing the young marchioness on her feet, the sophisticated Frenchwoman said, “We girls must look out for one another.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

She left Madame de Roubernon to meet Mrs. Waldo and baby Emily for lunch. After the meal, Louisa popped into her stateroom to check on His Lordship, who was blessedly asleep. She gathered her dressing gown and toiletries kit before flagging down a stewardess to reserve a bathtub.

Few passengers utilized these facilities in the middle of the afternoon. The bath stewardess delivered towels, washcloths, and a rinsing pitcher, placing them among Louisa's preferred soaps, shampoos, and fragrant oils.

Louisa locked the door behind her and undressed in the privacy of the bathroom. The space was small, consisting of a mirrored washstand, sink basin, bath stool, and soaking tub. From floor to ceiling, the walls were covered in gleaming white tile, reflecting the light from an electric fixture overhead.

She sank into the tub, immersing her feet, legs, and hips in warm water that poured from pipes affixed to the wall. Soon, the room grew hazy with steam.

Louisa shut off the flow of water and lay back against the bathtub, submerging her belly, breasts, and shoulders. Only her arms extended over the lip of the tub, and she let them hang, languidly swaying to and fro with the motion of the ship.

Little beads of perspiration trickled down her hairline. She wiped her face and puffed her splotchy cheeks, sweating out the previous night's gluttony of wine and overly rich cuisine.

This must've been how gentlemen felt as they stewed in the saunas and bathhouses of their athletic clubs, or why the ancient Romans gathered to luxuriate in their *thermae*—though she hardly envied them the social aspect of bathing. She was glad to remove her clothes and relax, to enjoy thirty minutes of perfect solitude.

On a ship buzzing with music, laughter, and conversation, the bathroom was silent save for the lapping of the water against the tub, and the gentle hum of electricity overhead. Louisa couldn't even hear the engines while *Campania's* twin screws charged eastward across the North Atlantic.

Growing drowsy, she let her mind wander to Madame de Roubernon's advice and to that naughty book the worldly Frenchwoman had pressed into her hand.

“Show him what you want... Learn what you like... Give yourself what he cannot.”

Louisa shifted in the water, stretching to reach the book, which rested atop her clothing on the bath stool. Her fingertips found a corner of the cover, and she carefully drew it into her hand.

Turning to the first page, Louisa reclined against the tub and began to read. It told a shocking tale of veils and jewels, harems, and distant lands, yet it ultimately served as an instruction manual in the art of lovemaking.

She thumbed through the story, mouth agape at what she discovered. Her heart raced as the young man, a handsome cavalier, risked his life to climb the lattice and sneak across the veranda to rendezvous with his true love, a royal concubine.

They embraced beneath the date palms, undressing each other in the moonlight, and reclining on silken divans.

The cavalier knelt between his lover's thighs to kiss and caress her. With his hands and mouth, he worshipped that secret—*forbidden*—part of her until her cries of pleasure grew so loud the couple was discovered by the palace guards!

Louisa gasped. She sighed. Surely, she moaned, for the tale was so erotic that she feared she might melt into a puddle!

She had no idea that people did such things, that they enjoyed such intimate acts. Did Madame de Roubernon know? By gifting her this erotic novel, had the Frenchwoman encouraged Louisa to try these things?

“We girls must look out for one another.”

Emboldened, she continued the tale. The concubine was cruelly dragged from the cavalier’s arms. She pined for him every night, enduring her royal duties, yet pleasuring herself with the memory of her lover.

Louisa slipped her hand beneath the bathwater, unable to wait for the star-crossed lovers to be reunited. She closed her eyes, imagining that she was the concubine and her beloved was Lord Granborough.

Soft fingertips quested between her thighs, petting that place of longing, circling and slicking where she had never ventured. Louisa fantasized about all the things she wished to do with her husband, and all the things she wished her husband would do to her.

He would do this if she asked. In her mind, His Lordship would do anything *for her*.

She dreamed of his naked body, so lean and taut. The smell of his skin as he arched above her, all around her. His hard thighs flexed against her parted flesh. Long fingers gripped hers, trembling with need. Two desperate bodies twined together, curving and thrusting, desperate with want.

Louisa’s fingers moved faster. She threw back her head, her lips drawn in a silent scream. Pleasure built within her, stoked higher and higher by her own hand, until she began to pant and quiver, quake and moan.

As she came, she whispered, *“Giles.”*

Her husband, her lover.

Louisa finished her bath, in no rush to leave this warm, humid sanctuary of self-discovery. When her half-hour reservation ended, she dressed and collected her toiletries, and tucked the erotic novel beneath her arm.

She left the bathroom tidy yet steamy. The walk back to her stateroom was short, and Louisa encountered few travelers as she crossed the paneled passageway. Still flushed from her climax, Louisa was all too happy to duck into her suite of rooms unnoticed.

Lord Granborough sat up, shielding his eyes from the late afternoon sun. He looked deliciously sleep-rumpled, and when he greeted her, his voice was huskier and more affectionate.

“Good afternoon, Louisa,” he said, running his hands through his honey-blond hair. He didn’t bother to cover his bare chest with the bedsheets. He reclined before her in all his golden glory.

She placed her book and toiletries aside. Admiring him, she said, “You look better.”

“A long nap was the cure. I’m only sorry I wasted the day. What have you done with yourself?”

Louisa blushed. “Oh, this and that.”

He studied her more carefully. Could he tell that she’d been...enlightened?

“You seem different,” His Lordship said. “Have you changed something?”

“Different how, my lord?”

“I’m not sure.” Puzzled, he continued to observe her as she went to the sitting room table and poured a glass of water. She brought it to him, and he drank lustily. “Thank you.”

Louisa watched his throat work as he swallowed. She watched his chest rise and fall with every breath. When her husband gulped down the last of the water, he sighed in audible satisfaction.

The sounds of his pleasure echoed in her brain, fantasy and reality blurring into one sensual memory—the man who’d taken, and the lover who gave.

Heat bloomed in her belly. Her heart fluttered between her breasts. Louisa went to her dress-basket to sort through her wardrobe. She dug through lingerie from Rouff and hosiery

from Lord & Taylor. Beneath Prissy, her treasured girlhood doll, lay a peach velvet frock ordered from the Paris couturier Emile Pingat.

Louisa longed to wrap herself in sumptuous velvet. The heavy fabric could hide a multitude of sins, but could it camouflage a woman's deepest desires?

As if in answer, she heard the bedstead shift behind her. Lord Granborough was up, moving about the suite. He poured himself another glass of water, dressed in only his under-drawers. The thin cotton left little to the imagination, yet Louisa couldn't avert her gaze.

She'd tasted from the tree of knowledge and now hungered for more.

Her husband collected his dressing gown from a nearby peg and slipped it over his shoulders. "I don't know about you, dear," said he, casually knotting the sash at his waist, "but I'm desperate for a bath."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

He'd spent the dressing hour soaking in the tub. While he'd never admit it to his proud Yankee wife, six months of running water and flushing toilets had spoiled him. Giles enjoyed having a bath on demand, without the need for servants to heat and haul the water.

He looked forward to installing plumbing at Granborough—at considerable expense—to provide Louisa with some of the conveniences she'd always known. He wanted her to feel comfortable and safe in her new home. He hoped she would leave her unique mark on the place, and elevate their corner of the countryside to her luxurious standards.

Louisa retreated to the bathtub every evening, and apparently in the middle of the afternoon, as well. She always emerged looking rosy, soft, kissable, and pliant. He wanted her like that in his home, in his bed. He wanted to return from surveying his estate or walking his parkland and find her warm, willing, and wet.

A private bath without servants poking 'round proved ripe for fantasy, and Giles indulged himself.

When he finally returned to their stateroom suite, Louisa was dressed and readied for dinner. She wore a peach velvet Pingat that she'd pulled from her dress-basket and sent her maid to press. The elegant dinner frock boasted ruched sleeves and a low, square neckline that showed a hint of décolletage.

He couldn't tear his eyes from her.

He was desperate to put his hands on her.

“My word, Louisa,” he said, holding his arms out to her. She stepped toward him, her heavy hems sweeping against the carpeted floor, and let him wrap his fingers around her waist. “Never listen to me about your clothes—every frock you wear is superior to the next.” He pulled her close to whisper, softly, “You’ve never looked more beautiful.”

She smelled faintly of French perfume with a hint of lavender lingering from her time in the tub. There was something else...something sweetly sensual that drew him to her.

Her lips were pink and ripe for kissing. Her tight, high breasts swelled against the neckline of her dress. Giles remembered the slight weight of them in his hands when she had lifted his palms and pressed his fingertips over her nipples. He was mad for her.

He was also a gentleman. He couldn’t raise her skirts and spend inside her, and then send her down to dinner. Louisa was a lady, still so very innocent. She deserved better than a breathless debauching from a man she barely knew.

How would he survive sitting next to his beautiful wife when he longed to bury his face between her knees?

His rigidly tempered passions were spiraling out of control. For years, he had guarded himself from his lineage of vice and dissipation. He had navigated the narrow path laid out for him. His union with Louisa, which he had carefully planned and skillfully executed, was never meant to be more than a marriage of convenience, yet she lured him from that path and made him want to *deviate*.

She made him want to install plumbing in his ancestral home!

His mother would be horrified at the idea. His late father would’ve laughed until he wheezed, and likely pinched Louisa’s bottom—but the older generation no longer controlled Granborough. It was up to Giles and Louisa to carry that torch, and his modern marchioness tempted him into embracing more than just the future...

A weaker man would've taken her to bed. Giles took her to dinner, instead.

They met their usual party at one of the long, rectangular tables beneath the stained glass dome. He shook hands with Mr. Meyer, who confessed to losing an eye-watering sum playing poker with the San Francisco card sharp over the last few days.

"You were wise to avoid the play, Granborough," said the man, jovially. He went as far as to thump Giles on the shoulder. "You may wish to join us in the smoking room tonight, as I intend to win it all back."

Fortunes could be made and lost at the card table, but it was far more entertaining watching someone else risk the blunt.

"I'll be there," said Giles, taking his seat.

Beside him, Louisa shared a few breathless words with Madame de Roubernon. The two ladies, along with Mrs. Meyer, laughed, blushed, and tittered amongst themselves at what must've been rather juicy gossip.

Two new additions joined their ranks, and the table rose to welcome an older English couple, Sir Julius and Lady Sitwell.

"How do you do?" The gentleman bowed.

His wife curtsied to the Granboroughs. "My lord, my lady."

Giles was delighted to meet his fellow countrymen. He hoped to give Louisa a taste of the society she would enjoy in her new homeland.

As they settled back into their seats, Lady Sitwell took an immediate interest in the young marchioness, complimenting her velvet frock. "That shade of peach matches the flush on your cheeks."

With a wink, Mrs. Meyer explained, "Honeymooners, ma'am."

"Oh, you clever creatures!" Lady Sitwell reached for her champagne. "You are to be congratulated!"

They lifted their glasses in a toast, with Sir Julius announcing, “You’ve your lives ahead of you now.”

As they drank, he heard Madame de Roubernon whisper, “It’s true, Louisa. You are glowing. You look like a young woman who has found herself.”

A curious fog lifted from his head, and Giles vaguely remembered Louisa being angry with him about the worldly Frenchwoman. He had waltzed and flirted with Madame, yet had never dreamed of taking the experience further. In his drunken misery, he’d allowed Louisa to believe he had behaved improperly—so why were the two women so friendly now?

He leaned behind Louisa’s back to address the lady. “You’re awfully chummy with my wife all of a sudden.”

“Why not?” asked Madame de Roubernon, sipping her champagne as though she’d accomplished some great coup. “Lady Granborough is a bright young woman with a fighting spirit.”

Louisa looked at him and smiled. Oh, yes, there had definitely been something cooking up between them, and it was disconcerting to feel he had been managed in some way.

His pretty wife gazed at him over the rim of her glass. Her eyes sparkled as though she harbored a glorious secret. She edged toward him, brushing their knees, as the white-jacketed waiters served oysters from an ice-laden tray. The sumptuous velvet of her skirts rasped the wool of his evening trousers, and that brief connection juddered his nerves. Her slightest touch sent his heart racing.

Louisa blinked slowly, her lashes heavy and cheeks flushed. She barely followed the conversation buzzing around them, instead taking an oyster from her plate, lifting it to her lips, and swallowing in one languid gulp.

He didn’t even know she fancied oysters, though his wife was a woman of surprises.

Giles recalled how sweet she had been to him that morning, comforting him when she knew he didn’t feel well.

Touching him, when last night she'd decreed that he didn't have the right to lay a hand on *her*.

She was a good wife and a kind woman. She did not deserve to become entangled in this web of lies that he, his family, the Herberts, and their awful society had woven.

In a bold move, he reached for her beneath the table. Giles found her gloved hand and laced his fingers with hers. He squeezed her palm and flexed his knuckles in a familiar rhythm—a heartbeat, a thrust.

A promise.

He pressed their twined hands into the folds of her skirts, wishing he could take back the last three days, the last six months, and start over together. Giles knew, above all else, that she wanted him to be honest with her.

Tonight, he would be.

He leaned to her ear, brushing his lips against the soft tendrils of hair that curled there. "I told you the truth today." He lowered his voice to a husky timbre, watching as a warm heat crept up her throat. She exhaled on a shiver as he confessed, "I am unworthy of you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Louisa spent the meal fantasizing about her husband, seated at the dinner table when she'd rather be dining privately with him.

Sometime between champagne and canapés, her lover had prowled onto the scene—not Lord Granborough, a cool and correct marquess, but Giles, that dashing, risk-taking cavalier who colored her dreams.

“I am unworthy of you,” he had whispered, and she'd nearly come undone at the sound.

Her breasts grew irritated by the unyielding confines of her corset. Her legs felt over-warm in layers of silk and heavy velvet. She longed to part her thighs.

She'd discovered something wondrous today and ached to experience *la petit mort* again.

Louisa plucked another oyster from the tray and gulped it down. She felt ravenous, but knew it was pointless to reach for food when she craved something carnal. Something that was—for the moment—beyond reach.

Lady Sitwell eyed her from across the table. “Are you quite well, my dear? You look feverish.”

The gathered group turned to her, studying her aroused state in various degrees of concern. Only Madame de Roubernon appeared amused. The Frenchwoman hid her knowing grin as Louisa writhed in her seat, for the erotic novel had achieved the desired effect.

Louisa dropped Lord Granborough's hand to place her palm to her cheeks. They felt aflame. She would've been mortified if she weren't so grateful to Lady Sitwell for giving her an excuse to leave the table.

"You know, I am a little flushed... Too much champagne, I'm sure." She turned to His Lordship, asking, "My lord, would you mind walking me back to our cabin? I think I'd better lie down."

Lord Granborough rose. "Of course, dear."

They quit the table, thanking the other diners for their company, pleading with them not to trouble themselves on *her* account. It was likely a reaction to the oysters, they concluded. Everybody wished Her Ladyship a restful evening.

Her husband escorted her through the crowded dining saloon. Heads swiveled and mouths whispered, but Louisa felt impervious to the chatter. She clung to Lord Granborough's arm with trembling fingers. She counted the steps as they mounted the staircase and made slow progress toward the upper floor.

"You've not seemed yourself all day, Louisa. Once I see you to bed, we ought to send for the ship's surgeon."

She paused on the landing to pull him aside, confiding, "I'm faking. The truth is, I couldn't stand another minute seated at that table. I needed a reason to get out of there."

"So you roped me into your scheme?" His Lordship frowned. "Am I to lie to our dinner companions for you?"

"It's only a little fib." Louisa did feel a prick of conscience for abandoning their party, but her marriage was more important. "They are all so kind, and I don't wish to hurt their feelings." She tucked her arm through his and urged him forward. "Tomorrow, you may tell them whatever you like, but tonight...tonight, lie with me."

They crossed the reception area as he guided her toward their stateroom. As they walked, he told her of Mr. Meyer's card game, of the Californian businessman whom he swore

was a confidence trickster out to swindle them all, and how eager he was to see the poker play unfold.

“You intend to join the others in the smoking room?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Why shouldn’t I?”

The question hung in the air between them. Louisa did not want him to go, but she didn’t know how to ask for what she desired. It was one thing to read of a seduction, yet something altogether different to speak the words aloud.

They reached their passageway only a few doors down from their suite. She must work quickly if she meant to accomplish her goal. Thankfully, Louisa thought fast on her feet.

“You’re brave for entering into that den of vice,” she teased, “after the sad state in which you woke this morning.”

Lord Granborough rose to her bait. “Why, when you were so very wifely? I seem to recall you soothed my sour head and held me through the worst of it.” He edged closer to whisper, “I awoke in your arms, dear, and napped with the scent of you clinging to the bedsheets. You made the agony of my poor choices bearable. I am obliged to you for seeing to my comfort.”

He thought of her as a wife, not an obligation. No longer a gaudy girl whose presence must be endured. Hearing that, Louisa took a risk, offering, “I could see to your comfort in *other ways...*”

His Lordship blinked down at her with obvious surprise. “Are you propositioning me, Louisa?”

How easily he could refuse her when fate—and some maneuvering on her part—had gathered the fractured pieces of their marriage so that she and Lord Granborough needed only to fit them into place. He could follow her into their cabin, press her back onto the mattress, and perform the same tired act he’d done before, but she did not think he would.

She could show him what she wanted, and how she wanted things to go.

Louisa moistened her lips and lowered her voice, laying it all bare before him, "I am inviting my husband into my bed."

Without hesitation, he reached past her to open their stateroom door. Together, they crossed over the threshold into the darkened space beyond.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Pale moonlight shone through the porthole windows to cast shadows on the sitting room floor. The Axminster carpet, a paradox of soft luxury and industrious efficiency, muffled the sound of Louisa's footsteps as she entered the dim space.

Lord Granborough followed a step behind, his hand resting on the small of her back, and his breath warming the nape of her neck. He too must've felt a shudder of anticipation, the thrill of whatever awaited them tonight. They'd reached a critical moment in their marriage, and there could be no turning back.

His Lordship urged her forward until she stood in a halo of moon glow, and her skirts crushed against the edge of the brocade sofa. When she could go no further, Louisa turned to him to meet his gaze.

Two icy blue eyes studied hers in the dark. His hands shifted to her hips, palms encircling her corseted waist, yet he hesitated to hold her too close.

"Tell me this is what you want," he pleaded.

She nodded. "It is."

He was everything she wanted. Their happiness lay within her grasp.

Lord Granborough began to strip her. He slowly unfastened the hooks and eyes, tapes and laces of her peach velvet gown. He pushed her skirts to the floor, and then dropped to his knees before her.

Louisa gasped, resting her hands on his shoulders, gripping him for balance as he removed her slippers and stockings, petticoats and underpinnings.

“What are you doing?” she marveled.

“Finishing what I started on our wedding night.” He kissed from her bare ankles to her inner thighs, dragging his open mouth over every inch of soft, pale skin. “Doting upon you as I ought to have done from the very beginning.”

She trembled, arching her hips, spreading her knees to accommodate his big, male body. Large hands cupped her bottom, spreading and caressing, and offering support for his wandering mouth. He licked a wild path up her belly, nipping at her navel, and tasting the French-scented flesh she offered him.

Louisa clutched his skull and buried her fingers into his blond hair. She tipped his lips to meet her breasts, and he took one nipple into his mouth, gently drawing on it until she moaned.

Never had she imagined such a spark of desire could come from kisses, from simple touches, yet His Lordship lavished attention on those tight pink buds. While he worshiped her, his fingers wandered. She couldn't see them in the darkness, but she felt the trail his fingertips blazed between her parted thighs.

Her husband found her core, slicking the pad of his finger against a place she'd only recently discovered. Louisa sucked in her breath and fought back a moan. She rocked her pelvis against his hand, carefully chasing this new, raw sensation.

He coaxed her further, sinking one long finger deep inside. She couldn't fight her cries of pleasure, panting hard and pleading for more. In answer, he slid another finger between her folds and began to pump and circle, pump and circle, until she grew mindless.

He pulled his mouth from her breasts to claim her lips. “Oh, Louisa, I marvel that you're mine.”

Together, they stripped him quickly. Busy hands tripped over each other to divest him of his evening clothes. Louisa tossed each layer aside, leaving a trail of garments until they reached the brocade sofa. She pulled her husband down onto the cushions and relaxed her head against the pillowed armrest.

If lovers in the French novel coupled beneath date palms, surely Lord and Lady Granborough could claim a sofa as their marriage bed.

Louisa angled her body in the moon glow, offering her kiss-swollen flesh to His Lordship's eager hands and mouth.

"Baise-moi," she whispered. *"Je veux jouir."*

She knew no polite words for what she wanted.

Thankfully, her husband comprehended.

He spread her thighs, slanting half-on and half-off the cushions. His fingers gripped the armrest above Louisa's head, and he gazed into her eyes as he eased inside her. There was no pain or friction, only a wanton heaviness as he sailed against her.

They'd lain together three times now, and yet this act felt brand new.

Lord Granborough kissed her, dragging his panting mouth across her jaw to nibble her neck. He suckled her earlobe while palming her breasts, all the while thrusting into her with slow, deliberate strokes.

Louisa felt hot desire pool between their bodies, every sensation focused on that one, needy place she'd brought to light. She snaked her hand over her breasts, and then drifted down her belly to massage between her legs where she and Lord Granborough joined.

His Lordship dipped his head to watch her fingers play. When he returned his focus to her face, his cheeks were flushed with ardor.

"You do like to be touched," he said.

“Yes.” She arched into him, desperate for further connection. Hadn’t she told him so many times, in so many ways? “I want your hands on me—everywhere.”

Louisa guided his hand to that pleasure point, and together they discovered all the delicate little touches that brought her to bliss.

Fingers roved and lips met. Tongues tangled in hungry kisses. Lord Granborough was an eager pupil and a good lover, adding his own finesse to their coupling. He did astonishing things with his hips and his hands, and Louisa gripped his shoulders to hug him close. She couldn’t get enough of him!

“Oh, Giles... Oh, Giles...” she chanted, feeling that rising tide build within. She was lost to all thought, all reason, as firm flesh and fantasy roiled together. His Lordship was her husband and her lover, her partner and fellow pleasure-seeker. She marveled at the sight of his masculine form rocking atop her, and thrilled at his fingertips working below.

Louisa offered herself to him, and he gave and gave until rapture overtook her. When she came, she cried his name, for there was pleasure and there was *him*, and tonight the two sensations were the same.

“Je jois! Je jois, Giles!”

Awestruck, he slipped from her. He collapsed onto the sofa cushions and guided her to ride in his lap. Face to face, with nothing but their warm breaths between them, it only took a moment for His Lordship to find release.

When he climaxed, he pointedly whispered “*Louisa*” into her ear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Louisa awoke to an empty bed. She sat up, searching for her husband. The stateroom was a mess, her hair was tangled beyond redemption, and her peach velvet dinner frock had been trampled on.

She barely remembered crawling to bed, jelly-legged and sated, but she felt swollen and sticky, and achy where he'd pleased her.

Blinking, she found His Lordship lounging on the sofa.

"I sat on this last night," he called, holding up the French erotic novel. "Where did you get it?"

She wasn't embarrassed to possess the book. "Madame de Rouberton."

"I ought to have guessed." He stood, naked, and stalked toward her. "Why did she give it to you? Why would you want it?"

Louisa couldn't answer. She didn't wish to hurt his feelings. It wasn't as if she wanted more than he could give her—she needed him to want more, to be more, for her.

She only shrugged.

Lord Granborough wasn't angry, merely teasing. He playfully tossed the tome onto the mattress beside her, saying, "It's filthy. Is that where you learned your naughty French?"

"Yes." She'd learned a great deal more than that, for the book had taught her the joys of pleasure, the power of agency,

and emboldened her to share this newfound knowledge with a partner she trusted.

His Lordship placed his hands on her hips, bunching the bedcovers up around her. “Rebellious, bookish, and now, enlightened.”

She laughed. “Would you rather I stuck with detective novels?”

“Not a chance.” He kissed her forehead.

He pulled the covers up over her, though he did not attempt to hide his nudity. Why should he? He was masterfully formed, all taut lines and pale flesh. Long inches of him that had never been kissed by sunlight had been offered up *to her*.

They ordered breakfast. Only then did he bother to don his dressing gown. They sat cross-legged on the bed, sharing a tray of coffee and cream, toast and marmalade.

Lord Granborough smiled. “This feels very like a nursery tea.”

“I never had a nursery growing up,” said Louisa with her mouth full, “and we certainly never took tea.”

“No?”

She shook her head. “We weren’t rich back then. I remember a little of what it was like to be poor—well, relatively poor. We struggled for years while praying the carpet mill turned a profit. Pappa was so busy and stressed. You remind me of him sometimes.”

“Really?” He seemed stunned by her comparison.

“There are moments when you look as though the weight of the world rested on your shoulders. You are too young to be so serious,” she said. “I used to want a better, brighter purpose in life, but maybe I’m meant to bring some light into *your* life.” She smiled at him over her coffee cup. “You needn’t suffer alone, my lord.”

He dipped his head, embarrassed. Had nobody been kind to him? Had he never had anybody on his side, fighting in his corner? “Thank you, Louisa,” was all he replied.

“Tell me about English nurseries,” she asked, curious about his upbringing. “What was yours like? Have you any happy childhood memories?”

“I’ve no happy memories,” he said, grimly. “I was brought up by nannies and nursemaids, and eventually tutors until I was packed off to school. I was presented for inspection, drilled on the curriculum, and interrogated over whatever discipline I’d received.”

He brightened as he recalled, “I was allowed one playfellow though—a girl, curiously enough, whose family lived across the park from mine. We were put out into the garden each summer morning and promptly forgotten until teatime when she or I would lead the other upstairs to share our bread and butter.”

Louisa blinked at him. “You don’t consider those happy memories?”

“Without getting too personal, the recollection leaves me feeling somewhat bittersweet. Children grow up, don’t they, and become different people? A bosom pal who once meant everything might eventually prove a disappointment.”

She shouldn’t pry. “I am sorry you lost your friend, whatever the circumstances.”

“Oh, I didn’t lose her. I am just awfully cross with her right now, and I imagine she’s rather miffed at me.”

“So you had a falling out?”

His Lordship shrugged. “If you like.” He selected a piece of toast from the tray and began to butter it. “You needn’t pity me, Louisa. I’ve heaps of friends in London who I’m very much looking forward to seeing again. I’ve been away for six months, you know.”

They’d shared a short courtship and an even shorter engagement. They’d held off the wedding long enough for Mamma to order a proper trousseau, yet these friends of his hadn’t come over for the festivities—though they’d been generous with sending gifts and good wishes.

Maybe it was simply the British way, and Louisa must accept the distant, undemonstrative nature of her new home. She'd been so fortunate to have close friends and affectionate parents, and wondered if Lord Granborough would've been better served outside the steely trappings of the aristocracy.

Louisa refreshed his coffee before topping up her own. Every further glimpse into her husband's history made her feel sorry for him. He'd not been loved by his parents. He'd been betrayed by his dearest friend and abandoned by many others. He'd been burdened by duty, responsibility, and financial obligations. No wonder His Lordship kept his distance from her, for he dared not trust her.

He'd been hurt too many times by those whom a young man needed most.

She had wondered why this handsome, titled gentleman sought a bride from across the Atlantic, yet had been discouraged from making inquiries by her parents and his Vanderheid relations.

That he wanted her million-dollar dowry was plain to everybody. Indeed, His Lordship never hid that fact. Why had he chosen her over all other belles, over better-bred Knickerbockers and serene young ladies whose temperaments and values more easily aligned with his own?

Louisa dared not assume his motives—or the fears and feelings of his heart that he so zealously guarded—but she vowed he would never regret his choice of wife. In twenty or forty years, Lord Granborough would glance across their cozy, electrified bedroom and know that *their* marriage had been the best thing that ever happened to him.

She hoped that she would feel the same.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

He ought not to discuss his past, or his boyhood fumbling with the young Lady Venia, but there was an openness with Louisa that welcomed a confidence. Giles felt he could speak with her about almost anything. He was learning that he could share some vulnerable parts of himself.

What a revelation—he enjoyed conversing with his wife!

Instead of going their separate ways, as they typically did every morning, he took a risk and invited his wife to join him on the promenade deck.

“Would you care to take a walk with me?”

Giles wanted to spend time with her. He was learning to enjoy her company. The differences in their class and upbringing no longer seemed so daunting now that they shared a greater intimacy in the bedroom.

He had seen Louisa take her pleasure. He’d kissed her and held her in his arms as they’d both come undone. He had opened himself to her, yet she had welcomed him in. With Louisa, he felt...unconditional, and longed to explore this unreserved acceptance further.

They washed and dressed for the day, and then ventured onto *Campania*’s open deck. The air was brisk, but the sun warmed their faces. As they walked toward the forecabin of the ship, a spray of seawater misted the rails and deck boards, and the painted iron hull.

Louisa looped her arm through his, tucking against his side. Her skirt hems flapped in the wind, and she wrangled them with her free hand, laughing. It was indecorous, but he didn't care. He shifted closer to the structure of the ship to put himself between his wife and the gale.

Blushing sweetly, she smoothed her skirts into place. "Thank you."

He liked the way she smiled at him as if she were glad to be with him—as if he were the only man she ever wished to be with.

Giles had never had anyone all to himself before. His parents had been too obsessed with their own aims to spare a moment for their child. His young playfellow, his best friend and first lover, had married someone else. He had wandered through society, unknowingly holding his arms out, desperate for close companionship, yet he'd been turned away as a waste of time, a bad investment.

Louisa Thurston Reid had taken that risk, and for once, he was grateful for a gamble. Giles grinned, for only an American could make such a speculation pay off!

His pretty wife beamed up at him, as he'd changed from a grim aristocrat to a good-natured companion. He didn't want to be stiff and formal with her.

"What's got you grinning, *Lord Granbruh?*"

She liked to tease him for his clipped, upper-class pronunciation of their title.

"Really, Lady Granborough, you must call me Giles," he said, smiling, "as you did last night."

Her cheeks pinkened at the memory of their shared night of passion, for she had cried his name as she'd climaxed. He would never forget the sound so long as he lived.

Giles feared he was beginning to have tender feelings toward her. He wanted to love her and felt certain that he would someday, but he'd felt this way before and had been let down in love.

He had dreamed of a wife, a home, a family, yet he hadn't been enough. He might've been Lady Venia Herbert's lover, but he had never been her first choice. Without the money to support himself and her ambitions, her devotion had turned elsewhere. His love had been reduced to something tawdry, some thrilling outlet from the dull marriage she'd contracted for herself.

He'd been lovesick for years, yet it took Louisa's vibrant presence to illuminate the darkest aspects of his life, those shadowy spaces where self-loathing lurked.

Giles didn't want to be that man anymore.

Step by step, arm-in-arm with Louisa, he was learning to shed the yoke of the life he'd been born to, yet never seemed fulfilled by.

Perhaps he'd never return to London.

He'd go to Granborough with Louisa and make a proper home, live a blameless life with her there, among the gardens and green fields. They could ride bicycles—she would teach him, surely—and raise their children, and endeavor to do good works in the countryside.

That was his secret, selfish dream.

As Giles and Louisa made a circuit of the promenade deck, they encountered a familiar face near a clutch of lounge chairs. Mrs. Waldo rocked baby Emily in her arms, enjoying the sunshine and sea breeze.

Louisa went to her, greeting the woman with genuine warmth. The duo had shared luncheon recently and developed something of a friendship. Her Ladyship's generosity had touched Mrs. Waldo, who now enjoyed a larger stateroom under the Granborough's account.

He tried to imagine his mother doing something so selfless, or—Heaven forbid—Lady Venia Herbert condescending to converse with a needy mother and her screaming child.

All the little quirks that had first annoyed him about his egalitarian American wife were growing to become his

favorite things about her.

Giles hovered close to bask in her sweetness. He gladly took baby Emily, cuddling the awestruck infant against his chest. He adored children and had envied his friends and their growing families. Warmth bloomed in his heart, tenderness prickled his throat. He longed for the day when he would hold a little one of his own, with Louisa's flawless profile and his golden hair. With her dauntless spirit, and his...what, exactly?

What legacy had *he* to pass down to his progeny?

A great capacity for change, he hoped, as Giles was still learning about himself, making mistakes, and endeavoring to become the man he wished to be.

How strange that this day of introspection should come so swiftly in the wake of their first true coupling when he had been open, bare, and honest with his wife.

Giles shifted Emily in his arms to better focus on Louisa. She stood among the deck chairs, looking windblown and sun-warmed, yet perfectly at ease. She might have been enjoying luncheon on a pleasure cruiser in Newport Harbor, or joining the Prince of Wales' yacht at Cowes for the Regatta. There was nothing she couldn't do, nowhere she did not belong, and she was *his wife*.

He placed his free hand on the small of her back, caressing the soft wool of her coat.

Louisa smiled at him, and edged ever so slightly toward him, to welcome his touch.

They stood together in conversation with Mrs. Waldo until the sight of two hulking figures moved into view, lurking by the railing just over Louisa's shoulder. Herbert's thugs eavesdropped, doubtless intending to report Giles' every word and move back to their employer.

He ought to confront them, but dared not risk dragging Louisa into the mire—to say nothing of Gladys Waldo and Emily, who were innocent bystanders. He couldn't bring shame to his wife when a new and affectionate understanding budded between them.

The taller of the hired toughs caught his eye, making a bold, sweeping survey of Louisa's trim figure, her well-tailored walking suit and radiant smile. He winked at Giles, whose hand curled into a tight fist.

Louisa felt the shift in him, the coiled tension as his knuckles ground into her spine. She looked up at him, brows pinched. "My lord, didn't you hear what I said?"

He frowned. "No, I wasn't listening."

She laughed, stunned at his rudeness. "And the English claim to have manners!"

Mrs. Waldo laughed, as well, though Giles didn't share the joke. He returned the child to her mother, and then offered his arm to his wife. "Shall we take tea, Louisa, dear?"

"Tea?" she asked.

"Of course. Where do you think I go every afternoon?" To Mrs. Waldo, he offered, "Won't you join us, ma'am?"

She wisely declined. The group parted ways, with Giles all but dragging his wife toward the ship's door, knowing the assembly room lay within reach. He was angry and terrified that these henchmen would dare to publicly intimidate him. Their presence onboard was a hell-hound nipping at his heels. His debt was a fist squeezing his throat until he panicked.

Giles feared he would never break free of his past.

CHAPTER THIRTY

His Lordship held the door for her, allowing her to pass before him. They crossed into the reception area and made their way to the assembly room. Lord Granborough kept a vigilant watch on their surroundings, though she had no idea what alarmed him. Maybe he was cold, for his hands trembled as he steered her through the space.

The assembly room, paneled in dark wood and upholstered in plush green fabric, overlooked the empty dining saloon below. It had been the scene of Louisa's retaliation against her husband's misbehavior, though they'd put the piano scene behind them now.

He removed his greatcoat and hat and hung them on a peg by the doorway. He took her heavy coat, as well, and placed it beside his own. Louisa hugged close as he found an empty table for two midway through the room.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked, pulling out her chair. "Should we move closer to the fireplace?"

"I'm fine, thank you." His Lordship was always seeing to her comfort, whether by meals or accommodations, or even in the bedroom.

Louisa sat, and he slid into the seat across from her. Their knees bumped beneath the tête-à-tête table. Shifting, he flagged down a waiter and requested a pot of tea.

"If we had an electric kettle," she teased, "we could take tea in our stateroom."

Instead of rising to her barb, Lord Granborough huffed in annoyance. “Here is something you must learn about your new homeland—we take pride in doing things the way our fathers and our grandfathers have done.”

His forebears had slept with chamber pots beneath their beds and probably died of some preventable disease. Plumbing was not a crutch, and only a fool would deny himself the marvels of electricity for the ‘tradition’ of gaslight and tallow candles.

“You fear modernity.”

“Alright,” he conceded. “Yes.”

Although she sympathized with his need for sameness, because she sensed he’d never known security, clinging to bygone days of glory prevented him from reaching out and becoming the nobleman she knew he could be.

She leaned toward him, almost cornering him. “I’m afraid I am going to offend you, but the world is modernizing whether you like it or not. We need electricity and running water to make life easier—for all people. We need telephones and bicycles to keep life interesting. There is nothing wrong with being connected, whether by wires or pipes, communication lines or transportation routes, or...” *love.*

The simple act of joining together.

“I am not wholly resistant to the idea.”

She blinked, for she’d distracted herself with thoughts of loving him. “The idea of what?”

“Do keep up, Louisa dear.” He laughed. “I’m not opposed to the idea of bringing Granborough into the modern age. You’ve won me over with your passionate plea for flush toilets and hot running water. We shall be the envy of everyone with our electric light in the countryside.”

“Of course, I would need to pay for it...” The prospect of bankrolling this endeavor chafed, especially if he expected them to live separately. His Lordship was coming around to her way of thinking, but there was still so much work to be done.

“I don’t think you grasp the magnitude of what you expect, as not even Windsor Castle boasts such creature comforts. We’d be better off than the Queen of England.”

A waiter chose that moment to interrupt with the tea tray. The man arranged the teapot, cups and saucers, and dishes of milk and sugar on the table.

Taking tea was a treat among New York society. Louisa had only enjoyed such a spread during her engagement luncheon at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. Caroline Vanderheid had instructed the belles on the proper etiquette for ‘pouring out’, and Louisa did her best to navigate the delicate china service now.

“Holmes and Watson were a waste of time,” she huffed. “I should’ve studied something more genteel, like Austen.”

“The works of Mrs. Gaskell might prove more to your tastes,” her husband replied, managing his cup and saucer with ease. “There are themes of women’s industry, worker’s rights, and the importance of community. Her stories can be quite gritty at times, which I’m sure you’ll appreciate.”

Lord Granborough encouraged Louisa to explore outside the lines that had been drawn for her. He encouraged her to read erotic novels, for goodness sake!

He stirred a dash of milk into his tea, quietly contemplating the steaming brew.

“Louisa...what if you dislike England?” he asked, placing the spoon upon the saucer. “What if you fail to make friends?”

She shrugged, for making friends had never been a problem. Louisa felt certain she’d meet like-minded ladies in his world. “Don’t your friends have wives? You can introduce us.”

He gaped at her over his teacup in mock horror. “I don’t want you anywhere near my friends’ wives—they are dangerous influences.” He took a drink, and then grew serious. “I do admire your bravery, though, in moving halfway ‘round the world with me. I chalk it up to your American sense of adventure.”

She lowered her cup onto the saucer and confessed, “Our marriage was my ticket out.”

“From what on Earth did you wish to escape? You’ve lived a charmed life, Louisa.”

She *had* lived a charmed life, but there were times when it rang hollow. “I’m not part of Mrs. Astor’s famed Four Hundred. My father makes carpet. Although I am proud of Pappa’s hard work, we’d never be accepted into the highest rungs of society no matter how hard my mother tried. I grew weary of always putting on a show.”

He studied her intently as she continued, “Can you imagine taking a cottage in Newport, yet never being allowed to enjoy the sea? Affording the best dressmakers from New York to Paris, yet never choosing my own clothes for fear of what some bored old matron might think? It’s maddening! My entire existence was theatrically arranged for the amusement of other people.”

“I thought you Knickerbockers knew freedom...”

She shook her head. “I told you, it’s an illusion. The only freedom we’ll ever truly know is that which we carve out for ourselves.”

She’d been given the best education, the finest wardrobe, and the most sumptuous settings in which to show off her accomplishments, yet Louisa had never felt seen until Lord Granborough had pinned her on the dance floor with two shrewd blue eyes. For better or worse, she had sensed he was her destiny.

“I know enough about English society to understand that once you attain rank and fortune, you’re settled for life. You are *in*. I wanted what you promised me, Giles—no more striving, no more grasping, no more pretending.”

He appeared distressed at her admission. Did His Lordship dislike the idea of being used? She hadn’t loved him any more than he’d loved her in those early days, yet Louisa hoped their marriage would be a stepping-stone toward an honest, useful life in an old and interesting part of the world.

“As Marchioness of Granborough,” he said, “you’ve certainly secured a fine position for yourself...”

“Exactly.” She reached across the tea table to take his hand. “I am as much a product of my circumstances as you are of yours. We’re fortunate to have found each other, for you and I are friends, at least.”

“Friends, are we?” He squeezed her fingers in a rhythm that brought a flush of heat to her belly. His voice filled with longing as he whispered, “Would you not call us lovers?”

She would be his friend, his lover, his partner. Whatever he needed her to be.

First, she had taught him to trust her. Now, to want her. Soon, Lord Granborough would seek her help whenever the hardships of his life overwhelmed him.

She would prove an unfailing support to him if only he would lower the shade and let her in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

He and Louisa had lingered until the teapot went cold, ignoring the call of the dressing bell. He'd lost track of time, engaged in heartfelt conversation, and had relished in the deeper understanding they'd gained.

After tea, they descended the grand staircase. The main deck, where their stateroom suite was situated, teemed with passengers coming in from the cold or returning from an afternoon spent in the fire-lit smoking room. A long queue gathered at the purser's desk as three floors of first-class ladies waited to collect their jewelry for the evening.

Louisa frowned at the line. "I wanted to wear my diamonds tonight."

He cringed at the idea, for it would take an hour or more of waiting. He tugged her away from the gathering. "Come, dear, you don't need them. You're beautiful without their embellishment."

She laughed, though the compliment was true. He dipped his lips toward her ear, adding, "You are beautiful without anything on at all."

"While I do appreciate that, I had a plan. The diamonds go with the dress, and I've already asked that it be pressed for the evening." She settled upon a solution, "Would *you* fetch it for me from the purser's safe?" Louisa reached into her coat pocket to produce a small purse, and then retrieved a slip of paper, which she held out to him. "The red Morocco case. Here is the receipt."

Giles took it. “Am I to be your errand boy?”

“It takes me twice as long to dress as it does you. If I wait in this line, we’ll be late.”

She did have a point. Really, what trouble was it to him if wearing the diamonds meant so much to her? “Very well.”

Grinning, Louisa lifted to kiss his cheek. “Thank you, Giles!”

Before he could realize how easily he’d been managed, his wife disappeared down their passageway, leaving him standing in the queue like a love-struck swain.

He inched forward as each passenger claimed their various baubles. He palmed the receipt, jamming his hands in his trouser pockets and rocking on his heels. Wasn’t this what a fellow kept a valet for?

Giles fixed his eyes straight ahead, but soon felt a foul presence breathing down his neck. As if they’d been waiting for the perfect time to approach, Herbert’s hired thugs flanked him in line.

He gritted his teeth until his jaw ached. “What are you doing here?”

The taller of the two put a heavy paw on his shoulder, squeezing tightly. “Things have been quiet hereabouts. Didn’t want you to think we’d forgot about you, guv.”

Giles shrugged off the man’s hand, feeling sick to his stomach. He thought he’d avoided them earlier, ducking into the assembly room where they’d never be permitted, yet he couldn’t hide in his first-class world forever. The moment he showed his head—the instant he dropped his guard—they had pounced.

“Get the hell out of here,” he said, lowering his voice. He daren’t make a scene, for these fellows were escalating. There was no telling what they’d do if he crossed them. “Leave me alone and stay away from my wife. She’s clever. She’ll notice you at some point and start asking questions.”

The other tough laughed. “You mean you haven’t told her? For shame! Not sure what Herbert was worried about. You’re going to muck this up on your own...”

Giles feared as much. “I don’t need marital advice from you bloody parasites, and certainly not from the Herberts.”

The queue for the purser’s desk moved forward. All three men took a step up. He couldn’t run, couldn’t shake them. For propriety’s sake, he stood firm and endured them.

Their presence began to draw attention. A lady in front of Giles hugged her purse and glanced over her shoulder at their shabby coats.

One of the thugs flashed a smile, explaining, “Not to worry, madam. We’re policemen.”

Giles turned to him, surprised. “Are you really?”

He shrugged. “Of a sort.”

Private detectives, probably. Doggedly determined and well above the law. Herbert would not have wasted his time or money on anything but the very best—or worst, depending on where one found oneself.

“Torment me all you like,” said Giles, “but leave Her Ladyship alone. She has done nothing to deserve this, aside from throwing her lot in with mine.”

The toughs locked eyes. “We ain’t harassing an innocent lady, but the minute we think she’s complicit in any of this, guv...” The taller one whistled through his teeth.

“How could she possibly be involved? She doesn’t know a thing about the Herberts or the money I owe. The little fool thinks I need her dowry for a new roof at Granborough.” He desperately needed a new roof, but there was more, so much more pressing into his bank balance. Louisa could never know the truth.

He stepped up to the purser’s desk and presented his receipt. After a moment, the assistant returned with a jeweler’s case covered in red Morocco leather. Giles opened it to inspect a blaze of diamonds, all neatly tucked into place.

“Thank you,” he said, collecting the necklace.

He needn't fear being robbed with two bruisers flanking him. He walked confidently toward his stateroom.

Heavy footsteps echoed on the paneled passageway. “Why not give us the necklace and be done with it? I reckon Herbert would take the trade.”

Giles almost laughed. The idea was preposterous, and he was no thief. “Are you mad? These diamonds are worth more than any debt.” They were likely worth more than Granborough itself, and he would die before seeing them draped 'round Lady Venia Herbert's throat.

He reached the door of his stateroom, but hesitated to twist the knob. He turned to the two men idling in the corridor. “This is where you leave me.”

They did.

Pushing into the sitting room, he found Louisa dressed in a silk frock cut low across her bosom. It was the color of a vibrant American Beauty rose and clung to her like a second skin before falling into a graceful sweep on the floor.

“The million-dollar rose,” he said, referring to the shade.

She grinned up at him. “Thank you for bringing my necklace. Would you do the honors?”

His wife turned her back to him, and Giles carefully removed the diamond collar from the box. According to Tiffany's, who had brokered the sale, these jewels once belonged to the Duchess of Angoulême, daughter of Marie Antoinette. They had cost Mr. Thurston Reid a fortune to acquire.

“*From one princess to another*”, Giles' father-in-law had boasted, never seeing the irony.

He and Louisa conversed as he dressed, with her acting as his valet since there wasn't time to ring for assistance.

“I wager your mother did not approve of this frock.” He pulled on his trousers and shifted his braces over his shoulders. “It's rather bold.”

Louisa smiled. “She did approve of it—in shell-pink, trimmed with rosettes. I really did look like a schoolgirl!”

“How ever did you change her mind?”

“I didn’t,” she said, helping him into his dinner jacket. “You’ll never believe it, but there was a worldwide shortage of shell-pink silk, and not one rosette to be found in Paris.”

“You’re right, Louisa. I do not believe it.”

She laughed, smoothing his white necktie into place. “Neither did Mamma. Thankfully, Monsieur Worth took pity on me and packed this version of the frock into the bottom of my trunk, where the ‘error’ wasn’t discovered until it was too late to send it back.”

“You ought to have conspired with your modiste sooner. I’ve never seen you looking prettier—not even on our wedding day, and you were particularly lovely then.”

Giles made one final pass in front of the mirror before he was satisfied. He wanted to look as good for her as she looked for him. Louisa always took the trouble to dress nicely, and he appreciated that effort. After watching her dress and undress for the last four days, he’d developed a newfound respect for women’s wardrobes.

He turned to his wife, marveling at the pale expanse of décolletage beneath a sparkling collar of diamonds. She was a goddess, a marchioness. A warrior princess in a jeweled breastplate.

He held his hands out to her, catching her waist and drawing her near. Sensual memories of the night before resurfaced, and Giles recalled the way she’d felt in his arms, sweat-drenched and writhing, clutching him to her breasts as she rode him, thrust for thrust.

Surely, it had not been a once-in-a-lifetime moment. He longed to experience their coupling again every night. He wanted Louisa—only Louisa—for the rest of his days.

She looked up at him as if she too shared the sentiment. Was there anything more delicious than being desired by one’s spouse?

Giles slid two hands to cup her jaw. His fingers fanned across her cheeks, tipping her mouth to meet his. He kissed her softly at first, breathing in her scent, savoring her taste. He slanted his lips against hers, feathering gentle nibbles at the corners of her mouth.

He recalled how he'd kissed her on their wedding night before everything had been ruined. He should've made her happy then, but there was no use looking back.

He wished to make her happy *now*.

“Oh, Giles...” She buried her gloved fingers in his jacket, curling them at his hips. She pulled him close, crushing her skirts between their bodies. Their embrace grew hungry, and their kiss robbed them of all sense of time and place.

Lord and Lady Granborough were expected. Their presence would be missed.

She pulled away breathlessly. “We have to go to dinner.”

He laughed and covered her mouth with his. “To hell with them, Louisa.”

She'd created a ravenous beast, and he was starved for her...but she was right. His wife was too beautiful, too brilliant to keep to himself. He ought to take her into dinner and watch her dazzle their fellow passengers.

Giles smoothed his evening clothes and offered his arm. “It would be my honor to escort an American Beauty.”

Louisa laughed in all her rose-silk, diamond-spangled glory and placed her hand upon his sleeve. Although they were dangerously close to being late for supper, he dared not rush one step of their journey. Tonight, the world—or at least the *RMS Campania*—would wait for them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Louisa swept into the dining saloon on Lord Granborough's arm. She smiled at him—her husband, *Giles!*—as she bore the weight of six hundred pairs of eyes turned to study her rosy frock, her diamond collar, her perfect posture, and ladylike deportment.

She wondered if the other voyagers noticed her kiss-swollen lips and pinkened cheeks, for the Marchioness of Granborough sparkled in the glow of electric chandeliers, yet her radiance had nothing to do with her jeweled necklace or her extravagant clothing. Louisa shone with affection for the gentleman who guided her through the room.

With every day that passed, she and His Lordship drew closer to a true, loving partnership. She hummed with raw desire for him, for this man who held her hand and her heart, and she couldn't wait to discover what the night had in store for them both.

They joined their party, happy to be hailed by the usual crowd—the Meyers and the de Roubernons, as well as two new faces. Mr. Ferron, a widower, and his daughter, Miss Minnie Ferron found their seats at the long, china-laden table.

Miss Ferron was young and attractive, and had recently been permitted to put her hair up. Louisa was delighted to share a meal with this girl on the cusp of womanhood, for her spiritedness reminded her of the belles she'd left in New York.

The two young ladies spoke during the champagne and soup courses, though Miss Ferron did not indulge in the wine.

“I am traveling to London and Paris,” said the girl, “to visit all of the great galleries, and then I will ‘finish’ in Switzerland.” She glanced longingly at Louisa. “I wish to marry and become a grand hostess.”

What a strange example Louisa must’ve set, dressed in silks and hung with diamonds, married to one of England’s most illustrious peers. While she would never change her circumstances, Louisa encouraged her tablemate not to surrender her girlhood too quickly.

“It’s such a privilege for an American to visit the Continent,” Louisa said, spooning soup. Tonight’s offering was a thick and creamy *vichyssoise*. “You must take full advantage of your time abroad. Concentrate on your studies and don’t rush to find a husband. You are so young!”

Miss Ferron glanced up from her soup bowl to state, “I am fifteen.”

“A tender age, to be sure,” Lord Granborough said. To his wife, he warned, “Careful, Louisa. Anyone might think you’re against the idea of marriage.”

“On the contrary! I think marriage is a wonderful institution—my parents have been happily wed for over twenty years. I don’t think it is anything to be undertaken lightly, as it is a bond for life.”

Matrimony was a binding contract and a sacred vow. She had promised to love and honor her husband for all her days, and Louisa had meant every word she’d uttered at the altar of St. Thomas’ Church. For her, there would be no separation, no infidelity, and no disgrace. She trusted His Lordship to uphold his half of their bargain and would accept nothing less than his devotion.

The fish course came. Louisa tucked into her flaky salmon, swirling each bite in creamy lobster sauce. She brought her fork to her lips, listening as the diners talked and laughed in easy camaraderie. They spoke of Mr. Meyer’s poor luck at cards and the Sitwell’s disappointment at being robbed of Lady Granborough’s presence the night before.

Madame de Rouberton leaned across the table to inquire, "I hope you're feeling better."

"Much better, thank you." She smiled at the Frenchwoman, enjoying this shared worldliness.

Only Miss Ferron was ignorant of the situation. "Have you been ill, ma'am?"

"The long journey across the Atlantic finally caught up with me, but don't worry, it was nothing an evening in bed couldn't solve."

The ladies tittered and Louisa blushed, for she'd said something brazen. Even Lord Granborough swiveled at her words with his fish fork arrested halfway to his mouth.

She endeavored never to bore him, and from the laughter winking in his blue gaze, Louisa had succeeded in keeping him on his toes. She lowered her gloved hand to rest on his thigh, tracing lazy circles into the soft wool of his black evening trousers.

She had helped him dress tonight. She'd watched him strip to his drawers, utterly confident in his own skin, and then don his dinner clothes with casual grace. To watch one's husband prepare for the evening was both commonplace and intimate, and Louisa had proved an eager student.

She imagined disrobing him—layer by layer—to pass the dinner hour.

While waiters cleared the table of the main course and returned to serve coffee and dessert, Miss Ferron turned her attention to Louisa. She edged around a waiter's white sleeve to ask, "Are all of your dresses from Maison Worth?"

"No," said Louisa, biting into a cream-filled brandy snap. She lifted her napkin to dab her lips, careful not to stain the bodice of her rose-silk gown. "But my frocks are from Paris. My mother wouldn't have it any other way."

A lady only received her trousseau once in her life, and there had been no reason to economize. To land in England with a shabby wardrobe would've been a slap in the face to every American who'd come before her.

Miss Minnie Ferron would not be put off. “Which is your favorite?”

“This one,” Louisa answered, because it was a Worth, and womanly, and complimented her diamond necklace so beautifully. She cast a sly glance at His Lordship, for she had a surprise in store for him on their last night aboard *Campania*. “And another one, which I’m saving for the Captain’s table tomorrow.”

“I hope to purchase such elegant gowns when I am in France,” Miss Ferron said, “though I’ll have to wait until I’m ‘finished’ to wear anything so fine as yours. Do you think gigot sleeves will still be the fashion? I’ve saved all the latest covers of *La Mode Pratique*, and plan to present my clippings to Mr. Worth at my first appointment.”

“I’ve never been to Paris,” confessed Louisa. “My clothes were ordered by cable from New York. If you want to know about French fashion, you should ask Madame de Rouberton.”

No doubt, Madame would enlighten the inquisitive young woman, yet Miss Ferron balked at the suggestion. A thirty-year-old was ancient in her eyes. “I’d prefer to speak with someone closer to my own age...”

This admission irked Louisa, though Lord Granborough seemed amused. He crunched into a brandy snap as he watched her straddle the gulf between a *jeune fille* and a wife.

She had only known His Lordship for half a year, yet he had changed her life. She’d only been intimate with him for the past four days, and every moment in his company brought fresh new feelings and experiences. Imagine what they might discover in each other over a lifetime!

Her husband edged closer to whisper, “I look forward to knowing you at thirty.”

She smiled and stroked his thigh, hiding the loving gesture from her fellow diners. With every minute and mile, she grew excited for her future in England, and her new life entwined with His Lordship.

As dinner drew to a close, the jaunty sound of piano music drifted from the gallery above. The assembly room had been opened for dancing, and many passengers began to make their way to the staircase.

Miss Ferron forgot all about frocks and cream-filled brandy snaps. “I long to join the others for dancing! Please, Daddy, may I go?”

Mr. Ferron was hesitant. His daughter was so very young and not nearly as sophisticated as she imagined herself to be. A fifteen-year-old girl had no business staying up late on an ocean liner where the rules of polite society were often relaxed.

Louisa sympathized, of course, for the only real difference between Minnie Ferron and herself was the golden band upon her finger. Only a week ago, Louisa Thurston Reid had never been alone with a man and required a chaperone for shopping, dancing, and attending dinner parties.

“Miss Ferron is welcome to sit with me,” she offered, “for an hour to enjoy the music.”

Miss Ferron could hardly contain her excitement. “Oh, Lady Granborough, I cannot imagine someone like *you* missing out on the dancing! Are you sure you don’t mind?”

It was the least she could do to make a young woman feel welcome.

She stood, and the rest of the table rose out of respect. “I’d be happy for the company.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Louisa led their party upstairs, doubtless drawn toward the lively strains of a reel, the rhythm of footsteps on the makeshift dance floor, and the rising sound of laughter. Her diamond collar sparkled in the electric light. Her heavy, silken hems swept across the polished teak stairs. She was attractive and attentive to those who walked by her side.

Miss Minnie Ferron all but clung to Her Ladyship's arm as they ascended. The girl chattered excitedly in Louisa's ear, though Giles couldn't hear their conversation, for he followed at the rear of their group, content to let Louisa enjoy the spotlight.

She thrilled at the notoriety she received as a beautiful, wealthy lady. He'd known from the very start that Louisa lived at the center of a crowd. She thrived in pretty clothes and luxurious surroundings, among both friends and strangers. Louisa possessed that rare gift of conversation. She could talk to anyone—spinsters, salesmen, aristocrats, old men, and young girls. She was naturally charming, without artifice.

No wonder everyone, including Giles, felt drawn to her.

She would be a leader of society, hosting country house parties at Granborough, organizing church fêtes and charitable functions across their vast estate. She'd entertain in London, and become a great success among the smart set of American expatriates there.

He wanted to stand at her side, to follow her blazing trail. Together, they could do good works and have fun, make

memories and build a life worth living.

In the assembly room, their group of eight commandeered a corner alcove furnished with green brocade sofas, wooden tables, and chairs. The space offered privacy without straying too far from the excitement.

Louisa found a chair near the dance floor. She perched on the edge of her seat, rose-colored skirts billowing over the cushions to pool at her feet. Giles sat to her right while young Miss Ferron claimed the position at her left. The trio enjoyed an unobstructed view of the dancers performing a raucous rendition of an old quadrille.

Monsieur and Madame de Roubernon ordered champagne. Waiters swiftly delivered ice buckets and trays of glasses, which were filled and passed around the table. Toasts were made, yet neither he, Louisa, nor Miss Ferron imbibed.

The spectators clapped as the dance ended. Couples and foursomes exited the floor, breathless and giddy. Philip Sheridan Perry made his way toward the group, smiling to the de Roubernons, conversing with Mr. and Mrs. Meyer, and finally bowing over Louisa's outstretched hand.

Mr. Perry's electric tea kettle business had proved prosperous, and he smugly informed them all of the sales and promises of sales he'd secured during the journey.

"You must count me among your number," said Louisa. "Mark His Lordship and me down for your most popular model."

Mr. Perry turned toward her as if Louisa needed *his* permission to make a purchase. As if she did not write her own cheques and draw on her own income!

Although he doubted that electric appliances would be a roaring success in Britain, Giles bore no hard feelings toward the fellow. He shook his hand, admitting, "I am always glad to be shown the error of my ways."

Before cornering Mr. Meyer on the topic of catalog listings, Philip Sheridan Perry grinned and winked at Louisa, asking, "Will you lead us in a song tonight, ma'am?"

“I don’t think so.” Her hot cheeks turned as rosy as her skirts.

Giles breathed a sigh of relief, for he’d be spared the shame of singing another dreadful music hall number. He draped his arm over the back of his wife’s chair and leaned in to say, “We really must work on a duet, dear.”

She laughed and Mr. Perry retreated. There would be no more speculating on the state of the Granborough’s marriage, for Giles was a determined suitor as well as a devoted spouse.

A polka began, and Mr. Ferron found his way to the dance floor. The older gentleman claimed one of the Broome sisters as a partner, and the pair began to circle the room.

Miss Ferron swished her feet in time to the music, dearly longing to join in the merriment. She smiled and clapped, though her tone grew serious as she confessed, “Daddy has been lonely since my mother died. He will be lonelier still while I am away at finishing school.”

“Your father loves you very much,” said Louisa, speaking from experience, “to put your happiness above his own.”

Giles angled forward to add, “He only wants what is best for you.”

“I think maybe I shouldn’t live away from him. Switzerland is so far from the States...”

“Then you must be honest with him,” Louisa urged. “Tell him how you’re feeling, and he can reassure you or help to point you in the right direction.”

The child would miss her father and her friends. No matter how full her life on the Continent became, she’d always long for the land of her birth. Hopefully, Mr. Ferron was a good sailor, for there would be countless transatlantic crossings in the man’s future.

What a fool Giles had been to expect Louisa’s parents to only visit at holidays or christenings! He hadn’t known the loving support of a close family, nor had he felt a sense of belonging to anyone or anything except Granborough.

Louisa was beloved by many people. Now she belonged to both an English world and an American one—and Giles supposed, by their marriage, he did, too.

A strange thought, for he'd always considered her society to be the antithesis of his. Americans were bold, ostentatious, covetous, and so often crass. He'd spent his time among the Knickerbockers locked in a state of permanent embarrassment for them. Yet he'd grown to enjoy Louisa's assertive nature, her opinions on everything from tea kettles to trade unions, and her shameless enjoyment of life's finer things. She had money, but was not governed by it.

She'd never known a cold night, an empty belly, or even a cruel word.

Rather than resent all of Louisa's many blessings, Giles respected her for them. He longed to embrace those freedoms that she'd always known and to become a part of her family.

As the polka drew to a close, Mr. Ferron returned to collect his daughter. Louisa enveloped the girl in a tight embrace, whispering a few last-minute words of advice in Miss Minnie Ferron's ear.

Giles watched the duo depart, hoping the child took Louisa's encouragement to heart. One really oughtn't to rush into marriage, especially devoid of any fond feelings for one's spouse. A hasty, passionless union often ended in disappointment.

He turned to Louisa, who had taught him so much. "Four days married and you're full of wifely wisdom."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't have listened when I was her age, but at least I tried."

"You showed kindness to a vapid child."

"I don't think she's vapid, but maybe inexperienced and uncertain, and only now learning how to navigate the wider world around her. Pretty clothes help women to be seen. Education gives us opinions, but an advantageous marriage offers us an outlet through which to voice them. We all wish to

be heard, Giles,” his wife said, taking his hand, “and to feel important to someone.”

Louisa had felt unseen and unheard. She knew the frustrations of modern young women whose opinions were disregarded, whose futures and finances passed from father to husband. She’d offered Miss Ferron the wisdom of hindsight. She’d offered Giles a glimpse into this secret sisterhood where ladies looked out for one another, and made the best of situations—education, occupation, marriage, and motherhood—that weren’t geared in their favor.

A fellow could learn a great deal from the fairer sex if he sat back and listened.

Giles looked into his wife’s eyes, marveling at yet another facet of this complex individual he’d pledged to spend his life with. Her irises were a misty sea-water blue. Fathoms deep and beautifully suited to her fair, flawless complexion.

A day or two ago, he would not have been able to recall the color of her eyes. He would not have bothered to notice, though he’d kissed her, coupled with her, and held their faces so near that he’d mingled breath with her.

He hadn’t wanted to look too close, to observe too much, for her reality complicated his plans. After seeing her, knowing her, and caring for her, Louisa could never be a means to an end. She was his bright new beginning.

Giles lifted her gloved hand to his lips, vowing, “You have my undivided attention.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. Surely, she knew it was true. He’d never felt more earnest in his life.

The first gentle melody of a waltz began—“*After the Ball*”, a sad yet wildly popular tune he recognized from his time in the States. It was, perhaps, an unsuitable song for newlyweds to dance to, but Giles took a gamble. “Will you dance with me, dear?”

She allowed him to escort her onto the floor. They felt the crowded assembly room’s attention shift, for everyone wished

to spy Lord and Lady Granborough sharing their first dance as a married couple.

He took her in his arms, sweeping her across the makeshift dance floor. They rose and fell together as he led her in the steps. Louisa held her hems aloft, managing her skirts and petticoats with ease when one mistake might've tripped her up. With her back to the world and her eyes focused on his, she trusted him.

They were partners—not only on the dance floor, but in life, as well.

Together, they rounded a corner. Faultlessly, they moved as one. Giles felt her silken frock brush the wool of his evening trousers as he and Louisa spun thigh-to-thigh. His senses were overwhelmed by her, for she felt warm to his touch, smelled sweetly of French scent, and sparkled with diamonds. She blinded him beneath the brilliance of electric light, yet he daren't look away from this radiant woman.

“Do you remember when we first danced, Louisa? You accused me of being a somber waltzer.”

“In my defense, you didn't try to be pleasant.”

He frowned at that. “No, I suppose not.”

He'd been distracted at the Vanderheid's ball. His priorities had been misaligned, and his perspective from his too-high opinion of himself had kept him from enjoying Miss Thurston Reid's company. Back then, he had been loyal to another woman, three thousand miles behind him.

Louisa, of course, remained ignorant of his struggles. “You looked like a man destined for the gallows,” she said. “I'd never seen a more dismal beau.”

He'd been miserable, sour. Jaded. Bad luck and the looming threat of bankruptcy had hardened him into a man he barely recognized. Louisa deserved better. “Then why did you agree to marry me? You had your pick of suitors, gentlemen of privilege with wealth of their own. Why choose me?”

“I married you because I wanted you.” She took a deep breath, her chest fluttering against his. Silk met starch.

Diamonds rasped against gold shirt studs. Her gaze locked with his, careless of the onlookers as she told him, “I want you, Giles.”

His hand curled at her waist, drawing her hips against his. Her fingers rested on his shoulder, entrusting and encouraging him, just like when they made love.

Giles understood how intimate a dance could be. He wasn't interviewing a stranger or passing a moment with some starry-eyed belle. Tonight, he held his wife for all the world to see.

Sensing this, Louisa rested her cheek against his chest. Despite everything he'd put her through, she felt proud to be his bride.

The understanding made him stumble. His heart drummed so wildly that he lost the rhythm of the music. Louisa moved with him, inelegant and out of time. She didn't mind if he faltered, struggled, or stepped from the path that life had predestined for him.

“I want you, Giles,” she had said.

Knowing that, and learning what a true partnership meant, he realized Venia Herbert had never wanted him. They could have married—albeit against all good advice—but life with a poor man hadn't appealed to her. Faced with a future by his side, knowing it would be for better or worse, *forever*, Lady Venia had chosen to take the easy route.

Louisa had fought for him.

Louisa had not abandoned him.

She would never, ever give him up.

Too long he'd wasted, chasing after someone else's wife. Pining for a woman who never truly loved him.

Love was doing what was best for another person, often at the cost of one's self. Risking what one had, alone, for the chance of something greater, together.

The path wasn't easy, but it was worth the trek. Giles was tired of standing at the bottom of that proverbial hill, watching

everyone ascend while awaiting his turn to climb.

Abandoning the waltz, he clasped Louisa's hand, and then quit the assembly room. Their plans for the night no longer involved dancing. He wanted to make love to his wife.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

They fell into their stateroom, kissing, nipping, and hungry for each other. Something had changed after dinner when she and His Lordship danced. Desire hummed as they'd waltzed, and a new longing charged between them with every touch and glance.

Her husband's need for her was palpable.

He kicked the door closed behind them, encircling her waist to draw her close. He claimed her mouth and whispered, "Oh, Louisa, my arms have been aching for you."

She undressed him while he kissed her. She stripped his dinner jacket down his arms, feeling his muscles flex and stretch beneath the wool, before tossing the garment aside. She removed his waistcoat and suspenders, sliding them over his shoulders to fall slack at his hips.

It was a joy to disrobe this man—her own private present—slowly unwrapping each intimate part of him.

Louisa ran her hands up his chest, feeling Lord Granborough's heartbeat beneath his shirt. She loosened his white necktie, tugging the ends until they exposed the stiff, starched collar buttoned at his throat. She nimbly divested him of collar buttons, cuff links, and shirt studs.

She parted the fabric to expose the column of his throat, pressing her lips to the damp hollow there, biting and licking down his gaping shirtfront. Louisa slipped her fingers through the opening, finding the warm, firm flesh of his chest. She

kissed where his heart lay, loving the way his pulse leaped beneath her lips.

With her free hand, she groped for his waistband, bunching the fabric in her fist and lifting his shirttail free from his trousers. Impatient, Lord Granborough dragged the pristine white garment over his head and flung it aside. He wanted her hands, lips, and tongue on him.

Louisa was happy to oblige. She pressed her palms to his chest, trailing down to his ribs. Her fingers splayed to steady herself as she kissed his bare skin. She flicked her tongue over his taut abdomen, just above his navel, while looking up the long length of his body to meet his hungry gaze.

She felt breathless as she praised him. “You are so handsome, Giles. I was awestruck from the moment I saw you.” She nibbled her way up his torso, peppering him with kisses as she went. “I can’t take my eyes off you. I don’t want to take my hands off you. I want to look...and touch...and taste you.”

He groaned as if in agony. “When you talk like that, it drives me mad.”

His Lordship’s muscles strained toward her warm, working mouth. His greedy hips pushed toward her corseted bodice, and she felt his hardness through layers of silk, linen, and whalebone. Louisa put her hand on him, her fingertips stroking that steely ridge over the wool of his evening trousers.

“God, Louisa.” Shrewd blue eyes watched everything she did as if he couldn’t believe that it was *her* touching him. *Her* loving him.

Lord Granborough’s pelvis pumped into her palm, desperate for more. There were still so many layers of clothing left to divest, but when she moved toward the buttons of his fly, he eased her hands away.

“Allow me to undress you, dear,” said he, maneuvering her. “You know how much I like this part.”

Louisa smiled and let him have his way. His Lordship made quick work of the hooks, eyes, and tapes that held her

vibrant, rose-colored frock together. He peeled the wide, balloon sleeves down her arms, bringing the gaping bodice over her breasts, her belly, her hips. He pushed the heavy skirts over her petticoats to pool at her feet.

Warm palms slid around her waist to loosen her corset. He kissed her while he stripped her, his mouth open and hungry. His tongue traced hers, teasing a rhythm she didn't quite understand, yet these insistent movements drove her wild.

Heat spread through the heart of her, making her moan and writhe. She begged for something she could scarcely dream of.

Lord Granborough answered that call. He freed her from the corset, her gloves, her petticoats and underclothes. She stood before him, naked but for the weighty diamond necklace around her throat.

“Go and lie on the sofa,” he said. “Let me look at you.”

Louisa lowered onto the red brocade cushions, angling her body to face him. She sank back against the pillowed arm of the sofa and drew her knees up, baring herself to his gaze. She lazily parted her thighs, letting her legs fall slack while she caressed the sensitive place that brought her unfathomable pleasure.

Her husband flung the buttons of his trousers apart, dragging them down his hips. He removed his drawers, socks, and shoes, all the while watching her fingers slick and circle. When Louisa pushed two fingers deep inside herself, she felt certain the heat of his gaze would scorch them both.

He burned so hot for her.

“You're killing me, Louisa,” he said as he fisted his erection. He pleased himself in long, slow strokes. “Have you any idea how beautiful you are?”

Her back arched off the cushions as her fingers curled within. She pumped her palm until her hand grew slippery. She smeared that wetness in and around her entrance, desperately wanting His Lordship to kneel and taste her.

Louisa offered her hand to him. “Please, Giles. I need you.”

Her naked husband eased to his knees, closing those few precious inches from the sofa to the carpet. His hands gripped her hips, positioning her bottom against the edge of the cushions. He placed a pillow behind her head so that she might recline more comfortably.

“I only know one trick,” he said, coming to rest between her thighs, “and I’m not entirely certain you’ll like it. It isn’t the sort of thing a gentleman does with his wife—or so I’ve been told.”

It was something lovers did. She’d read of the act in the French book and had fantasized about Lord Granborough kissing her *there*.

Louisa was not afraid or embarrassed. She wasn’t scandalized by her desire for this man and the wondrous things he could show her.

She put her glistening fingertips to his lips and told him, “This wife wants it.”

Grinning, he took her fingers in his mouth, flicking his tongue to taste the pads of her fingertips. The move was so intimate, so deliciously erotic.

She put her hand to his head, guiding him down, down, down...until his hot, open mouth met her damp flesh. Louisa gasped. She curled her fingertips in his golden hair, angling her hips to put his lips where she needed them most.

He suckled her, increasing the pressure until she cried out, and then retreated to delicate nibbles that made her purr and moan. He was everywhere all at once, his hands at her thighs, thumbs spreading her, fingers petting her. His jaw rocked in the cradle of her hips, worshipping her as if he could never get enough of her.

She loved the sight of this proud man on his knees for her.

He put forth such an effort to please her, rising for a breath to ask, “Show me, Louisa.” His Lordship dipped to lick her, low and slow. “Here?” he asked. “Or here?”

Everything felt amazing, but one aching place made her thighs shake. “Mmm...there.” She gasped as he drew on her.

“Just like that!”

The rasp of his tongue was relentless. The play of his fingers never ceased. He fondled her while he devoured her, locking eyes down the length of her body. Hungry, needy.

Louisa delighted in watching what he did to her. Her fingers curled over the back of the red brocade sofa. Her other hand crowned his head, fingernails snaking through his hair. She watched his tongue lap between her legs, his breath puffing fast and hot over her slick, pebbled flesh.

Lord Granborough’s moans matched her own. He gripped her hips and rode the wild, wanton movements she made. She was powerless beneath the pressure of his lips, the brush of his tongue, the gentle bite of his teeth as he nipped her.

Every motion stoked her higher until she grew mindless and restless. “Oh, Giles!” She panted and chanted, over and over again. “Oh, oh...”

Her head tossed against the pillows. Her spine squirmed against the cushions. Louisa strained and reached for her pinnacle, finding climax with one last, wicked lash of her husband’s tongue. She trembled against his lips, moaning his name as waves of bliss washed over her.

Sweaty and sated, Louisa collapsed in His Lordship’s arms, barely registering when he hauled her limp body from the brocade sofa and carried her to bed.

She had never felt more treasured.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

He awoke with her head on his chest. Giles stroked his hands through her silky, tousled hair, marveling at its softness. How nice to wake with one's wife, intimate and unhurried! He felt glad to have her with him, here in his arms, sharing his bed.

Yet even in such bliss, he fretted over what to do about Venia, who expected him to abandon Louisa in Granborough before returning to London. How would she understand that his marriage vows had suddenly grown sacred?

Giles had promised his life, body, and the protection of his name to one woman, and could no longer stomach the thought of infidelity. Louisa was his wife in the eyes of God, the law, and now—he feared—his heart.

He would write Venia an explanation, he decided, and return the photograph to her, as he had no further use for it. He intended to post the letter as soon as they put into port. As for his debts, he'd find a way to settle with the Herberts. He must save Louisa from the disgrace of paying off her husband's ex-mistress.

From this day forward, he vowed to be a good and faithful husband, for he did not wish to become entangled in the same plots, schemes, and manipulations as before. Giles longed to start afresh with Louisa.

She stirred drowsily in his arms and turned her naked body into his, for he too was warm, and cozy, feeling loverly. He pressed a languid kiss to her lips, claiming her thoroughly—as

he had done last night when they had brought one another to the heights of pleasure.

“Good morning, Louisa,” he said, softly.

She smiled like a lazy, sated house cat. For once, she did not balk at his closeness or shy away from his touch. “Good morning, Giles,” she said, instead.

They were on very good terms today.

Louisa climbed out of bed, donned her wrapper, and peered from the porthole window, frowning. “Is that England out there?”

He rose and joined her at the window, spying the first glimpses of verdant, green countryside on the horizon. “Ireland, probably. We call at Queenstown to drop the mail and likely some passengers, as well.” He sought his dressing gown before ringing for breakfast, which was soon delivered. The steward arrived with the usual fare of coffee, pastries, and jam. Anything more substantial was served in the dining saloon.

It was far more pleasant to dine privately in the sitting room as man and wife, Giles decided as he sank onto the sofa cushions with a cup of coffee and a slice of hot, buttered toast slathered in marmalade.

Louisa sat beside him, doubtless blushing at the memory of all they’d experienced on this very sofa. She had been bold last night, and their coupling had been unbelievably erotic. He’d never imagined that one’s wife could behave so wantonly, or that she would welcome his attentions out of sheer sensual satisfaction.

Yes, he knew that women *wanted*. He knew they felt desire and craved climax. He simply never believed that Louisa would need or even expect to be treated as a lover. He never thought she would want *him*.

His wife regarded him over the rim of her coffee cup, asking, “What are your plans for the future? What do you hope to accomplish at Granborough?”

He owed her some degree of truth. “I hope to put your money to good use. The house needs a new roof, not to mention the drains. The coal bill alone is £1,000 a year.” With reluctance, he admitted, “Things have got so bad that I’ve shut up the east wing and washed my hands of it.”

Louisa looked shocked. “I had no idea things were so dire.”

“It’s this damned industrialization,” he said. “Everyone is moving to the cities for work. In my grandfather’s day, there wasn’t an empty farm in the county.”

The very thing that had destroyed him—industrialization—was the thing that saved him, for he would use her money from the carpet mill to restore his estate.

That harsh reality passed unspoken between them.

“We’ll tackle things together,” she said at last. “I want to bring modernity to England, or at least to Granborough. Why shouldn’t your tenants have electricity and running water? They have no one to make their tea or draw their baths, and might appreciate these labor-saving amenities.” She nibbled her slice of toast, adding, “I really do want to order one of Mr. Perry’s electric kettles. I think it sounds very handy...”

A week ago, he would’ve been incensed. He would’ve denied the suggestion outright, and then seethed over her brash, American audacity to interfere with hundreds of years worth of tradition. Now, he endeavored to see the matter from her point of view, though he didn’t necessarily agree.

Giles sought to tease her with a modicum of the truth. “Oh, yes, you’ll need to be ‘handy’ when the servant classes revolt because you and Philip Sheridan Perry have modernized them out of a job.”

She laughed. “Surely, we can afford servants *and* electric appliances.”

“Are you a spendthrift, Louisa?” Though it was her money, Giles wasn’t certain he could stomach watching her spend her millions when he desperately wanted thousands to clear his debts.

“I suppose I have been,” she confessed, “but I’ll curb my spending, if it makes you anxious. Sometimes I feel as if Pappa has invented a money-printer.”

He couldn’t help but agree. “I cannot imagine a world where people won’t need carpet.”

The Thurston-Reids boasted more money than Giles could fathom. He doubted they’d ever run out of capital.

Still, he hoped to be better than those who came before him. He hoped not to squander his newfound wealth, or to use and abuse Louisa as his mother and Venia had urged him to do. He would not hurt his wife for his own gain.

“I’d like to find a way,” he told her while sipping his coffee, “of making the estate pay. I should fancy seeing Granborough become self-sufficient, though I’m not quite certain how that is to be accomplished with the land worth a pittance and the farms woefully ramshackle and empty.”

She smiled at him. “That’s a dangerously modern goal, my lord. Perhaps I’m beginning to convert you to my way of thinking.”

He laughed grimly. “Not bloody likely!”

Truthfully, he *was* starting to understand her opinions on class structure, capitalism, and unabashed Yankee ambition. Louisa wasn’t afraid of hard work and daring investments. She could afford to take risks that many of his countrymen could never hope to shoulder.

She was a prize. An ally. A rare jewel—and he was undeserving of her loyalty.

Why had he ever thought to feel ashamed of her?

“Have you considered opening Granborough to the public? Charging for visitors? I’m sure the parks and gardens would make a lovely day out.”

“I don’t wish to be ogled by strangers,” he said. “I’m not a circus attraction.”

“Oh, but you *are*, and I am, too. Do you recall the fanfare of our wedding? You said we’d never escape the press. Why

not use that notoriety to our advantage?”

“You mean to court attention?” He could think of nothing more demeaning.

“In a way...” she said. “You should embrace it. If anything, you can blame it on my American egalitarianism.”

“Live our lives in a fishbowl? A gilded cage? Is that what you want of our marriage, dear?”

“I want us to be successful. Money won’t make us happy, but I know a steady income would be of some relief to you, Giles, and I know you wouldn’t wish to rely on me for everything. We can make the estate profitable if we modernize and look toward the future. You were clever enough to marry me, which means you are clever enough to change with the times.”

They might open the house and parklands whenever they were away in London, perhaps for four months out of the year. She watched the wheels turn in his head as he seriously considered what had otherwise been an unthinkable solution.

“It’s not unprecedented,” she said, devouring her toast and jam. “Mr. Darcy’s housekeeper led tours of Pemberly and he had £10,000 a year.”

Giles couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I thought you didn’t read Austen.”

She shrugged. “Every schoolgirl reads *Pride and Prejudice*. I just didn’t know I was meant to study it so closely.”

As she grinned at him from her seat beside him on the sofa, Giles noticed a light sheen of marmalade glazing her bottom lip. He leaned over and kissed her, savoring her flavor.

“You always taste so sweet, Louisa.” Suddenly, he was hungry for her.

Perhaps he’d been starved all along.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

After breakfast, Giles sat down to write his farewell letter to Venia. He'd never really contemplated his life without her—even when she'd married Herbert, they'd made plans to reunite after her first child was conceived. No one, not even her husband, had considered their affair to be immoral or indecent, as it was simply the English way of doing things. They knew of no love matches among the upper classes, who married for wealth, political power, and social connections.

His pen nib sailed across the sheet of stationery as he tried his best to explain this shift in him, this new perspective on matrimony. Perhaps Venia loved him in her way—they'd both grown up to be selfish, stubborn, and autocratic in their will to please themselves—yet Giles yearned for a proper marriage. He wanted a loving wife and children whom he could know on a deeper level than a cursory glance once a year at Christmas or on the occasional school holidays.

He longed for the sort of family he'd never known, and understood now that he would not find fulfillment with Lady Venia Herbert.

His concentration was interrupted by Louisa emerging from the bedroom dressed warmly in a woolen walking suit. She smiled at him, asking, "What are you doing?"

"Writing a letter, but it will keep." He put down his ink pen, giving her his full attention. "Did you want something?"

"I'm going to walk on the promenade deck, and I thought you might like to join me."

She rarely invited him anywhere. He felt honored that she'd asked. Clearly, his wife wished to spend time in his company—a *very* recent development—and he would be a fool to deny her this simple request.

“I accept your invitation,” he said, packing away his stationery kit. This was, perhaps, the first time Giles was aware of placing Louisa before Venia. In fact, his previous lover was the furthest thing from his mind as Lord and Lady Granborough navigated their way through the ship.

The promenade deck was busy and blustery. Folk lined the railings to watch the mail tender steam out of Queenstown quay, a pretty horseshoe-shaped harbor filled with colorful houses and church spires. Along the glassy waterfront, fishing boats and sailing vessels were moored.

Gulls cried overhead—the first they'd seen since leaving New York.

He and Louisa leaned against the railing to watch the spectacle.

Giles felt thrilled to catch an early glimpse at Ireland, which stood only a day's journey from Liverpool. They'd be home by tomorrow evening!

Louisa did not share his enthusiasm for the panorama. “Will we be expected to ride on that little launch when we disembark?”

“Oh, no. There is a great landing stage awaiting us. Cunard will roll out the red carpet and we'll be ushered down the gangway like royalty,” he explained. “There are usually press there, but since we're not on the passenger list, I'm not certain whether they'll be expecting us.” He frowned down at the mail tender, ferrying news out into the world. “It depends on how fast word travels.”

She arched over the railing to watch spy sea foam lapping against the hull of the ship. “It's a long way down...”

Giles looked, too. “It's a far drop. You're not afraid of heights are you?”

This was surely not brave Louisa who traveled halfway 'round the world on his arm. He couldn't imagine her being afraid of anything.

Yet the sight of the surface, so far below, seemed to unnerve her. "What if I should fall in the water?"

Her fearful reaction puzzled him. "From up here? I'll swim out and save you—or row out, realistically, and fetch you back in a dinghy. There are about a dozen of them on the boat deck ready to put in at a moment's notice. Come, we can inspect them if you like." As he guided her away from the railings, it dawned on him that he *would* save her, were she ever in danger. He would do everything in his power to keep Louisa safe and to give her a good life, even at great personal cost to himself.

He took her gloved hand and kissed it. He laced their fingers, swinging their arms lightly as they strolled. He sought to distract her from this sudden surge of anxiety.

It felt pleasant to walk without the rumble of the ship's engines underfoot. Without the propellers churning the sea, there was only a gentle rolling of waves as the ship rocked in the harbor.

They strolled the circuit of the deck until they came upon a group of children playing hopscotch while their mothers and nurses sat nearby.

He and Louisa observed the little ones skipping, jumping, and squealing with unbridled delight. No one bothered to quiet them or curb their fun.

"What is the point of it?" he asked her.

"To burn off energy, I'm sure." She turned her pretty face toward him with the wind whipping her hair beneath the brim of her hat. "Did you and your playmate never hop scotch?"

He grimaced at the thought, for he and Venia had never known such freedom, such inhibition even as children. They'd been neglected, ignored, and finally forgotten until they could grow up and become useful pawns in their families' schemes.

“We played our own games,” was all he could stomach to say, for they’d played wretched, selfish, pointless games often at the expense of innocent people.

Louisa explained the rules to him as they watched the older girls. She chatted easily with the ladies, whose group included Gladys Waldo and baby Emily. A smaller girl with short, stumpy legs took her turn, slowly, for she had longer to go on her little legs.

One of the bigger girls approached Louisa and asked, “Would you like a turn, miss?”

She looked to Giles. He couldn’t help but encourage her. For who would care if the Marchioness of Granborough hopped scotch on an ocean liner?

“Go on, then, Louisa,” he said, laughing. “I should like to see you try.”

She sailed yachts, pedaled bicycles, and sang music hall songs to an audience of strangers. She’d shown a real fear of heights earlier, and he hoped to give her back her confidence. For too long he’d been embarrassed by her loud talking and misbehavior. He’d thought to lock her away, to put her out of sight—as his parents and Venia’s parents had done to their children—but she deserved to take dares, act boldly, and have fun.

Giles hoped he hadn’t crushed her spirit.

How wrong he had been about her!

She laughingly tossed her stone, gathered the hems of her tightly-tailored skirt, and hopped across the board of squares. Two feet. One foot. Two feet. One foot. Down and back again, until she came back to him, breathless and giddy.

When had he ever played? Or even lost himself to fun?

He clapped for her with real enthusiasm. “Well done, dear!”

Behind her, the little girl tried again, but this time, her stout legs failed her, and she dropped onto the deck in a heap. Humiliated, she began to cry.

“Oh, do get up, Clarice,” scolded another girl. “You’re in the way!”

The older children pouted to Louisa, explaining, “She is always underfoot.”

None of the mothers or nurses seemed overly concerned by Clarice’s fall, yet—in unspoken agreement—Giles and Louisa hurried toward her to ensure that she wasn’t hurt. Thankfully, they saw no skinned knees, only a bruise to the child’s pride.

Little Clarice wanted to play like the big girls, though the hopscotch squares were too wide for her legs to jump through.

Louisa took one of the child’s hands. She prodded Giles to take the other. Together, they helped Clarice take her turn, lifting her aloft so that she leaped across the board in a clumsy mimicry of Louisa’s journey.

“One foot,” she instructed the child, brightly and easily. “Two foot. Yes! One foot, and now back! Excellent job!”

After completing her turn, they released Clarice, who gleefully ran to her nursemaid.

Giles and Louisa continued on their promenade, hand-in-hand.

“You’ll be a wonderful mother someday,” he said, reeling from all manner of tender feelings that playing, and teaching, and enriching that little girl had brought forth in him.

She frowned at his words. “In about nine months’ time, I bet.” She rested the glove of her free hand over her womb, where he’d spent himself many times during their coupling.

There was no reason to suspect that she *hadn’t* fallen pregnant during their honeymoon—that had certainly been the point of his coming to her, night after night, for the sooner she bore his heir, the sooner he could wash his hands of her. He would be free from her.

“Yes, probably so,” he said, “but if you aren’t yet expecting...” He pulled her aside. They quit the main walkway to duck around a corner, shielded from the wind and the view of other passengers. He discreetly confessed, “You

needn't become a mother straightaway. There are things we can do to avoid conception. It's never foolproof, but we might buy you some time. It would be your decision."

Why ought it to be her decision, he wondered as he spoke these words that would tie him to her for months, perhaps even years longer than he'd planned. Giles needed a son. He wanted a family, yet Louisa...hadn't made up her mind on the matter.

She considered his words carefully. "I think I'd like to wait."

"Of course," he said. She didn't wish to be a mother at only twenty years of age. He hadn't proven himself to be a worthy mate or an honorable father figure to any impressionable youngster.

"Thank you, Giles, for telling me," said Louisa, blushing. "I didn't know."

She'd been kept ignorant of too many things in her marriage, and he intended to rectify that. "It ought to be your choice."

Her life and health were the ones at risk. The thought of losing her in childbed was a real fear. He could not have coped with losing her now that he was falling in love with her. Wasn't love doing what was best for the other person, sacrificing one's wants to uplift the other?

She explained to him her reason for postponing pregnancy, "I want my children to have hot water and electricity, and all the modern conveniences."

He laughed. "You'll spoil them."

"I'll spoil their papa, too." She laughed. "I want it to be just the two of us for a while."

"Yes," said he, in all sincerity, "I would like that very much."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

She and Lord Granborough returned to their stateroom hoping to rest for a while before dressing for Captain's dinner later that evening. This was their last night on *Campania*, as they would arrive in Liverpool by tomorrow morning.

They walked the swaying paneled passages with their fingers laced. His Lordship was fast becoming a gentle, conscientious husband who cared for her opinions and asked for her advice regarding his estate—it was her dowry funding the restoration, after all, and she should have a say in how the money was to be spent. What's more, Louisa knew that he wanted a family, an heir, yet he put her concerns first and educated her on the finer points of conception. He would help her to postpone becoming pregnant until she felt prepared to become a mother.

His sacrifice was not lost to her.

Louisa adored him. She marveled at this change in him and in their newfound relationship, which grew closer and stronger with every passing day.

Together, they passed through the first-class corridor that led to their stateroom suite. Two rough-looking men in ill-fitting suits loitered before their door. These thugs did not look lost, though they appeared to belong in steerage based on their manner and dress.

“If it ain't the penniless marquess,” said the taller of the two as they watched Lord and Lady Granborough approach, “and his millionaire missus.”

His Lordship's hand stiffened against hers. His fingers clenched, and he bared his teeth at the harsh words of these rude men. With every footstep, he became more and more enraged.

The second thug spoke, saying, "We've come to remind you of your obligation. You're due back in London, guv."

Louisa refused to be intimidated by these strangers and refused to let her husband out of her sight. "You're mistaken. He's getting off the ship with me and we're going to Granborough."

She hated Pinkertons, for they were strikebreakers and union busters. She wasn't afraid of them, if this was what they were, as they were motivated only by money, and their services were easily bought.

Money held no power over *her*.

She turned to her husband, asking, "Are we being extorted?"

"No, the debt is mine—my family's—and I intend to pay it as soon as the funds clear."

"With my dowry, you mean?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"I see." Here was the reason why he'd married her. Louisa remembered their earnest conversation that morning. His parents were gamblers, spendthrifts, and schemers. None of this was his fault. He was merely trying to overcome the unfortunate circumstances to which he'd been born.

She opened the door to their cabin. To the thugs, she said, "You'd better come in, then."

Their rough presence crowded the sitting room. The smaller of the two men kept his back to the door, guarding it, keeping an eye on His Lordship, who'd begun to sweat and shake.

Lord Granborough sank onto the sofa as if his legs had given out. He looked near to swooning. Clearly, he was

humiliated by this confrontation. How long had these men pursued him, and why had he tried to keep his debts from her?

“How much are you in for,” she asked. The three of them standing on their feet circled him, putting on the squeeze. It was time for honesty between them.

He took a ragged breath before admitting, “£12,000.”

This was an eye-watering sum, yet her bank balance would cover it. There would be precious little left for Louisa to survive off of until her investments and allowances were paid out.

His Lordship reached for her hand, gripping it painfully. Wide blue eyes pleaded with her. “No, dear, do not pay the debt! Let them take my teeth or break my nose!”

She withdrew her hand from his, gathering her skirts to kneel before him. “I prefer my husband to be handsome—not that you’d be any less good-looking with false teeth and a crooked nose, but I’d prefer not to see you harmed. Let me help you, Giles.”

“I had hoped to keep this from you,” he said, defeatedly. “I had hoped to keep you from being tainted by all this unpleasantness. My debts aren’t yours...”

“They’re not yours either,” she argued, “but now they’re *ours*. It lies within my power to help you clear your name, to start fresh and unencumbered. Will you let me you, or would you have these Pinkertons take out your kneecaps?”

With his consent, she rose and retrieved her bank book. She placed the leather ledger upon the sitting room table, and wrote out the check in a flourish, signing it ‘*Louisa Granborough*,’ for the very first time in her life.

“I demand a receipt of payment,” she said to the taller thug, “and your word that all of His Lordship’s debts are cleared. Your employer, this man Herbert, will be satisfied by this?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She handed him the ink pen. “I require an assurance of that.”

They scribbled a receipt onto Cunard Line stationery, which Louisa tucked into her bank book. Returning her focus to the men, she said with all the derision she could muster, “Now, get out. If I see you again, I’ll have you thrown in the brig.”

The rude man laughed in her face. “Civilian vessels ain’t got brigs.”

“I’ll have you locked in the cargo hold, then.” She gave them a haughty look—an impression of her husband at his snootiest. “Or better yet, the kennels.”

The thugs left, slamming the cabin door behind them. Lord Granborough gasped as though he’d been gut-punched. The breath was knocked from his lungs.

She’d never seen him looking so low.

“Is that all of it?” she asked, demanding total honesty from him now.

He nodded defeatedly. “That is everything I currently owe, but there will always be more. I’ve told you of the roof, drains, and death duties—it will take hundreds of thousands, Louisa.”

Money meant nothing to her, in the grand scheme of things, but she understood that it meant everything to him. He had married her to save Granborough. He had sacrificed his future happiness to protect the estate from bailiffs, creditors, and debt collectors breaking it up piecemeal.

“Oh, Giles, if you were in trouble, you should’ve come to me.”

“Surely, you can understand why I didn’t. I was buried so deep that I couldn’t see the light.”

Louisa joined him on the red brocade sofa. She had witnessed this vulnerable side of him before. He’d given her fleeting glimpses behind the mask when the shadowed curtain slipped to reveal the frightened, wounded gentleman beneath.

“You’re a proud man, but there is no shame in having debt. You didn’t squander your birthright. In fact, you’ve gone to great lengths to preserve what you have left.” She took his trembling hand in hers, lifted it to her lips, and kissed each gloved knuckle. “Believe me, I understand your sacrifice and will happily pay whatever is necessary to lift that burden from your shoulders. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

His free hand stroked her face. “Please, don’t give up on me,” he pleaded, softly. “My pride is all I have left, and I’ve clung to it. Now, you know the depths of my mortification.” Long fingers feathered over her cheeks. “What manner of man have you married, Louisa?”

He carried great shame over things that weren’t his fault.

She had more faith in him than he had in himself.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” she told him. “It’s what you do going forward that matters. And yes, this is a marriage, and it’s work—but it’s work that I want *with you*.”

Lord Granborough had been on a journey, she realized, from the emotionally repressed, guarded, haughty aristocrat she’d married to this thoughtful, unguarded man who sat beside her now. Louisa wondered what fresh challenges awaited them in England when they reached the other side of their voyage.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Although bailiffs and pawnbrokers had taken everything else of value, the heirloom jewels he'd smuggled to New York were too precious to part with. The Granborough Emeralds, as they were known, were all he had left to give her, and he'd produced them from their tattered case on the eve of his wedding.

Tonight, Louisa retrieved the parure from the purser's desk in honor of the Captain's dinner, and the wearing of them was meant to be a surprise *for him*.

"I hope you like it, Giles," she said, emerging from the bedroom clad in an iridescent green silk gown dyed to match the parure he'd presented her in honor of their marriage.

She spun for him, flaunting her nipped, corseted waist and sweeping, bell-shaped skirts. The bodice was cut low across her breasts, and the puffy, gigot sleeves defied gravity above her slender arms. The Marchioness of Granborough was a vision to behold.

"I love everything about it," he said, awestruck. She was magnificent in all her finery, yet the sight of her wearing his family heirlooms—the same stones as his grandmother and great-grandmother wore before her—moved him. This simple act held more significance than he would ever have imagined.

She was his wife. Even after the distasteful events of the afternoon, Louisa hadn't spurned him. The symbolism of her now, choosing the jewels, embracing the role, and stepping

into the forefront as Lady Granborough bound them together more than any golden wedding band ever could.

Emeralds were emblems of lovers' vows. Giles hadn't cared before, yet his hands shook as he traced his fingertips along the heavy, polished gemstones gleaming at her throat.

"Oh, Louisa..."

He'd been humbled today. He could have endured the humiliation of debt, but to watch Louisa be pulled down into the mire alongside him—his wife threatened by hired thugs!—brought him lower than he'd ever been.

Yet she made him proud. She had fought for him, proving that Lord and Lady Granborough could endure life's challenges together. He would share in the running of the estate with her, open the grounds and gardens to paying gawkers and holidaymakers, and install the necessary amenities to bring the house, farms, and tenant cottages into the twentieth century.

He might've had generations of noble blood pumping through his veins, but Louisa had pluck, gumption, and common sense. She kept a cool head in a confrontation when he was highly-strung and liable to panic.

She balanced him out. He provided a position in society in which she would thrive. They would make a good team—in marriage and in the business of running Granborough. She would indeed be Lady Bountiful of the county, while he would be forever known as the man who'd been clever enough to recognize the woman she already was.

Tonight, she was wearing *his* jewels.

He looked forward to watching her shine.

In the dining saloon, the Meyers held the honor of hosting Captain Haines at their table. Giles led Louisa into the space for the last time, committing the gilded ivory paneling and red velvet upholstery to memory. They weaved a familiar path between the long, white-cloth-laden tables, smiling and greeting those fellow passengers who'd enlivened their honeymoon journey.

Louisa stopped and spoke to the Misses Broome, who had been quite convinced that Lord and Lady Granborough's brilliant union was a secret romance.

"He is smitten!" announced one of the sisters, tittering behind her champagne glass. "I knew it from the start!"

Giles didn't bother to deny it, though in the early days of their voyage, he'd been more appalled by Louisa's conduct than infatuated with her. "You must call on us," he said, "before you leave England again. I'd be delighted to show you 'round the parklands, gardens, and ruins of Granborough."

The invitation was a great honor for the sisters, and he would be gratified to host Louisa's newfound friends. He extended an equal courtesy to Sir Julius and Lady Sitwell, who promised to look the young couple up when Lord and Lady Granborough were next in London.

Further down the table sat Philip Sheridan Perry, who would be happy to advise the newlyweds on all manner of electric appliances for their domestic convenience. "You know, there is a fellow in Germany," said Mr. Perry, conspiratorially, "Herr Flocken who claims to have invented what he calls the '*Eleckrtowagen*'—a sort of horseless carriage powered by an electric motor. Imagine the freedom! The opportunities!" His eyes were fairly glazed with rapture. "If a man could only get in at the start..."

Giles had resigned himself to pedaling a bicycle at Louisa's side, and doubtless lagging behind her blistering pace, but he could not imagine joining her on some mad adventure atop a glorified buggy. He simply didn't see the appeal of such an undignified conveyance, yet he knew his wife would always have her finger on the pulse of invention, forever looking for ways to modernize and vitalize their lives.

He would never grow bored by her side.

Also present at the Captain's dinner were Mr. Ferron and his daughter, Minnie. The young girl raved over Louisa's glittering emerald parure and shimmering green frock. Miss Ferron had taken their advice and told her father of her fears, and was happy to report that she and her Daddy would be

touring the galleries of Paris and shopping along the *Rue de la Paix*, but not committing themselves to any educational plans beyond that. There would be plenty of time to ‘finish’ and become a grand hostess, but precious few girlhood days left to spend with her doting father.

“Let’s go over to Paris,” Giles said to Louisa, as they moved through the gathered group, “and visit my mother in the spring. There is so much I want to show you along the *Bois de Boulogne*, and I know you can hold your own against the grasping conniver who birthed me.”

She grinned at him in the dazzling glow of the chandeliers overhead. “Only if you promise to host Mamma and Pappa every Christmas, and show them what a model son-in-law you’ve become.”

He threw his head back and laughed, heedless of the six hundred pairs of eyes swiveling in his direction. “It seemed we’re both up for the task of tackling our new families.”

At last, Lord and Lady Granborough reached their seats at the head of the dining table, where Captain Haines and the Meyers held court. Their arrival was greeted with handshakes and hugs, and rapidly-spoken French as Madame and Monsieur de Roubernon rose to welcome them.

Louisa was liked and respected by their fellow travelers, and as she took a champagne glass from her hosts, she looked very much the marchioness.

Giles settled into his seat beside Madame de Roubernon, who looked elegantly ostentatious in her bangled bracelets and elaborate coiffure. Although he could never admit it, he was grateful that she had gifted Louisa the naughty French novel, for she had given a lonely young bride something far more valuable—confidence in herself and her sensuality.

“I am obliged to you,” he said, drinking from his water glass, “for recognizing what I was too blind to see.”

Louisa deserved pleasure. She deserved passion, devotion, and her due regard as the woman he’d chosen to share in his name, his bed, and his life.

He didn't want to end up like his father, who'd been drunk, faithless, and miserable for as long as he could remember. This transatlantic sailing had been Giles' one chance at redemption, a rare opportunity to begin his life anew. He would be a fool not to take it. He would be a fool to have a lady like Louisa and lose her.

Thanks to *her*, he no longer feared Herbert breathing down his throat. He'd been freed of the shackles of debt, and could finally sever the ties that bound him to Lady Venia, once and for all.

He found Louisa's hand beneath the tablecloth, and laced his fingers with hers nestled in the folds of her silken skirts. As he watched her drink, dine, and dazzle their dinner companions over courses of caviar, Dover sole, and *Campania* pudding in a decadent rum sauce, Giles knew there was nowhere he'd rather be than by her side.

At last, he had fallen in love with the woman he'd married.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

There was singing and dancing after the meal, but Louisa slipped from the assembly room unnoticed—or so she imagined. She had taken turns with all of their friends and had exchanged addresses with many of them, promising to keep up correspondence and pay calls in the future.

Her life as Lady Granborough would be very busy, she realized, for there would always be something to do, someone to see. Responsibilities and requirements beyond pleasing herself.

She looked forward to it after years in New York being just another heiress floundering a sea of moneyed beauties, another face in a crowded ballroom, or making up a yachting party at Newport. She had wanted to escape Knickerbocker society, where the Thurston Reids would never ascend to Mrs. Astor's Four Hundred, though Louisa never fathomed what awaited her on the other side of the Atlantic.

She would be mistress of the Granborough estate, a great lady, and a grand hostess. A wife, and someday, a mother. Louisa hadn't considered herself to be a child in those carefree days before her marriage, yet she suddenly felt grown up, for somewhere—between leaving New York and arriving in Liverpool—she had changed. She viewed the world differently.

Louisa stepped through the exterior door and emerged onto the promenade deck. Wind whipped at her heavy green skirts. She hadn't brought a coat or even a rug, and she shivered in

the crisp night air. Her breath puffed condensation as she walked toward the railings and looked out upon the churning sea.

A million stars glimmered overhead, and she swore she could see for miles. *Campania* was only a tiny, traveling speck in the universe that seemed to stretch on and on forever. Louisa hugged herself, feeling the weight of the Granborough emeralds pressing on her heart, hanging heavily in her ears and cuffing her wrists.

She was girded to do battle. A knight's armor couldn't have protected her better. She would be a formidable woman, capable of managing servants, tenants, and houseguests in the countryside. She would engage tradesmen and artisans to restore Granborough, for Louisa intended to do more than write checks.

Footsteps on the deck drew her attention. She pivoted to watch her husband approach, looking so handsome, gentlemanly, and refined. No one would suspect that earlier this afternoon, he'd been gripped with panic and paralyzed with fear over two Pinkertons—or the rough English equivalent.

His Lordship was deeply embarrassed by his debts and had tried to hide the gravity of the situation from her. These private detectives had pursued him for days! More bailiffs and creditors had hunted him in London, she'd discovered, since the day he'd inherited the marquessate. His father had barely been cold in the ground before everything valuable had been sold off or pawned.

Louisa had never wanted for money. Her every desire lay within her reach, and whatever she couldn't buy herself, Mamma and Pappa had provided. Lord Granborough had not been so fortunate. He hadn't known such a safety net. He'd never found a soft place to land.

"There you are," he said, reaching her side. "I've been looking for you across the dance floor. One minute you were in the center of a group singing "Buffalo Gals", and the next, I

couldn't find you." His shrewd blue eyes searched hers, as he confessed, "I was worried about you."

"I'm fine, Giles, thank you. I needed some fresh air."

He laughed at that. "Did you? Well, it's bloody freezing." He shrugged out of his dinner jacket and draped it across her shoulders. His warm hands rubbed her arms, conscious of her shivering. "We've suffered a great deal today, haven't we? I wish you hadn't been exposed to Herbert's thugs, Louisa, but I'm grateful to you for standing up on my behalf. I've never had anyone do that for me—you cannot know how much it meant to me, that you have chosen me, for all my failings."

She turned in his arms to press her cheek to his shirtfront. "That's a change in your tune since our courtship. You were the most arrogant, prideful man. You would never admit to a fault. You would never make yourself grateful to anyone, though half of my society turned themselves inside out to welcome you."

"It's true," he said. "I looked down my nose at you all. I imagined myself to be above you, but only because I'd been taught to feel so." His lips brushed the top of her hair. "You've humbled me, dear. I daresay you've made me a better man."

"Giles, this is our last night on the ship. Our honeymoon is drawing to an end, and our real life together starts tomorrow." She pulled away to look into his face, to find some truthfulness in him. "These last few days have grown into something special. What if that all stops the moment we step off the ship?"

"It won't. We shan't let it! We'll fight for one another, be devoted to one another."

"There will be so much needing to be done. You said so yourself—the roof and the drains, and the entire east wing of your house requires repairing." Misgivings poured from her lips, for she did not wish to do this alone. "English spouses don't spend much time together. Your cousin Caroline warned me not to grow too fond of you, as I wouldn't often see you outside of the social Season."

Caroline Vanderheid had attempted to warn her, to keep her from getting her hopes up in regards to Louisa's grim yet good-looking suitor. Had his cousin known that he was only marrying her to save Granborough? To keep the wolves from his door?

"All that," he said, "and you still took me on?"

She shrugged. "You were worth the risk at the time."

"And now?" His Lordship asked, dipping his head to claim her mouth. Two hands cradled her face, protecting her cheeks from the biting wind. "What do you think of me now?"

"I love you," she told him, without fear or reservations. If she had ever thought Lord Granborough above her in pedigree or status, this journey had opened her eyes to the truth. "Not because you're a nobleman or even a *nice* man, but because you are sober and dignified and devoted to your estate. You might've married some English girl with whom you have more in common, yet you were willing to put aside your personal needs to save Granborough. You want to make the place better for those who live and work on your estate. I see the selflessness in that, even if you call yourself a bounder."

Her cold, numb fingers gripped hands until her knuckles throbbed. "I was raised to be loved, and sheltered, and even spoiled, but you weren't," she said. "I recognize now that you weren't even brought up to expect it. Maybe you believe yourself unworthy of it. Well, I don't! I only ask you not to run from me when I tell you that I love you.

"Don't hide from me, Giles. Don't push me away or lock me out when this honeymoon is over and the real world threatens to pull you back into whatever it is you're accustomed to. Stand with me. Fight with me. Be with me! I don't want to be packed off to the country like your cousin warned me you would. I don't want to be alone in this marriage."

"Oh, Louisa, I am ashamed that the thought ever crossed my mind. You'll not be alone. I'll not be one of those 'obliging' English husbands who turn a blind eye to your

needs. You shall be petted and treasured, and pined for—even when I’m only so far as the east wing.”

She laughed softly.

“It’s true,” he said, growing solemn, “that I’ve never experienced *true* love. Indeed, I’ve avoided attachment and affection. You’ll think me pathetic, but every woman that I have ever reached out to has pushed me away. My mother does not care for me beyond the need to use me for her own gain. My childhood playmate—my only friend—strung me along for years, perpetuating the lie of a relationship that would not ever come to fruition.”

Lord Granborough enveloped Louisa’s hands in his. “I daren’t say that I am reformed, but at least I’m aware that the life I’ve led until now has been shallow and false. Come, Louisa, dear, and let me show you the truth of our marriage. Let me expose, once and for all, the man whom you claim to be worthy of your love.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Panic clawed at his chest. For months, he had taken Louisa for granted. This Fifth Avenue princess he'd married would save Granborough whether she wanted to or not—as soon as their funds cleared, Giles intended to begin his plans for restoring the house—yet he'd fallen in love with her during this sailing. He had grown to care for her thoughts and opinions, her wants and needs as a woman. She was a fully formed person with dreams, fears, and a will of her own.

Giles felt terrified that he could lose her.

He had never loved, trusted, or made himself vulnerable to anyone. Opening oneself emotionally and physically to another person exposed one to ridicule, humiliation, and exploitation. What would Louisa think of him when he'd been pulled from the pedestal of his pride and his privilege? When he'd been stripped raw, laid bare, and made real?

He was a weak man, a lonely little boy. A lost and wandering sojourner on the greatest journey of his life. He was afraid to walk this path alone, for where did it end without *her*?

Giles brought Louisa to their cabin.

Loving her and becoming the man worthy of her required complete honesty. He could not in good conscience—for that damned noble part of him insisted on coming to life during this trip—keep Venia's presence hidden. Louisa deserved to know the full extent of Giles' manipulation and to hear from his lips a promise that he would never stray. The sanctity of

marriage was precious to him. Louisa was precious to him, as was the life they planned to build together.

From this day onward, he would do nothing to jeopardize any of it.

He was turning his back on his past and choosing a future with her. He only hoped Louisa would trust him when he had never done anything deserving of her favor.

In their bedroom, Giles searched through his trunks to find the photograph that Venia had sent to him as a reminder of their affair. The image showed a darkly beautiful, voluptuously figured lady dressed in the height of fashion. Once, he had believed her to be the most sensually arousing woman he'd ever known, yet the image did nothing for him now. He only had eyes for Louisa, who was the perfect package of looks, intelligence, daring, and heart.

Giles did not bother to compare the two women, for there *was* no comparison between them. Venia had been his first lover, but Louisa would be his true love, his forever love, even if this confession meant the end of their marriage.

She might very well leave him after this.

He handed the photograph of his mistress over to his wife.

Louisa studied the image curiously. "She's lovely." Turning the picture in the lamplight, she read the signature at the bottom of the card, " *'Lady Venia Herbert.'* "

He waited while her clever mind worked out the shameful details—Venia was the name he'd uttered when he'd been drunk, and Herbert was the man to whom he'd owed a fortune.

"You're entangled with these people..."

Giles nodded, for that was an understatement if ever he'd heard one. "Venia was my boyhood playmate. There was a time when I hoped to marry her, but my parents' recklessness ensured that could never happen. I'd been too poor to keep proof over Venia's head, and she rightly wanted better for herself." He slumped against the bedpost, explaining, "Lady Venia Herbert is my lover, and I am so sorry for the other night. I did not mean to call you by her name."

Such a slip of the tongue was unforgivable.

That drunken night, Louisa had accused him of engaging in an affair, though she'd wrongly assumed that it was Madame de Roubernon who'd captured his lust. In truth, the sin went much deeper than that.

"Venia is the only woman I'd ever been with," he confessed," aside from you, of course. She is a married lady with three small children. Her husband, Herbert, is very rich and fully aware of my relationship with his wife. I suspect he bought my debts to secure my fidelity, for he will do anything to keep her happy. To preserve the status quo, so to speak."

Louisa frowned at this knowledge. An English upper-class wife mightn't bat an eye at such a *menage*, yet a young and idealistic American girl must be horrified to learn of her husband's infidelity—and the willful infidelity of his lover, and his lover's husband.

Bed-hopping was a national sport in Britain when in London where morality was lax and in the countryside where there was nothing much better to do.

"Do you think of her," asked Louisa at last, "when you're with me?"

"No," he answered honestly and emphatically. He had not fantasized about Venia when he was coupling with Louisa. His wife commanded his full attention and he had provided it.

She returned the photograph to him. Her voice was careful and even when she said, "I'm sorry that you had to give up the woman you loved."

"I never intended to give her up. I was supposed to reunite with her in London as soon as you were confined in the country. The goal was to get my heir on you and keep you busy so that Venia and I could carry on together as we have done for almost the whole of our lives."

He watched Louisa blink back tears. Her bottom lip trembled as she wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging herself. "Did you ever intend to make a go of this, our marriage?"

“Honestly, no,” Giles said, hating himself. How dared he hurt this innocent, trusting woman? “But that was before I knew you—truly knew you. I meant every word I said to you earlier. I want to make a life with you, Louisa.” His words sounded empty and hollow, though he was earnest in his promise. Suddenly, he remembered this morning’s task. “Here, read this letter, and then you’ll see.”

He fetched the letter he’d penned to Venia and offered it to his wife. She extended one shaking hand to lift the sheet of stationery to her gaze. She read his words, learning how he had struggled with his disloyalty toward *her*, his wife.

Louisa had been the wronged party, kept ignorant throughout the six months of his courtship scheme. She could not have discovered the true nature of their marriage until they were back in England and she was probably pregnant and could be trapped at Granborough to birth his heir.

But Giles had lost his nerve.

He’d fallen in love.

“I adore you, Louisa. I never counted on falling for you, but once I held you, I knew I couldn’t let you go. You have made me appreciate my vows in a way I’d never considered before. I wasn’t merely pledging myself to an heiress, and you weren’t only selling yourself for a title. There are hearts and happiness at state, and yours has become so very precious to me. Please trust in me to make you happy, Louisa. You’ll see I want nothing more in this world.”

Trust was the most dangerous part of a marriage, he realized. Placing one’s faith in another imperfect person, praying they stood by and supported you through the easy days and the hard. With Louisa, the choice was simple, for he already knew she would fight for their marriage. Giles took his strength from her, swearing never to forget how she transformed a broken-hearted, mercenary, non-believer of love into the most ardent, steadfast, *loving* spouse.

There was no one else in the world for him.

Now, he faced the panic of losing her.

“I don’t want Venia,” he said. “I want you. I don’t want to lose you, for you’re the most important person in the world to me. I love you, Louisa, and I beg you not to allow the old me to destroy that which the new me cherishes.”

She handed him the letter. “Will you be posting this when we land in Liverpool?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Even if I intend to separate from you?”

His heart caught in his throat, for he hadn’t won her. He wasn’t worthy of her. “Yes, Louisa, dear. I shall wash my hands of the Herberts even if I never see you again. I am no longer bound to them by debts or the mistakes of my youth” Giles hung his head. “I understand if you wish to return to New York. I shan’t stop you—though I’ll be the last man standing on the docks, weeping as I wave you off, watching your ship grow smaller and smaller on the horizon.”

“You’ll still have my dowry and the £12,000 I paid to your creditors.”

He forced his eyes to meet hers. “That’s awfully generous. Thank you.”

Giles would save Granborough, and he would live like a monk for the rest of his days. He would become an exemplary landowner and a good friend to those who lived and worked on the estate. He would never know another woman.

Really, he was shocked at the depths of his devotion.

Louisa had released him from any obligation to her. He was free to spend her money without her. He had been given his life back—rather, the life he’d wanted in those desperate days before he’d known her—yet it wasn’t enough.

“What do you want, Louisa?” he asked. “What can I do to make *you* happy? If it is to go away from you forever, then tell me. Your dignity and happiness mean more to me than my own, even though I want only to love you, to be your husband and partner, and to work by your side to make a difference in Granborough.”

She placed a hand on his sleeve. “I want to trust you, Giles. I want to love you and live with you without needing to look over my shoulder wondering what new scandal you’re running from. I don’t want to worry about what else you’re hiding from me.”

He flinched as though she’d struck him. “I tell you that you *can* trust me!”

Her hand crept up to his shoulder, and then snaked around his neck. She pulled him closer to her as she enveloped him in a hug. “Loving somebody is a risk, as you well know. I have no idea what the future holds for us. But I guess the point of fidelity—of being faithful—means putting your trust in the person you love and hoping that they don’t betray you. On our wedding day at St. Thomas’ Church, I vowed to love and honor you, and to put my faith in you for better or for worse. Well...today has been the ‘worse’, and I still love you. Now, I want the ‘for better’. I demand the very best of you, Giles, from this moment on.”

“Yes,” he said, collapsing into her arms. “Oh, Louisa, my love, you shall have the very best.”

She had fought for him. She had chosen him.

Still, she wanted him.

Was there anything more precious than a woman’s love?

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Giles was astonished at this sudden weight lifting off his shoulders. He could breathe again. He could smile. In Louisa's arms, he felt hope for his future rather than bitterness over the past and regret for what might've been.

He could live a full, honest life with Louisa—with his *wife*.

His hands sought the hooks and laces of her iridescent green frock. He pulled the bodice down her arms, revealing lacy lingerie trimmed in eyelets, ribbons, and dainty bows. The sweeping skirts fell to the carpet in a whisper of silk. She stood before him wearing her corset, drawers, and stockings. The heavy, glimmering emerald parure shone from her chest, her ears, her wrists.

Giles ran his hands over the jewels, tracing the pads of his fingers over each polished gemstone. The Granborough emeralds were perhaps not as pretty as a rope of Georgian pearls or as rare as diamonds that had once belonged to a dauphine of France, but they were old and dear, and they were hers by right.

“I remember,” he said as he admired her, “the moment I saw you at Cousin Caro's ball. You were vibrant, laughing, and happy. I knew you would never crave a man's validation, for you were an independent spirit. Bold and unflinching. In a sea of debutantes, *you* stood out to me, and when we spoke, I believe I recognized—quite unwittingly—my soul's mate. The

only woman brave enough to travel halfway 'round the world as my bride.

“For weeks, I have thought that you were mine,” he continued softly, “and you still are, and always will be. Yet I’ve discovered something else, something far more wondrous these past few days, Louisa.” He kissed her lips and confessed, “I am yours.”

She smiled at his admission. “I thought you were the most handsome man I’d ever seen, but so bored and sad. Somber and miserable, even. I was too naive to understand that you were hurting, Giles.” She stroked his chin and cradled his firm jaw in her palm. “I feel I know you so much better now. I want you so much more.”

Again, they kissed. She began to strip his dinner jacket from his shoulders. Questing fingers tangled in his hair and tugged at his clothing. They parted long enough for Giles to remove the corset, stockings, and drawers that separated her skin from his.

Louisa placed the parure into its box while he disrobed. Lord and Lady Granborough returned to each other, utterly undressed. Naked, physically and emotionally, for there was nothing left to hide or disguise. Nothing to keep from one another.

Giles reached for her. “Come here, dear. I cannot hold you and not kiss you.”

He enjoyed kissing her. He relished the sweetness of her mouth, the softness of her lips, the perfection of her teeth, and the delicious audacity of her tongue as it touched his. Kissing was so intimate, so *close*. If Louisa were to open her eyes, she would witness every flaw, every shadow and line on his face, yet he no longer feared what his wife might find if she studied him too carefully. He welcomed her to look, taste, and take her fill.

Tonight, he took her to bed. Giles carefully pulled back the sheets and counterpane and laid Louisa down upon the soft, swaying mattress where they’d consummated their union only five days before. He’d had her every night save for one, when

he had been intemperate and indiscreet, and she had been rightly angry. She'd put him in his place that night, though she hadn't banished him from her arms.

She had shown him grace when he had not deserved it, and Giles would be forever grateful. In the shelter of her arms, he'd been allowed the space to become a better man—*her* man.

This was an act of love, a second virginity for both of them. A pivotal moment in their marriage, when husband and wife came together to celebrate their coupling. To give pleasure and to feel pleasure, unreserved.

They lay face-to-face. Mouths kissing, fingers roving. One hand cupped her jaw and the other palmed her thigh, holding her close and pulling her against him.

She enjoyed being touched, he knew. She liked being kissed, and caressed, and pleased. Louisa wasn't shy in her desire for him. The hard shaft of his erection pressing between their bellies could not be denied.

He wanted her with an ache that was almost painful.

Giles moved his hands to cup her firm, high, upturned breast. He toyed with the pink tips before tracing his way down her ribs to her softly sloping waist. Her slender hips and slim thighs, which gaped open for him.

Her hands were all over his body. Her lips pressed kisses to his chest. She nipped his throat and nibbled his earlobe. She slanted her mouth against his, drawing on his tongue in a wanton rhythm that soon had him panting and desperate.

He flexed his body against hers. Her knees bent and bracketed his. She arched her spine and pushed up into him, grinding and gripping at him, and chasing the connection she needed until she was pleading—pleading for him to make love to her!

His pulse pounded and his ears rang.

Soon, he too was chanting, "*Louisa... Louisa...*"

He'd never been much of a lover, but he aimed to please his wife. With his hands and his mouth, he did the things that brought her to the heights of ecstasy. Unashamed, he went to his knees for her, worshipping the hot, wet heart of her with his tongue until she moaned, and writhed, and grabbed fistfuls of his hair, holding him where she wanted him until Louisa went taut, breathless, and gasping.

Giles felt a wave of pleasure rising within her. Swelling, crashing, swirling, and finally, bathing her in a warm, breathless glow.

He rested his cheek on her belly, which quivered as she spasmed beneath his skin. He stroked her idly, slipping his fingers through her wetness, and prolonging those tiny tremors of pleasure until she fell slackened and sated against the bedsheets.

“Oh, Giles...” she said, drowsily. Louisa smiled down at him with rosy cheeks, her face flushed from climax. “Tell me again that you’re mine.”

He laughed, for she was a good and greedy lover—in the very best way. He dragged himself up onto his arms. With his free hand, he guided the head of his arousal to her entrance and edged inside. She felt tender, swollen, and pleasure-slick.

“I’m yours,” he told her. “I’m yours, only yours...”

Louisa moaned on every inward stroke. She gasped as he withdrew and twined her arms around his shoulders, confessing that she delighted in every plunge of his flesh within hers. Every buck of his hips as he rubbed at her core.

She was honest and guileless, and each spoken word of praise enflamed him. Giles pumped his pelvis in time with hers, pressing forward and drawing back, over and over again, until he was driven mindless by the hot, tight pull of her with each stroke.

He muttered her name—*Louisa! Ah! Louisa!*—for there was only her.

Climax raced up his spine. He felt every nerve come alive, and his raw, bestial instinct told him to rush forward, to chase

this ecstasy, to thrust inside her and spend his seed deep within, where she was warmest, softest, and relaxed enough to receive him.

Her body was primed for it, surely.

Yet the ultimate act of lovemaking was to deny himself that selfish desire. Louisa had asked him to take care with the matter of conception, and she trusted him to be true to his word. He loved her and respected her, so he withdrew before the moment of crisis.

Her hands cradled his face. Her eyes held his.

Giles cried out as he came. He did not hide from her gaze as he quaked, and rocked, and bellowed his breath. Satisfaction soothed any shame he might've felt in that vulnerable moment. There was only peace and bliss in Louisa's arms.

"I love you," she whispered.

He sank onto the dampened sheets by her side. His hand sought hers beneath the covers because he found he needed to touch her. For a frightful moment, he felt like weeping.

Giles cuddled close to her, burying his face in the curve of her neck. "I love you more."

He thought, perhaps, that it wasn't true. She was the better of the two of them, more loving, accepting, and undaunted in the face of life's trials. Certainly, she meant more to him than Granborough, than his legacy or even his own life.

He'd been raised to be self-serving, guarded, and manipulative. Love was a weakness, a fault, and a chink in one's armor through which to be struck. With Louisa, love was a state of being, meant to be nurtured, to be wondered at, and thrilled about.

Oh yes, Giles thought as he drifted into a most satisfying slumber, he loved her more...more than he'd ever imagined possible.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Louisa awoke in the cradle of his arms. The sheets swaddled around them felt warm, soft, and slightly damp from their lovemaking. They'd spent the night exploring each other's bodies, discovering the places that brought them pleasure, and delighting in their sighs, gasps, and cries of ecstasy.

She was learning an entirely new language of love with Giles; her husband, partner, and now her friend. The shades had fallen from his eyes. He had shed his mask and come to her unguarded. For the first time in his life—Louisa realized—Lord Granborough felt safe. He was happy, and he was *with her!*

Smiling drowsily, she turned in his embrace to press a kiss against his chest. She peppered her lips along his sternum, his across collarbones, and up his throat until she felt his low voice rumble beneath her open, panting mouth.

"*Mmm.*" Giles moaned. He stirred at her touch, tracing his fingertips over her skin in slow, seductive circles. He massaged her spine, cradled her skull, and cupped her bottom until she writhed his capable hands. He took her mouth in a sweeping kiss, murmuring, "Good morning, Louisa."

"Good morning," she said, climbing atop his thighs to straddle his hips. They kept the bedlinen draped around them, luxuriating in the little cocoon they'd created for themselves.

She felt his erection nudge her entrance, and when she dipped her hands between their twined bodies, she found his

flesh hard and straining against her palm. Emboldened, Louisa stroked him in long, lazy fistfuls.

His hands and mouth were not idle. Giles caressed her face, kissed her lips, and plundered her mouth with his. His tongue danced with hers. Hot breath mingled as they stoked one another's desire.

His hips surged upward, bucking, and grinding, and thrusting into her palm. "Please, Louisa, love, please..." He grew desperate for the warm, tight sheath of her body—for *her*, the only woman he would ever know for the rest of his life.

Claiming him felt thrilling. Louisa rolled her hips teasingly, placing him at her entrance only to pull away again. She rose and fell, swelled and retreated, arched and pressed until her husband was mindless with wanting.

At last, she guided him into her entrance. Louisa took him into her core. She welcomed him, deeply, into the very heart of her. She rode him slowly and steadily while he curled his fingers over her breasts, plumping and pinching, and bringing her nipples to tight, achy points of pleasure.

Giles lifted his head from the pillow to suckle her. He looked up at her with sharp blue eyes, so clear and sincere as he watched her make love to him. His gaze heightened her desire, and Louisa slipped her fingers to the place where their bodies joined.

Circling her fingers, she rode his length, conscious of his pleasure but chasing her own. He moaned against her bosom as she canted her hips. Feelings of love and lust, desire and gratitude, and—yes—smug satisfaction rose within her, for this was her husband; the man she wanted, wed, and waged war over. She had won him and would have him for all time.

Louisa confessed her love with every post of her hips, each pulse of her fingers, and the unfaltering rhythm with which she rode him.

"My God, Louisa! My dear!" Giles groaned. He gasped. He allowed her to keep the pace between them, tracing his

palms over her ribs and down the slope of her belly to grip her hips beneath the bedsheets.

Climax came swiftly, nearly catching her by surprise. She curled over him, cushioned against his firm chest as the tremors racked her. She could do nothing but clench and cry out, over and over again until she felt dazed. Sated, yet utterly wrung out.

“*Oh, Giles...*” She shuddered and sobbed his name.

Louisa felt him thrust into her—once, twice, and again for a third time—before withdrawing. He came between her thighs, whispering sweet words into her ear as satisfaction washed over him. He’d taken great care not to spend inside her, and she felt glad to mean that much to him. The man she loved would wait to start a family with her, even though he wanted children. Even though he desperately needed an heir to secure the future of the Granborough estate.

Giles put her safety first, and her wellbeing over his own.

She kissed him. “I love you.”

“I love you, dear.” He hugged her to him, claiming her lips with his.

They dozed until the noise through their porthole windows grew too loud to ignore. Footsteps sounded on the deck beyond. Crew members shouted orders and winches groaned. Vibrations from the engines had ceased, and the ship no longer swayed with the rhythm of the sea.

RMS Campania had reached Liverpool.

Louisa crawled across the mattress, taking the counterpane with her as she ventured forth to spy her first glimpse of England. Through the circular pane of glass, an entirely new world opened before her, filled with new languages, customs, and cultures. The morning sun shone on the docks which teemed with stevedores, passengers, newspapermen, and curious onlookers.

Soot streaked the sheds and warehouses, and black smoke belched from the chimney stacks towering over the skyline. There were no trees, no parks, no green spaces that she could

see. Liverpool was a sprawling industrial city, grim and gray, and intimidating.

Giles came up behind her and wrapped her in his arms, confessing, "I've never been fond of the place myself, but we'll soon be on our way." He tucked her head against his chest. "We shall be in London before luncheon and sleeping in our bed at Granborough by nightfall. I cannot wait to show you our home, Louisa—I feel certain you'll love it. I'll do everything in my power to ensure that you do."

She smiled at that, for they would make a fine life together. They would work hard to restore the house and to return the estate to its former glory. His tenants, servants, and neighbors would prosper. Together, they would be better than their forebears. Despite the odds stacked against them, Louisa knew they would make their families proud.

"We should pack," he told her, "if we're to get an early start. Doubtless, there will be a queue at the purser's desk, and the Marchioness of Granborough must have her jewels."

The jewelry and trunks full of fashionable clothes were the least important things she'd carried with her to England. Louisa placed her naughty French book into her dress basket alongside Prissy the doll. She had left New York as an innocent young bride, but now she arrived on the other side of the Atlantic as a wife, a stronger and worldlier woman.

Louisa possessed many gifts in which to bestow upon her future children, and her daughters would not suffer the same fate, or feel that same ignorance that she had experienced on the first few days of her journey.

A lady's destiny was her own to command. Happiness was hers to demand, and their offspring would never settle for anything less than the loving, trusting example that Louisa and Giles would set for them.

She rang for her maid in order to bathe and dress for the day. Lord Granborough summoned his valet to wash and shave, and then went to claim their belongings from the purser's safe. Their morning was busy but exciting as they prepared to debark. Stewards came to collect their baggage,

hauling their wardrobe trunks, hatboxes, and valises through the cargo passages and down the gangway onto the landing stage below.

Giles returned with her jewelry, having inspected the Georgian pearls, the Granborough emeralds, the Duchess of Angoulême's diamonds, and the priceless baubles that Louisa had received as wedding gifts from all of her friends.

He frowned through the porthole at the docks. "There they are, the press. You wanted to be gawked at, didn't you? To be more than a face in the crowd..."

"Yes, I did." Louisa had donned her blue 'going away' ensemble, confident that she looked her best for her arrival onto English soil. She would take British society by storm and was unafraid of the photographers and journalists swarming the waterfront.

Giles turned to her, looking grim. His blue eyes swam with remorse. "To think, I had wanted to hide you away and to forget that you'd ever existed. I see now that my plan was as foolish as trying to hide a lighted candle beneath a haystack. You'd have burned the whole business down."

"I would not have gone quietly," she replied, "that's for sure."

"No, indeed." He took her gloved hand in his, squeezing her knuckles. "My wife is a fighter."

Louisa smiled at him, for she felt ready to leave their stateroom suite—and all that had passed between them within these luxurious confines—behind. "Let's start with a clean slate for our new life together. No more fighting, no scheming, no secrets, and certainly no more lies. I'm happy to be Lady Granborough, and I'm excited to discover what our future holds."

"To a clean slate," he said, raising their joined hands in a mock toast, "and a new life together."

"To our life, Giles!" She kissed him, and then they swept from the room, hand-in-hand for all the world to see.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The happy couple passed through the first-class corridor. Giles felt as though he'd traveled for miles through mahogany-paneled passageways illuminated by bronzed fixtures and padded underfoot by thick, machine-woven Axminster carpets. In truth, he had been on a journey—from the jaded mercenary who had set out to court and capture a Yankee heiress to the loving, supportive, and protective gentleman who returned home with a wife far worthier than any woman he'd ever dreamed of.

Louisa was worthy of his love, fidelity, honesty, and unfailing devotion. *He* was worthy of her loyalty, integrity, and—yes—her love. She trusted him, and Giles vowed to never let her down, for he was as reformed as a mortal man could be, and ready for his rendezvous with destiny.

They emerged onto the gangway, hand-in-hand. A chill, grey wind ruffled their coats and nipped at their noses. The smell of salt air and coal smoke filled their lungs, and Giles longed for the sunny, verdant countryside of Granborough. He and Louisa could walk together in the gardens and bathe together in the lake. They would share a bed, a table, and a comfortable fireside sort of life. When they wanted for society, they'd indulge themselves in London, Paris, or even in New York. The possibilities were endless, and Giles felt hope for the future.

Their future.

He couldn't wait to begin!

Stevedores and spectators dashed about the docks. Trunks and baggage wagons crowded the landing stage where passport control and customs agents interviewed travelers upon arrival. Members of the press searched the sea of faces and consulted the passenger lists. Giles was grateful to have traveled discreetly, though word of their presence had no doubt been publicized from Queenstown with the weekly mail.

Louisa sallied forth with her head held high. Her perfect profile did not betray the nervous tremble he felt from her fingers locked with his. “I feel as if I’m walking the plank!” she confided.

He laughed, giving English society their first look at the new Lord and Lady Granborough. “Nonsense, dear. Confronting the press is as easy as playing *Kinderszenen*’.”

“Then my piano lessons were worthwhile after all,” she replied. “Mamma will be pleased.”

“Your mother ought to be pleased, as she raised an attractive, intelligent, courageous daughter. I feel certain that she allowed us to marry because she knew you were up to the challenge. Indeed, Louisa, you delight in a challenge, whether it’s mastering a song at the piano, marrying a marquess, or moving halfway ‘round the world. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

It was her turn to smile. “Thank you, Giles.”

Their radiance and good humor had not gone unnoticed by the camera-wielding journalists and society hunters. The Marquess and Marchioness of Granborough’s happy faces would be printed in every fashionable magazine from New York to London and everywhere in between. Their departure from *Campania* would be gossip fodder for a fortnight, at least.

He’d come full circle—Giles realized with some surprise—from the dreaded days of their courtship when he had balked at the press intrusion, and on the day of their wedding when he had not wished to be seen with her either at St. Thomas’ Church or after the celebrations.

Now he was proud to walk by her side and thrilled to have such a clever, beautiful, vivacious young lady on his arm. He wanted the world to know that Louisa loved him. She'd chosen him and fought for him, and he belonged to her, body and soul, now and forevermore.

At the bottom of the gangway, Giles stopped. He prevented Louisa's feet from touching the landing stage. "Wait a moment, dear. I believe it is customary for a bridegroom to carry his wife over the threshold."

She laughed, stunned by his spontaneity. "The threshold of their house, not... *all of this*." Louisa gestured to the boarding gantries, cranes and towers, and the bustling harbor beyond.

Yet Giles was in earnest. He wanted to show her off, to send a message to anyone who doubted their devotion to one another. Their marriage might've started as one of convenience, but it had bloomed into something beautiful and bold. "I've too many houses, and not one of them is good enough for you. Let me give you something better. Let me give you England, Lady Granborough."

Undaunted—as he knew she would be—Louisa placed her trust and her gloved hands into his. He lifted her into his arms in a flurry of blue velvet trimmed with sable, and then set her down upon the pier, careless of the gawking crowd, the newspaper reporters, or the stunned faces of their fellow passengers milling about the baggage claim area.

It was a grand gesture, and perhaps even a ridiculous one in light of his social status and position within the aristocracy. From the moment Lord and Lady Granborough stepped onto English soil, they set a new precedent for honesty and open-heartedness, for theirs was a rare aristocratic marriage in the American fashion. Not only a transatlantic alliance, but a love match that would inspire a new generation of young people who were bright, and new, and in step with the changing times.

Ignoring the hot flush staining his cheeks, for he had just made a spectacle of himself on the world's stage, Giles

extended his hand to his wife, honored to escort her from one continent to the next. “Welcome home, Louisa.”

As the crowd surged to receive her and the newspapermen rushed to interview her, Louisa was gracious, articulate, and genuinely interested in her new homeland. She accepted bouquets of flowers and kind wishes for her future happiness. She was a princess from the kingdom of Fifth Avenue who’d married a British peer. She would never again be a striver, a grasper, or a newly moneyed newcomer. She would never be just another pretty face in a crowd, though Giles knew that she’d never been one to start with.

She had dazzled everyone who saw her. She’d delighted everyone who knew her. Although she would never be admitted into Mrs. Astor’s famed Four Hundred, she claimed her place at the pinnacle of society, for Louisa Granborough was—*home at last*—exactly where she belonged.

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