
FORGOTTEN VOWS
FORGED ALLIANCES
BOOK FIVE
LAVINIA GLEN

FORGOTTEN VOWS

Lavinia Glen

OceanofPDF.com

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CHAPTER 1

AUGUST 1867

"If you turn me in, you will never find your wife."

Dalton stopped breathing.

Alfred sat back in the chair. Handcuffed, bloody-nosed. Smirking.

For a long moment Dalton did not move and did not speak.

He stood at the far wall, arms foldeIt was not just your accent d, the stone cold through the linen of his shirt. He set his face in the empty, assessing lines he had learned during nineteen years of interrogations. The face that gave a prisoner nothing to read and made them eventually fill the silence themselves.

The silence stretched.

Alfred broke it first.

"You have nothing to say?" His voice came thick through his damaged nose. "I expected more from the great spymaster. Shall I repeat myself? Your wife is alive. Vivienne. Alive."

"Prove it."

Alfred tilted his head toward the photograph on the table.

Dalton had looked at it once, when Alfred first produced it, and had felt the floor tilt under him. He didn't need to look at it again. The image had imprinted in his mind. Her face in three-quarter profile. The angle of her

jaw. The shape of her ear, half hidden by a curl. He had seen enough to know.

"A photograph proves nothing," he said. "It could be seven years old."

"It was taken four months ago. You can see the differences. They are subtle, but there. Her clothes, for one. The Duchess of Dalton never wore anything so… humble. The simple way she does her hair. Her expression." Alfred let the silence stretch. "She is living under a different name. A new identity. With no memory of you. She cannot remember a thing before the shipwreck. The duchess thinks she is a nobody." Another pause. "And she is engaged to a local doctor."

Dalton absorbed each piece the way he absorbed intelligence reports: cataloging, cross-referencing, filing. A new identity. No memory.

Engaged.

The last detail was a knife. Alfred had clearly held it back for exactly this purpose.

He didn't let any of it show.

Beneath the cataloging, something else was happening that he could not stop. The walls he had built around the fact of her death were failing at every joint. He could feel his composure as a physical effort. He could feel the moment when it might collapse.

Not here. Not in front of this man.

"What do you want?"

"Thirty thousand pounds. And my freedom."

"No."

"Then you will never see her again."

"Do you think I can't find her on my own?" His voice came out level. "Now that I know there is a possibility she is alive, I will move heaven and earth. She will be back before the end of the month. With or without your help."

Alfred leaned forward. The chains on his wrists clinked against the chair.

"How did that go for you the last time you searched for her?"

Dalton didn't answer. He could not have answered even if he had wanted to. The last search had gone on for nine months, across three countries and four coastlines. And had been a resounding failure. The pain of that failure was a corrosive acid that burned him from within.

Alfred saw the silence. The smile widened on his split lip. He didn't seem to notice the blood.

"What you fail to understand, cousin, is that she lives at my pleasure. Turn me in, and that pleasure ends. And if you keep delaying with useless threats — " The smile again. "Perhaps by the time you find her on your own, it will be too late."

Dalton crossed the cell in two strides, took Alfred by the lapels, and dragged him half out of the chair.

"What does that mean? Speak."

Alfred didn't flinch. That was the unnerving thing about him — not courage, but a kind of cold patience. Like a man who had decided long ago that sentiment was for fools. Dalton was convincing in giving the appearance that he believed that. Alfred embodied it.

"It means I am not the only one watching her." Alfred's voice dropped. "The people I work with — they are aware of her too. I kept her safe because she was useful to me. Remove me, and she becomes a problem they will solve." He paused. "They have done it before. You know that. You have been chasing the evidence for months."

Dalton released him. Took a step back.

Then another.

He had been assembling the pieces for the better part of a year, and Alfred was right — he had seen the pattern. People who became inconvenient died.

His hands were shaking. He put them behind his back.

The trap was so clean it was almost elegant. He could not turn Alfred in. He could not kill him here. He could not leave him in this cell to be moved to a Crown prison where he would die of an apparent accident before he ever stood trial. The only option left was the one Alfred had presented to him.

He had to let his cousin walk away. And he had to trust him to lead him to her.

"Tell me where she is," he said. "I will verify it myself. Once I have seen her, you go free."

"I don't think so." Alfred straightened his coat with what dignity the handcuffs allowed. "This is how we do it. We leave England together. You hire a ship — not yours. A neutral vessel. Something fast enough for the open sea."

"And the money?"

"You bring it. Locked, if you like. I don't care."

"You expect me to trust you?"

Alfred laughed. "No. I expect you to want your wife more than you want my head."

A long silence.

"You need to tell me where we are going," Dalton said, "so I can hire a yacht."

"Do you take me for a fool? Surely you don't think I would just give up her location. I will disclose it once we are underway. Once we are on the open sea, and there is no turning back."

"How do you expect me to hire a ship without telling the captain our destination?"

A handcuffed wave. "I have faith in your powers of persuasion. And your deep pockets."

Dalton stared at him.

The operative in him — the man who had kept the Empire's secrets for nineteen years — knew this was a trap. Alfred was a proven liar. He could have fabricated the photograph. He could have built the story to secure his escape.

But beneath the operative was a man who had not slept a full night in seven years. A man who had kept his wife's rooms intact because he could not bear to part with anything she had ever touched. Who had almost killed himself searching for her until his sister begged him to stop, weeping, telling him he was becoming their father —

If there was any chance at all that the woman in the photograph was Vivienne, he would walk into a trap. He would walk into ten.

"When we arrive," Dalton said, "you will take me directly to her."

"Before we leave the ship, the money goes into my berth. And you will instruct the captain to convey me wherever I please when I return alone."

"You assume I will allow you to walk away once I find her."

"You will." Alfred's voice was almost gentle. "Once you set eyes on her, you won't even see me leave."

A pause.

"You see, under the veneer of the spymaster, you are just your father's son. Sentimental. Predictable." He held Dalton's gaze. "Weak."

His father, who had loved so completely that when his wife died, he had followed her within a year. Who had left behind a seventeen-year-old boy, a

weeping ten-year-old girl, and a dukedom with no one at the helm. Dalton had spent twenty-three years making certain he would not be that man.

He had just decided to be that man.

He kept his face still.

"If this is a trick — "

"You will hunt me to the ends of the earth," Alfred finished, rolling his eyes. "Yes. I know. I will take my chances."

"And if you are lying," Dalton said, stepping closer, "you will not survive the trip."

"Agreed. But if I am telling the truth, you will stop pursuing me."

Dalton turned and walked to the door.

"We leave at dawn."

He opened the door, climbed the stone stairs, and reached the corridor of his own house, and there he stopped.

He pressed his head against the wall.

For one moment only, he let it in.

The hope.

Seven years of keeping it down, and now it broke through, and he had nothing left to hold it back. The hope, and the terror that came with it. This was the kind of thing that could save a man or finish him, and he didn't yet know which it would be.

She is alive.

The belief he had carried without acknowledging it. The reason he had never remarried. Never taken a lover, never permitted himself even a passing interest in another woman. Some part of him that refused reason or evidence had known.

Vivienne. Alive.

His father's son indeed.

He pushed off the wall. Straightened his cuffs. Composed his face.

There was a ship to hire, and a crossing to survive.

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CHAPTER 2

THE DAMN SEA HATED him. And the feeling was mutual.

Dalton braced a hand on the rail as the steam yacht bumped against the pier, the jolt running up his arm like a reminder that he was again on solid land — well, almost.

The gale had subsided, leaving behind a few tattered clouds over St. Peter Port, while the few remaining ragged gusts rocked the vessel in petulant aftershocks. After two nights of hell, they had arrived at Guernsey's harbor. The crossing should have taken little more than a day. Instead, the Channel had risen in a fury that dragged the journey past forty-eight hours and into something that felt far longer.

As if the sea, after taking her from him, was now determined to keep him from reaching her.

Not bloody likely.

He had taken refuge below decks once the worst struck, the yacht pitching and heaving like a creature in its death throes. Every groan of the timbers, every slam of the waves against the hull, had dragged him back to that other storm. He had spent half the night gripping the edge of the bunk, jaw locked, refusing to let the memory take him.

At least Alfred had fared no better. Dalton had listened to every miserable bout of retching through the thin bulkhead and had felt nothing but grim

satisfaction. He had hated the sea for years, but in that moment he hated Alfred more.

Now, at last, land. Somewhere on this island his wife lived. Hidden from him for seven long years.

He stared at the waterfront buildings rising in tiers up the hillside, as though he might spot her by sheer will alone. Seven years of silence, of anguish, of absence — and it ended today.

The sailors secured the lines, and the gangplank thudded down. Dalton shifted, patted the pistol in his pocket — loaded, primed, and kept ready since they had left London. He didn't know what Alfred intended, but he had prepared as best he could.

Footsteps behind him snagged his attention, and he turned just in time to see Alfred emerge from below decks, pale, unsteady, and greenish about the mouth. The man straightened his coat and tried to look composed, as though he had not spent the last day spilling his guts.

Dalton closed the distance in three strides.

"Let us go, Alfred." Low. Clipped. He jerked his chin toward the gangplank. "We have lost enough time. Where is she living?"

His cousin swallowed. "St. Saviour's Parish. Opposite side of the island."

Dalton entered the harbormaster's office, where he inquired about a carriage and was told the roads were near impassable. He didn't care. He got directions to a livery stable, hired two horses instead, and they rode out within the quarter hour.

The roads were as bad as warned. Mud flew up with every stride, splattering his boots and coat. They forded two swollen streams. By the second, he was soaked to the knees, and Alfred was listing in the saddle. Dalton didn't slow down.

And then, through a break in the hedgerows, the church spire.

It rose against the gray sky, and his chest tightened at the sight. St. Saviour's. The place where she lived. She had been here all along. So close, and yet she could have been a world apart.

Seven fucking years.

He should have searched harder. He was the Crown's own spymaster, for God's sake. If he had directed the full force of the service to find her instead of letting himself believe that further searching was useless, she would have returned home long ago. Safe. With him.

He kicked the horse forward. The church grew larger. He could make out the graveyard wall, the rectory beyond it — a modest stone house with smoke rising from the chimney.

Alfred had said she lived as a companion to the rector's mother. He swung down from the horse, kept Alfred at his side, and knocked.

A wiry old woman in a servant's uniform opened the door and frowned at the state of his clothing.

"May I help you, sirs?" she asked with a touch of impatience.

"You might." He used the tone that made grown men step back. "I am looking for the woman rescued from the sea seven years ago."

The maid raised her eyebrows but didn't budge. "And who might you be, sir?"

"I am the Duke of Dalton. The lady's husband."

The color drained from the maid's face. Her eyes went wide. "Husband, you say?"

"Yes. It is clear you are acquainted with the woman in question. Take me to her."

But she only shook her head — not in refusal, but more in disbelief. "We thought she had nobody. In seven years, not a soul came looking."

He bit down on his impatience. "I didn't know she was alive. It was only two days ago I learned where she was. Now, madam, take me to her at once."

He had a great deal to answer for. But he would be damned if he was going to stand on the street and explain himself to a servant.

"B-but I cannot, sir. I mean, Your Grace."

"Why not?" Cold spread down his back. *Please God. Let her be safe.*

"Because she is not here. You see, she is at the church. Getting married."

Getting married.

The words struck him like the clapper of a great bell, reverberating through his skull and down to his very bones. Or maybe that was the sound of real bells. Loud and jarring in the stillness of this village. He looked toward the church tower.

She could not be getting married. She was his. His wife. His Vivi.

Except she didn't know that. She didn't know him.

"Is she at this church here?" His own voice sounded distant.

"Y-yes. But the ceremony must be concluded by now — "

He was already running as he answered, more for his benefit than the servant's. "I don't give a damn. She is my wife. And God help the man who tries to stand in my way."

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CHAPTER 3

THE STORM ON HER wedding day had been a bad omen.

Grace stood at the altar of St. Saviour's Parish Church, the scent of wet stone and garden roses drifting through the open windows, and tried to breathe. The rector's voice rolled over her in practiced cadences, warm and melodious. She fixed her gaze on the modest stained glass above the altar and willed her hands to stop trembling.

It was not supposed to be this way. After seven years of not having a past, she had finally taken the first step toward building a future. She had agonized over this decision for months, ever since Paul had knelt beside her chair in his surgery, held her hand with the same steadiness he used to set a bone or stitch a wound, and asked her to be his wife. He had not dressed the proposal in poetry. He had said, simply: *I know what you need, Grace, and I can provide it. A home. Stability. Children of your own.*

Children. Something had shifted in her chest at the word.

She was fond of him. She trusted him more than any person she could remember knowing — which was, admittedly, not a vast field. Seven years ago, he had saved her life and cared for her when some sailors brought her to him, half drowned and delirious, her body battered and her mind a blank. He was her friend. His kindness made her feel safe.

For that alone, marrying him should have been easy. Natural. Like the instinct for survival.

Yet it was not.

She could not silence the doubt that insisted this was wrong. That she should not be doing this. The feeling had no name, no memory attached. It was just a deep, bone-level wrongness.

So was her life. She could read and write, set a table, mend a hem, recite the Lord's Prayer, and play three hymns on the rectory's ancient pianoforte without looking at the keys. She could do these things and not remember learning a single one. Her body remembered; her mind did not. She would sometimes enter a room and sense she had been somewhere like it before, and yet have nothing to attach it to. Just the feeling, rootless, untethered… and useless.

The reason was no doubt buried in the mystery of her past. A turbulent and scary past she only caught glimpses of in her nightmares. A past she feared with the same intensity she yearned to unveil.

Last night, the dream had come again. She had been running down a narrow stone passageway, her bare feet slapping against the cold floor, and someone had been behind her — close, so close she could feel the heat of him, hear the deliberate rhythm of his breathing. Not hurried. Patient. As though he knew she had nowhere to go. She had woken with a cry lodged in her throat and a strange, shameful warmth pooled low in her belly.

She had lain in the dark afterward, staring at the ceiling of her small room at the rectory, and thought: *I am marrying Paul Harrison in twelve hours, and I dreamed of being chased by a man whose face I cannot see.*

But seven years of useless fragments had taught her nothing. She had almost resigned herself to the possibility that she might never recover her memories. That her past would remain shrouded. That Grace Harper was all she would ever be — a woman built from the kindness of strangers, standing on a foundation of nothing.

Paul could give her something. Not the sort of love the poets wrote about, not the consuming force she sometimes glimpsed in the pages of Margaret's novels that gave her a pang of recognition she could not explain. But he could give her friendship. Companionship. A life. A name that was legally hers. And children — someone who would be truly her own. Connected to her by blood rather than by charity.

It was enough. It had to be enough.

The rector's voice brought her back.

"Forasmuch as Paul Harrison and Grace Harper have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company…"

Oh God. It was happening. She was promising her life to this man in front of God and the entire congregation. Margaret, the rector's mother, who had taken her in when she was barely more than a ghost, sat in the front row. The fishermen's wives who had brought her soup during those first terrible months were here too. All of them watching, warm and expectant.

She could not disappoint them. She would not.

"…I pronounce that they be man and wife together, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

It was done.

Her heart lurched. The church bells broke loose overhead, a clatter of peals that echoed through her ribs and amplified the thudding of her pulse. Paul reached out and took her cold hands in his warm ones. Always practical and attentive, reading her body's distress before she voiced it. So like him. Her gratitude was fierce enough that she could almost mistake it for something more.

She looked up at his face, and he offered her a steady smile. She smiled back. His head dipped to claim his kiss, and she closed her eyes, accepting the soft brush of his lips over hers. Gentle. Undemanding. The kiss of a friend who hoped to become more.

When the bells subsided, the rector spoke again. "I give you Mr. and Mrs. Harrison. Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

The church doors flew open with a violent crash, slamming against the walls in a thunderous boom that echoed through the cavernous space, drowning out the congregation's applause.

A man — or more like an apparition from her nightmares — invaded the church. His face was a mask of fury. His hair wild, his clothes splattered with mud, as if he had crawled from hell itself to reach out and take her with him.

But it was his eyes, dark and burning, that pinned her to her spot, made her breath catch in her lungs, and her heart beat double time. He did not look at Paul or the rector. He looked only at her. Blood pounded at her temples.

"I will put them asunder." His voice, low and savage, carried through the nave. The stone walls caught it and threw it back until it seemed to come

from everywhere at once.

Everyone turned to gaze at the newly arrived stranger. The rector stepped forward, pale but resolute. "Who might you be, sir?"

She already knew the answer. Not his name, but something deeper that her mind could not reach and her body understood at once.

This man was her past.

The hairs on her arms stood on end. Her pulse doubled. And beneath the terror, beneath the shock, the feeling from the nightmare. The one she could never explain.

He came down the aisle in long strides, his mud-caked boots ringing on the stone. She saw Paul square his shoulders and step in front of her. She heard the whispered commotion spreading through the pews.

The stranger stopped three paces from the altar. His gaze had not moved from her face. Not once.

"I am Valentine St Aubyn, the Duke of Dalton," he said. Quieter now. No less certain. "This woman's husband."

Her husband.

She was aware, distantly, of the rector's face going white. Of Paul's hand tightening on her arm. Of the congregation breaking open, the whispers turning to something closer to a roar.

But these things reached her from far away, muffled and dim, because the church was tilting. Her vision was narrowing. Her temples throbbed, and the darkness from her nightmares was closing in from the edges, eating the stained glass, the candle flames, the faces of every person she had ever known, until only his remained. Sharp and furious and familiar in a way that frightened her more than anything else.

Her knees buckled.

She was falling.

And the last thing she noticed before the darkness took her was the stranger's arms catching her — sure and immediate, as though he had been waiting seven years to reclaim her.

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CHAPTER 4

BY GOD, NOTHING HAD prepared him for the sight of her after so many years.

She appeared the same, and yet not. The same face he thought he would never see again. But she had looked at him without recognition, her eyes wide with fear instead of warm with love.

He regretted that the most. He had planned to introduce himself with care. To reassure her. He meant to protect her. Make her feel cherished. Safe.

But the news of her wedding had laid those plans to waste. He had barged into the church like a demon, shouting the truth that nobody in this parish suspected. And scaring her half to death.

He had seen her stricken expression, her dawning horror. Felt her brittle strength, and known the exact moment it deserted her. He was ready to catch her. To hold her in his arms, where she belonged.

And now she was here, cradled against his chest. Unconscious from the shock he had caused her.

"Don't touch her," he growled, gathering her tighter against him as the man she had tried to marry reached for her.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Alfred by the church doors. He smirked and gave him a mocking tip of his hat. Then his cousin turned and vanished into the gray afternoon.

The bastard was escaping. Just as he had predicted he would.

Every reflex in Dalton's body screamed to give pursuit, to finish what he had started in that London holding cell. But he looked down at the woman in his arms, and his choice became obvious.

Her head lolled against his shoulder, the scent of orange blossom underlaid with her own warmth teasing his nostrils. Familiar. She looked so fragile. So pale.

God, please, let her be all right.

He turned to the rioting congregation. "Somebody get a doctor."

"I am the doctor." Her would-be husband replied with annoying steadiness. "I can help her."

Dalton decided he hated the man. Hated him more because there was nothing hate-worthy about him. He looked composed and competent — the sort of man people trusted on instinct. Vivienne had trusted him enough to marry him.

Wonderful.

"Let us retreat to the vestry," the rector suggested, indicating the narrow door beside the chancel.

Dalton followed, carrying her through the doorway, the skirts of her gown spilling over his arm. The doctor walked behind them.

The vestry was dim and cool, the air thick with beeswax and old incense. The rector rushed to clear the long oak table of ledgers and vestments while the doctor folded a green cloth into a makeshift cushion for her head.

"Lay her down here," the doctor ordered.

Dalton complied, his worry for his wife eclipsing his animosity.

"Stand back. She needs air. Open the windows."

He did as he was told, helped by the rector. He even retreated while the doctor checked her pulse and loosened her dress fastenings. That cost him more than he would ever admit.

The doctor patted his pockets, swore. "I don't have my smelling salts. Of course, I did not anticipate needing them today." A pointed look at Dalton.

Dalton ignored it and ducked out. In the nave, where a scattering of the congregation still lingered, he called out for smelling salts. Two matrons came forward, vials extended. He took both with a curt word of thanks and returned to the vestry — only to find the doctor rubbing his wife's hand between both of his own. The man's thumb traced her knuckles with a familiarity that spoke of years of habit.

The sound that came from Dalton's throat was not that of a civilized man.

The doctor turned, met his eyes, and released her hand. To his credit, he did not flinch. "You have the salts? Good. Give them to me."

Having uncorked and inspected the two vials, the doctor brought one closer to her nose. She groaned. Her eyelids fluttered but remained closed.

Dalton strode to the washstand in the corner, poured water from the pitcher onto a cloth, and returned to her side. He bathed her forehead and temples while the doctor fanned her with a sheaf of papers, and for one absurd moment they worked over her in concert, neither willing to cede the patient.

After what felt like an age but was probably minutes, her lashes flickered. She stirred. Her breath caught.

Her eyes went to the doctor first.

She smiled.

And the doctor returned her smile with a tenderness that made Dalton want to put his fist through the wall. "There you are, Gracie."

That settled it. He was going to have to murder the doctor.

"Her name is Vivienne," he said, and his voice could have cut glass. "Her Grace, the Duchess of Dalton."

Vivienne's gaze snapped to him as if she had just noticed his presence. Then, with a strangled sound — something between a gasp and a whimper — she scrambled to sit up. He extended his hand to help her, but she took the doctor's hand instead and allowed him to support her.

His heart gave a painful squeeze at the small rejection, but he withdrew his hand and clasped it behind his back.

Her incredible hazel eyes stared at him. They were the most amazing color. At first glance, they might appear light brown, but when the sunlight caught them at the right angle, flecks of green lit them up from within. There was more green in the right one.

She pinned him with her gaze, and it struck him anew. The miracle of her survival. Until now, he had been running high on emotional turmoil. The shock of learning she was alive. The struggle to get to her, when the elements seemed determined to keep them apart. Then learning she was getting married to another man. Even when he saw her at the altar, with the drama of the moment and her fainting, he had not had an instant to pause. Breathe. And absorb the fact that his wife was alive and in front of him.

He smiled. "Hello, Vivi."

"So it was not a nightmare," she said. "The scene at the church happened. You are real."

The smile fell from his face. *A nightmare?*

For him, she was a miracle. And she thought his presence was the stuff of nightmares?

He would not let her see how hard the blow landed. He had absorbed worse. The smile he attempted felt crooked and too wide, but it was the best he could manage.

"I'm afraid so."

Her expression softened, a small frown crumpling her brow. The panic receded and something else replaced it — compassion. Regret. As if she had noticed his reaction and were sorry to cause him pain. As if, even amid the wreckage of the most bewildering day of her life, her first instinct was to offer comfort.

That was the most Vivienne thing in the world, and it nearly undid him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I do not remember you."

"I know." He lowered his eyes. He could not keep looking at her or he would break, and he would not break here. Not in front of her. His distress was distressing her. And that he could not have.

"You see, I was in an accident. And I remember nothing of my life before that."

He nodded. Cleared his throat. Took a breath.

"I know all of that. I was there on that ship and witnessed the wreckage." He swallowed. "It is not your fault. None of it is. If anything, I am the one who should beg your forgiveness for not finding you before now. I didn't know you had survived. I was led to believe…" He shook his head. All the careful speeches he had prepared had fled. "It does not matter. It was my failure. And I'm sorry it took me so long."

"Excuse me, Your Grace," the rector interrupted. He was a compact man of about fifty, with the careful bearing of someone accustomed to dealing with human foolishness. His expression held no hostility, but no yielding either. "I have a duty to this parish and to this woman we have sheltered for seven years, so I must ask: how can you be sure that our Gracie is your wife?"

Dalton barked a humorless laugh. "Her name is Vivienne, and I am certain because I know my wife. I have memorized the exact shade of her

eyes. The scent of her skin, the inflection of her voice. I am intimately familiar with the tilt of her smile and the shape of her lips."

"But is it possible that, after so many years, and given your desire to believe this woman is her, you could be confused?" The rector insisted.

"Not bloody possible."

"Your Grace. I will ask that you not curse in my church."

"Then don't be so obtuse, Reverend. How many duchesses do you think were lost at sea seven years ago in this part of the world? How many do you think look exactly like her? I will not stand for being doubted when it comes to my wife."

Few men would dare to challenge him; most would mumble an apology and retreat when he used that tone. But to his credit, the rector did not back down. Tugging at the lapels of his coat, he replied.

"We are not doubting your memories, Your Grace. But she does not remember you, and there are no other witnesses present. Surely you comprehend we cannot just take the word of anyone who appears and claims to be related to her. Please understand that we only mean to protect her."

Dalton could almost admire the rector. He would be grateful that Vivienne had such staunch protectors once his emotions settled. Right now, he wished he could make everyone disappear so he could talk to his wife in private.

"In other words, Your Grace, we need to see proof that she is, indeed, your wife." The doctor added, making Dalton want to punch his face in.

As if the events of the day were not surreal enough, now he was being treated as if he were the enemy. As if his own wife needed protection from him. They had closed ranks around her, and he was the outsider. The ramifications of her condition kept buffeting him one after the other, like the relentless waves of the sea.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew his watch. When he flipped the cover, the miniature photograph caught the vestry's dim light. It was of Vivienne and himself on their wedding day. Younger. Happy. Two people who did not yet know what trials life had in store for them.

He offered it without a word.

Vivienne took the watch. Their fingertips brushed, and the contact jolted through him. She pulled her hand back as if scalded. Had she felt it too?

She studied the miniature, tracing the photograph with one finger.

"She does look like me." Her eyes met his. "Would you be able to provide a detail about my person that only a husband would know?"

Good God, she wanted to quiz him. Here. In this vestry. With these men listening. And it would have to be a physical detail — personal memories were useless when one party had none. He held her eyes, and when he spoke, his voice dropped low for her alone, although the room was too small for privacy.

"You have a birthmark on the inside of your left knee. It looks like a butterfly and is about the size of my thumbnail. Reddish in color."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the doctor stiffen with recognition. The bastard knew. He had seen her birthmark. For the man's sake, he hoped the doctor had come by that knowledge while tending to her injuries, and not… No, he could not even consider the possibility. Not today.

He kept his eyes on Vivienne. The flush that flooded her cheeks was answer enough. She nodded.

"And you said my name is Vivienne?" she asked, her curiosity overpowering the fear.

"Vivienne Rose St Aubyn." He paused. "Duchess of Dalton."

Something moved across her face. As if the name had unlocked a memory in her mind.

The doctor stepped forward. He had held himself together so far, but now his voice carried a raw edge that had nothing to do with medicine. "That is very moving, Your Grace. But a photograph and a birthmark do not constitute legal proof. We must consider her state of mind and her well-being. What do you plan to do now that you have found her?"

Dalton turned to the man his wife had almost married. Assessed him for the first time. He was good-looking enough, he supposed. Brown hair, regular features. Average height and build. He had an air of calm competence about him that must be reassuring to patients.

One day, Dalton might feel grateful to the doctor for caring for Vivienne. Right now he felt only animosity.

"I plan to take my wife home, of course." He put enough force behind his words to make it clear he would not tolerate any interference.

Vivienne sucked in a breath. "I beg your pardon. Are my wishes and preferences of no importance, then?"

She spoke with the imperiousness of the duchess she could not remember being. Yet her voice trembled just the slightest bit. Enough to tell him she

was terrified.

In all this time — since Alfred's revelation, through two nights on the Channel, through mud and flooded roads — he had never once considered that she might not want to come home. He had been so certain. So arrogant in his certainty.

It was where she belonged and where he wanted her. It was the right thing to do. His duty to care for her. To restore her to her rightful place, with her family and loved ones. It was his dearest wish. And he never, for one moment, considered that it might not be what she wanted as well.

He had imagined himself a rescuer. She saw a stranger claiming ownership.

Just a stranger. After fourteen years of marriage, three losses, one shipwreck, and seven years of grief that had nearly killed him.

Despite being forewarned of her amnesia, he had not fully grasped all that would mean. He still thought she would be glad to see him. As if… as if the mere force of his presence was enough to make her remember. To invoke her love and her memories.

He had been a fool.

Her love had vanished along with her memories.

His gaze snapped to her, at a loss for what to say. How to proceed.

"Of course, my dear. Forgive me. I didn't mean to imply I would take you against your will." He stopped. Started again. "I’m a stranger to you. I see that now."

It should have been crystal clear. She had been about to marry another man, for goodness' sake. Was she in love with the doctor then?

His throat felt tight. His chest burned with the strain of forcing air in and out. "But of course, I understand if you need some time…"

He trailed off. Meeting her gaze, holding it. *Please let her say that she just needed some time to get used to the idea.* He could not contemplate the notion that she might not want to go home with him.

Now, or ever.

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CHAPTER 5

THE APOLOGY, COMING FROM a man she suspected did not apologize often, offered in a sincere if somewhat stiff manner, made her wish she had not lost her temper. The duke appeared too formidable to be hurt. Powerful enough to make her and everyone on this island bend to his will. She had thought him unshakable. Yet when she spoke her words, for a few unguarded moments, his eyes had widened, his lips parted. Then he had firmed his jaw and schooled his face to neutrality. But she had seen it. Or sensed it. The pain she had inflicted.

That was not her intention. But God help her, she was terrified. Confused. The day had battered her from every direction.

"I apologize as well, Your Grace." She offered a small smile. "I shouldn't have spoken so sharply."

If he was her husband, how would it appear from his perspective to find her marrying another man? What did he think of her? Of Paul?

A tenderness softened his austere features. That flash of vulnerability tugged at her conscience and burned off the last of her indignation.

"Let's start over, then," he said. "I did not intend to barge into your life in such a way. I never meant to cause you any distress." He extended his hand. "I'm Valentine St Aubyn."

Valentine. What a romantic name for a man who looked anything but. Oh, he was handsome, but not in a romantic way. Dark hair, lightly threaded

with silver, cropped in a no-nonsense style and arranged in neat layers. The straight nose, chiseled jaw, and lean face created an almost stoic sort of beauty, while the crease between his eyebrows spoke of worry and duty. He was not a seducer. He was a conqueror. And right now, he was looking at her the way she imagined generals studied a territory they intended to claim.

She appreciated that he did not tell her who she was. He allowed her to introduce herself in whatever manner she saw fit.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace. Incidentally, I have been called Grace for as long as I can remember."

She took his offered hand. Warm. Strong. It enveloped hers as he lifted it to his lips. The contact sent a shiver up her arm that had nothing to do with the cold.

"The pleasure is all mine, Grace. Please call me Valentine. That is how you used to address me."

"Valentine." The name rolled off her tongue as though she had pronounced it thousands of times before. She probably had. His gaze sharpened, fixed on her mouth as she formed the syllables.

"I would very much like for you to become reacquainted with me… Grace." She noticed the pause, the deliberate use of her new name. "I will answer any questions you have. Tell you anything you wish to know about me, or about yourself. I should also like to hear about your life these past seven years."

He looked to the rector and Paul. "Could I speak to my wife in private?"

Heat crept up her neck as she realized she had forgotten about the Reverend Carteret and Paul, who were both standing in the room. Good God, she had been about to marry Paul. No. She had married Paul. They had stood at the altar and spoken their vows before God and the congregation.

What a tangle. She had been so consumed by her own discoveries that she had failed to consider how Paul must feel. Their marriage was a practical union between friends, not a grand love affair. But there was genuine affection between them. And this had to be humiliating for him.

She needed to speak with him. But who to address first? The stranger who claimed to be her husband, or the friend who had almost become one?

The rector decided for her. "Dr. Harrison and I shall wait in my office."

Paul looked none too happy with that, but she sent him a tremulous smile and a nod. "Please, Paul. I need to sort out the situation. We will speak later."

He nodded and filed out after the vicar.

She turned back to the duke, who still held her hand.

"Thank you." His voice was low. "I want to be clear about my intentions, Grace. I wish to recover what was once between us. My aim is to earn your trust. For that, we would need to cohabitate. I'd like to bring you to my home — our home. I want to restore you to your rightful place."

A conqueror indeed. And sure of his victory.

She stood, walked to the window, and turned her back on him.

Her rightful place. What did that even mean? She saw herself adrift in some enormous house, dozens of servants whose identities she could not recall, rooms whose purpose she did not know. And beyond that house — London. Society. The Duchess of Dalton must have been a grand lady. Sophisticated. Accomplished. Grace Harper was none of those things. She would be the talk of every drawing room in England.

"That life you talk about. Being a duchess. It sounds very grand. But I don't think I'm capable of it anymore."



THERE HAD BEEN A tremor beneath her words that betrayed her fear. She was not refusing; she just needed reassurance.

He breathed out, relaxing a bit.

"Of course you are capable," he said. "I know you are. You were a wonderful duchess. It was as if you were born for the role."

She shook her head. "You are thinking of a person who does not exist anymore. The only life I know is a simple one in a sleepy village in Guernsey, as the rector's mother's companion. I'm just… me. A woman who keeps the household accounts and mends the curtains and takes her walks along the cliff path. I don't understand the first thing about being a duchess. I wouldn't know how to address my own servants, let alone the lords and ladies of your acquaintance. Can you imagine the spectacle? A duchess who can't remember the names of her own guests?"

The fear was legitimate. She was right that society could be merciless, and the ton's appetite for scandal was bottomless. A returned duchess with no memory would feed that appetite for months.

But she had navigated those waters before. She could do it again. She needed the chance.

"At least try it before you reject it," he said, and the idea came to him whole. "A trial period. Come live with me for three months. See for yourself what your life would be like. You can do as you please. I will not make demands of you of any kind."

She turned, her eyes studying him with a directness that was so Vivienne it made his chest ache.

"And if, at the end of that period, I decide I'm not the person you think I am? If I wish to return to the life I have built here?"

He swallowed the protest. "Then I won't stand in your way. I will abide by your wishes and allow you to return."

She nodded. "That seems fair. But three months is too long."

"Too long? After seven years apart? Three months is nothing by comparison."

"One month," she countered.

"Seven weeks. One for each year we lost. A symbolic gesture, not a demand. Seven weeks, and at the end, you decide your future. Without pressure. Without duty. Will you give me that?"

He could see the struggle in her face. The willingness warring with the uncertainty. At least he could still read her. That was something.

"I need to think about it. This has all been a great shock. I don't feel capable of deciding anything at the moment."

"Of course." He stepped closer. The desire to touch her was overwhelming. To hold her. Confirm that she was real, that this was not some fever dream born of seven years of grief.

But she drew in on herself, arms wrapping around her torso.

He stopped.

He could be patient. For seven years, he had waited without hope. Now that he had found her, he would win her back. If she granted him the seven weeks.

If she didn't, he would find another way. He had not come this far to lose her again.



SHE HAD SO MANY questions that she could not sort them. She seized the nearest.

"How old am I?" Something so simple. Even children knew their age. But she couldn't even remember her birthday. For seven years she had guessed her age, and added one more year on the anniversary of her arrival at Guernsey.

"You turned thirty-five two weeks ago."

"Two weeks ago… I always wondered…" But before she could dwell on that discovery, her curiosity jumped to the next burning question. "Do I have any other family? Who are my parents? Do I have siblings?"

"You are an only child. Your parents are Lord and Lady Kilbrannan."

"Kilbrannan." She turned the word over. "That sounds Scottish."

"It is."

"I didn't know I was Scottish." A strange, almost absurd thing to say. She had lived thirty-five years and didn't know where she came from. "I once met a Scottish merchant who passed through town. I don't speak the way he did. Do you think I lost my accent along with my memory?"

He smiled. Just the corners of his mouth, but it changed his face. Made him warm. Made him someone she could imagine knowing. "No. You sound as you always did. You spent many years in England."

"I sound like you," she said.

"Yes."

A tiny reassurance, but a reassurance nonetheless. She had always noticed that she spoke differently from the people in Guernsey. One more thing that marked her as an outsider here, and brought her closer to the duke.

"Was I close to my parents?"

"Very. They visited us at least once a year, and we visited them often too. The news of your disappearance at sea devastated them. I can imagine their joy when they learn you are alive."

The panic rose before she understood its source. She stepped back, wrapping her arms about herself.

"Could you not tell them yet?"

He frowned.

"I cannot face them. Not now." She pressed her hand to her breastbone, where the tightness had settled. "I am still struggling to comprehend that I may be married to you. To have more people looking at me expecting an emotion, a response I cannot give…" She shook her head. "It would overwhelm me."

His jaw tightened. She watched him wrestle with it.

"It will be as you wish," he said.

She exhaled. Her shoulders dropped.

Another question. This one she had been circling since the beginning, afraid to land on it. But she had to know.

"Do we have children?"

Something rippled across his face. A tightening of the mouth, a narrowing of his eyes. It was fast. An emotion surfaced, and he shut it away immediately.

"No children," he said.

Two words. Flat. Final.

She opened her mouth to ask why, but the look on his face stopped her. Whatever lived beneath those two words, it cost him to be even this close to it.

"I see."

She would broach the subject again when they became better acquainted. When she had the courage to hear the answer.

"Your home. Is it far?"

He breathed out. The smallest sound.

"Not at all. My seat is in Cornwall. It's called Penrose Castle, on the coast near Falmouth." His voice steadied, returning to the measured tone she was beginning to recognize as his natural register. "You have been close to home all these years."

"At the opposite end of Great Britain from my Scottish family," she said, half to herself. "And yet just across the Channel from here."

"Yes." There was pain behind the admission.

A silence settled between them. Not hostile. Almost companionable.

"I haven't agreed to go," she reminded him. "To the seven weeks."

"I know."

"I must speak with Paul first. And with the rector. This is not a decision I can make in a quarter of an hour."

"I would not ask you to." He inclined his head. "Take whatever time you need. I shall be at the inn. I believe there is one in the village?"

"The Crown. But it is modest."

"I'm certain it will suffice." His tone was dry. She suspected that the Crown's offer would not meet the Duke of Dalton's usual expectations.

She almost smiled.

"I shall send word tomorrow," she said, and extended her hand.

He took it. This time the contact was not a shiver but a warmth. His thumb traced across her knuckles, perhaps without thinking. Despite his self-control, his hands betrayed him.

"Tomorrow, then."

"Until tomorrow, Valentine."

She used his name deliberately and saw in his eyes what she had seen before — hope so fierce it looked like pain. It frightened her. Not because she thought he would hurt her. But because she might not be up to fulfilling it.

He turned and walked out. His footsteps measured. As composed as if he had concluded a business meeting rather than the most extraordinary encounter of his life.

The door closed behind him, and she pressed both hands to her face. Her fingers trembled.

She was married to a duke. She had parents in Scotland and a life in Cornwall and a name that was not Grace. She had been someone else, a woman this man had loved. Still loved, if the anguish in his eyes was any measure. And she could not remember a single thing about her.

Not one thing.

Except the way his name felt in her mouth. As though some part of her had never stopped saying it.

She lowered her hands. Straightened her spine. She had survived seven years without a past. She could survive one more night.

Tomorrow, she would decide.

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Chapter 6

THE RECTOR'S OFFICE SMELLED of ink and old paper and the beeswax Mrs. Carteret used on every wooden surface she could reach. Vivienne sat in the chair by the desk with her hands folded in her lap, holding herself still while her mind raced.

Paul's ring was on her finger. Thin gold, too large, warm from her skin. It had been there less than two hours, and already it felt like it belonged to someone else's hand.

Paul was pacing. The office was too small, and his agitation made it seem smaller. His cravat was loose, his hair disordered where he had dragged his fingers through it. She had never seen him so undone. In seven years of friendship, of medical consultations and shared suppers, Paul Harrison had been unflappably kind.

Not today.

"You can't be seriously considering going with him." Not a question. An accusation.

The rector sat behind his desk, hands steepled, watching them both. He had not yet spoken, but his demeanor was calm. Thank goodness. She needed someone in this room who was thinking clearly, because she was not.

"How can I not?" she said. "If what he says is true — and Paul, he had a wedding photograph with my face in it. He knew about the birthmark. He

—"

"The birthmark proves nothing." Paul turned from the window. "I knew about it. Any physician who treated you could have known. He might have bribed a doctor or a maid."

"To what end? He's a duke."

"So he claims."

"He had documents. A photograph. He knew my name — my real name."

"Which he could have obtained from any number of sources if he were running a confidence scheme." Paul stopped pacing and faced her, and his expression was not angry but pleading. "Vivienne. Think. A stranger walks into a church, makes an extraordinary claim, produces a photograph and knowledge of a mark on your body, and within two hours, you are prepared to sail to England with him. Does that not strike you as reckless?"

She opened her mouth to argue. Closed it. He was not wrong. It was reckless. Everything about this morning defied reason. And yet reason was not what had made her pulse settle when the duke said her name. Something deeper had stirred when she looked at his face. Not recognition. But the absence of the wrongness she had felt standing at the altar with Paul.

She twisted the ring on her finger. Around and around.

"If he is not who he claims," she said, "it would be easy to disprove. We go to England, we make inquiries, and if his story collapses, I come home."

"And if it doesn't collapse? If he is your husband?" Paul's voice dropped. "Then you are in his domain, under his control, in a country where you know no one, with no allies and no recourse."

"She would have us," the rector said.

Paul did not look at him. His eyes were fixed on Vivienne, and there was something in them she had not seen before — or had not allowed herself to see. A fierceness that went beyond friendship. Beyond the concern of a doctor for his patient.

Oh. Oh no.

She looked away. She had accepted his proposal because it seemed sensible and she was tired of being afraid. Because he was kind, and he had offered her the one thing she craved more than memory: belonging. He had framed it as a practical arrangement. Mutual affection. Companionship. Stability. She had believed him because she needed to believe him.

But the way he was looking at her now suggested his feelings had never been as tidy as his proposal.

"What about your nightmares?" Paul said, and the shift in his voice — lower, more deliberate — made her go cold. "Could he be the man who features in them?"

Dark stone corridors. Running. The echo of her own breathing, magnified by the close walls. Hands seizing her from behind, the smell of damp and iron and something sweet she could never identify. A faceless figure standing too close, saying words she could never quite hear—

She gripped the arm of the chair.

"We don't know those dreams are memories," she said. Her voice came out thinner than she had intended.

"We don't know they aren't."

"Paul." The rector's tone carried a warning.

But Paul pressed on, pacing again, his hands clasped behind his back — the same way he stood when he was working through a difficult diagnosis. "If those nightmares are based on real events, and if this man was part of those events, then going with him is walking into the very danger your mind has been trying to protect you from for seven years."

"Or it's walking toward answers I've been too frightened to seek." The words came out harder than she expected. "I've been hiding on this island since I woke up on this shore. Too afraid to leave, too afraid to search for my past, too afraid that if I found my family, they wouldn't want me. And now my past has found me, and you want me to hide again?"

Something crossed Paul's face. A flicker that vanished too fast, which she would have missed if she had not been watching him. Something that looked, for a heartbeat, like guilt.

Then he was running his hand through his hair again, and his expression was only weary.

"I want you to be safe," he said. "That is all I have ever wanted."

The rector's mother appeared in the doorway with a tea tray balanced on her hip. Margaret Carteret was small and white-haired and moved with the brisk economy of a woman who considered sitting still a character flaw.

"You'll all think better with tea," she announced, setting the tray on the corner of the desk. "And someone ought to eat something. There were sandwiches laid out for the wedding breakfast and they'll go to waste."

The wedding breakfast. A celebration that would never happen. Vivienne's stomach turned.

Margaret poured without waiting for answers, pressing a cup into Vivienne's hands with a look that said, drink it, more clearly than words. The warmth of the porcelain steadied her. She wrapped both hands around it and breathed.

Paul refused his cup. He had stopped pacing and stood by the window, arms crossed, staring out at the churchyard. The afternoon light caught the shadows under his eyes.

"There may be a solution," he said, turning back to the room. His voice had changed. It was calmer, more measured. The doctor's voice. The one he used when delivering difficult news. "We could enter a formal petition for separation. As her physician, I would testify about her amnesia. Her condition could be grounds to declare her unfit to resume her marital—"

She gasped. He stopped.

"Unfit." The word tasted like ashes and fear.

She watched him hear it. The color drained from his face. His mouth opened, then closed. His hands dropped to his sides.

"That came out wrong," he said. "Vivienne, I didn't mean—"

She set the teacup down. Her hand shook, and she didn't want him to see it. "You would declare me mentally unfit."

"No. Not like that. It would be a narrow medical opinion, limited to the question of whether a woman who cannot remember her spouse can reasonably be expected to…"

"And once that opinion exists?" She stood. The chair scraped against the stone floor. "Once a doctor has testified before a court that my mind is impaired? What happens then, Paul? You know what happens then. You told me yourself."

She had not meant to raise her voice. Margaret paused with the teapot in midair. The rector leaned back in his chair. Paul stood very still, and the stricken look on his face would have moved her if the fear had not already taken hold.

Because she remembered. She remembered everything he had told her, years ago, about what could happen to a woman deemed mentally unfit.

It had started with an overheard conversation. Two parishioners after Sunday service, talking the way people do when they assume the subject of their gossip is not present. "Poor thing," they said with feigned sympathy.

"Two years and still no memory. Someone ought to have her looked at properly. There are facilities for people like that. It would be a kindness, really."

She had gone to Paul, shaking, and asked him what they meant by facilities. And he had told her about the asylums. After that, she had become obsessed with the institutions. Had investigated everything she could about them. That's how she learned that committing a woman was easy: a husband's signature and a doctor's assessment meant the doors closed behind her. How rarely those doors opened again. How her condition, her lack of identity and memory, would make her particularly vulnerable. If she ever found her family and they proved unwelcoming, a single petition could see her locked away for the rest of her life.

He had meant to warn her. To protect her. She understood that. But the knowledge had worked its way deeper with every passing year.

And then there was the engraving.

She had come across it in a weeks-old London newspaper that had found its way to the island — a pen-and-ink illustration accompanying an article about wrongful commitments. A woman behind iron bars, barefoot, her hair matted, her eyes hollow. Vivienne could no longer remember the article's words. Only the woman's face. Only the bars.

She had not slept for three nights after.

And now, even here in this safe, familiar room, surrounded by people who cared for her, the mere suggestion was enough to make her feel the walls pressing in.

"I would never have you committed." Paul's voice was rough. "You know I would never do that."

"You just proposed declaring me mentally unfit to a rector and his mother, Paul. Forgive me if the distinction feels thin."

He flinched.

"She's right." Margaret spoke from her corner by the tea tray. "I know you didn't mean it like that, but once you open that door, my dear boy, you can't control who walks through it. A diagnosis is a weapon. Even in kind hands."

Paul looked at Margaret, then at the rector, then at Vivienne. He sank into the remaining chair and put his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't thinking." He broke off. Drew a breath. When he looked up, his eyes were bright. "I have spent seven years trying to keep you safe. The thought of handing you over to a stranger who could

do anything he likes with you once he has you on English soil… I cannot bear it. But that was a monstrous thing to suggest, and I am ashamed of myself for saying it."

The apology was so bare, so unguarded, that her anger loosened despite herself.

She sat back down. Picked up the teacup again, more for something to do with her hands than because she wanted tea. The office settled into quiet. The mantel clock ticked. Gulls cried somewhere beyond the window.

"What do you think I should do?" She turned to the rector. "Do you believe I should go with the duke?"

He took his time answering. She trusted him for that.

"As a man of God," he said, "I must tell you that marriage is a sacred vow. If the duke is your husband, then your place is with him."

Paul opened his mouth. The rector raised a hand.

"However. I also recognize that the situation is extraordinary. You do not remember him. You cannot verify his claims from here. And you deserve protection while the truth is established." He paused. "For that reason, I propose that Paul and my mother accompany you to England. As chaperones. They can ensure his claims are legitimate and that he treats you with the respect you deserve."

"Chaperones." Paul's voice was flat. "And what could Mrs. Carteret or I do if he proves he's her husband and is unkind to her?"

"Witness," the rector said. "You would be witnesses. A man is less likely to mistreat his wife if she arrives with a physician who can testify to her condition and an elderly woman whose son is a clergyman. It is not a perfect protection. But it is something."

Vivienne turned the plan over. Paul as chaperone. Paul, who had been her almost-husband this morning, traveling with her to meet the man who claimed to be her actual husband. The thought was absurd. And yet the rector was right. She should not go alone.

"There is one more thing," she said, and heard her own voice steady as the decision took shape. "I asked for a fixed trial period, and the duke proposed seven weeks. One for each year."

The rector nodded. "That seems wise."

Seven weeks. Enough to learn the truth. She would not be trapped forever if it proved unbearable.

"Paul." She turned to him. He was sitting forward, elbows on his knees. "You don't have to come. I would understand if you'd rather not. The situation is—"

"Unconscionable," he supplied. "Absurd. A bloody farce."

"I was going to say difficult."

A smile crossed his face. Sad enough to ache.

"Of course I'm coming," he said. "You think I would let you walk into that man's house without someone who knows your medical history? Without someone who—" He stopped. Swallowed. "I'm coming."

There was something in the way he cut himself off. Words he chose not to speak. But the day had already held more than she could bear, and she let it pass.

"Then it's decided," the rector said.

"Not quite." Vivienne stood. Smoothed her skirts. "I need to tell the duke. I should tell him myself."

Paul pressed his lips together and said nothing.

She had promised an answer tomorrow, but she found Dalton in the churchyard and saw no reason to delay the inevitable now that her decision was made.

He was standing by the stone wall, his back to the church. He had shed his mud-caked coat and stood in his shirtsleeves, still damp and creased from his journey. The wind pressed the linen against his shoulders. He was not moving. Not restless, not at ease, every line of him taut with waiting.

She came up the gravel path. He turned at the sound. And there it was again, that expression. The one that had arrested her in the vestry. He looked at her the way a man looks at something precious he expects to lose.

"I'll come," she said. "For seven weeks. On my terms."

She saw the exhale. The way his shoulders dropped, and his jaw lost some of its rigidity.

"Thank you," he said. Just that. As though she had done him a kindness rather than agreed to the bare minimum of what duty required.

She told him about Paul and Margaret. She told him about the trial period. She looked for resistance in his face, for the aristocratic entitlement Paul had warned her about. There was none.

"Whatever you need," he said. His voice was level, but his breath came deeper, and she understood he had been bracing for refusal.

Then the brief, unguarded moment was gone, and the composure returned.

She nodded. Turned to walk back to the church, where Paul and Margaret and the rector were waiting, where the sandwiches were going stale and the wedding flowers were wilting on the altar.

She paused at the church door and looked down at her hand. Paul's ring. Thin gold, slightly too large.

She did not remove it. Not yet. But she was aware of it now in a way she had not been that morning, when it was only the next step in a sensible plan. Now it felt like a question.

She pushed open the door and went inside.

She was doing this. Not because duty demanded it, or because the rector counseled it, or because Paul's objections had failed. She was doing this because for seven years she had been a woman without a past, and her past had just walked into a church and called her by name.

She could hide no longer. Whatever lurked in her past, she had to face it head-on.

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CHAPTER 7

THE NEXT MORNING, DALTON walked the narrow lane toward Dr. Harrison's cottage, feeling each curtain twitch along the way. Word traveled fast on an island this size. By now, every soul in the parish knew that the stranger who burst into their church, mud-caked and half-wild, had claimed their beloved Grace as his wife. He could imagine how gossips would have embellished the story by teatime.

Not that it needed much embellishment. It was crazy enough as it was.

She had lived here for seven years. While he had paced the corridors of Penrose Castle, while he had stood at the edge of the cliffs watching the sea that had swallowed her, while he had drunk himself insensible on three consecutive anniversaries before Venus dragged him back from the brink — Vivienne had been here. Walking these lanes. Breathing this air. Building a life so small and so complete that she had almost married another man inside it.

He stopped at the gate to Harrison's cottage. A solid dwelling — not grand, but well-kept. The garden was orderly: herbs in neat rows, a climbing rose trained along the south-facing wall, a wooden bench positioned to catch the afternoon sun. A doctor's garden. Practical and considered.

He could picture her here. Sitting on that bench with a cup of tea, the light in her hair, Harrison emerging from the house with his shirtsleeves

rolled and sharing a quiet, intimate moment with her.

His chest tightened. He pushed open the gate and knocked.

An old maid, her face mapped with wrinkles, opened the door, her eyes widening when she saw him.

"You are the duke, are you not? The man who came to take our Grace from us on her wedding day."

Our Grace. As if Vivienne belonged to the island itself.

"I'm here to speak to Dr. Harrison," he said, not in the mood to discuss his own life with yet another impertinent servant.

"Hmph." She backed away, leaving the door open. "Come in, then. I will go notify the doctor."

Dalton entered and surveyed the house, a twenty-year habit from his intelligence career he could not break. The hallway was narrow, the flagstones worn smooth. A coat stand held one jacket and one hat. A single pair of muddy boots stood by the door.

A bachelor's house.

The parlor was small and clean. A bookshelf filled one wall, and Dalton's gaze swept the spines. Medical texts, mostly. *Abernethy's Surgical Observations. Todd's Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology.* A well-thumbed copy of *Bucknill and Tuke's Manual of Psychological Medicine* that stopped him. Harrison had been reading about Vivienne's condition, then. Studying it.

On the desk beneath the window: a microscope, not new but well-maintained, surrounded by glass slides and a stack of handwritten case notes. A stethoscope hung from a hook beside a framed certificate from the University of Edinburgh. The furniture was sparse. Two chairs by the fireplace, a writing desk, a sideboard bearing a bottle of whisky and two glasses.

Few ornaments. No portraits. No evidence of inherited wealth or family connections. Everything in this room had been earned. Harrison was what he appeared to be — a country doctor who had given his life to a small community that needed him.

A good man. Dalton didn't want to think it, but that was the story this room told.

He had spent the hours since yesterday telling himself the doctor was an opportunist, a man who had taken advantage of a woman's lost memory to claim a wife above his station. It would have been easier if that were true.

But this room — the worn texts, the microscope, the case notes — did not belong to a man scheming for advancement. Harrison had not been trying to possess Vivienne. He had been trying to look after her.

Dalton still wanted to hate him for it, but that said more about Dalton than it did about Harrison.

Not a full minute passed before the doctor walked in, and his state was worse than Dalton had expected. Haggard, undone, no jacket, shirt open at the neck and left hanging loose. His eyes were red, as if he had been drinking all night.

"What do you want, Your Grace?" The bitterness was unmistakable. "I thought everything was already decided. You get to take the bride home."

Dalton didn't rise to it. He was not here to fight. He had fought enough already — the sea, the church, the appalling impulse to gather Vivienne in his arms and carry her from this island. He needed this man's cooperation. More than that, he needed his expertise.

"There is much to discuss. Things to clarify."

Harrison went to the sideboard and poured himself a generous measure. He lifted the bottle toward Dalton. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thank you. Let me get to the point, and then I will leave you to your endeavors."

Harrison took a long swallow and looked at him. Waiting.

"I'm not here to quarrel with you," Dalton said. He kept his voice even — the tone he used in diplomatic negotiations, when composure was the only weapon left. "I owe you a debt of gratitude. From what I have gathered, you were the one who tended to her when she arrived on these shores, injured and lost. And since then, you have shown my wife nothing but kindness during the years when I could not."

Harrison stiffened. His knuckles went white around the glass.

"I don't need your gratitude. I did it for her, not for you." His voice was hoarse but steady. "And whether she is your wife remains to be seen. I married Grace Harper in this parish yesterday."

"That is what I need to set straight." Dalton held the other man's gaze. He did not enjoy this. But pretending served no one — least of all Vivienne. "I don't question your feelings for her. I will not even question how much you knew about her past. But the law is clear. The woman you married yesterday was already married. We were joined before God and country

eight years before you ever set eyes on her. The law calls your marriage void. Not voidable — void. From the instant the vows were spoken."

"She remembers nothing of such a marriage."

"I know. And I hold her blameless. She could not have known she was not free to marry. But the law does not bend because the truth is inconvenient."

"You have come to take her from me." Harrison's voice dropped. "To tear her away from the only life she knows."

"I have come to give her the chance to remember who she is." Dalton heard the heat rising in his own voice and checked it. "I am not dragging her away. She has agreed to come of her own free will. She cannot remain here under a false name, married to a man who is not her husband. However comfortable the lie, it is still a lie."

Harrison opened his mouth. Dalton stayed him with a raised hand.

"I understand this is not your fault. But her name is not Grace. It is Vivienne. And she is the Duchess of Dalton."

The doctor sank into the chair by the fireplace. The glass hung from his fingers, forgotten. So much grief on his face that Dalton felt it in his own chest. Because he knew. He had lived seven years inside the same loss. He would not wish it on any man. Not even his rival.

"She has made a life here," Harrison said. "She is content. She has friends. Patients who depend on her charity visits. A routine, a purpose. What will become of all that if you drag her back to a world she cannot recollect?"

"She will have my protection. I won't demand more than she can give." Dalton measured each word. "She may bring companions — yourself among them, if you wish it. I have already agreed to that. She will stay for a trial of seven weeks, and after that, decide for herself whether she wishes to remain. But we must proceed in truth. Not in shadows."

"And if her heart chooses this quiet life over yours?"

There it was. The one question he had no defense against. Not that Vivienne did not remember him. He could bear that. Be patient. Earn her trust. But that she would come to know him and choose to leave anyway. That the woman she had become would weigh the life he offered and find it wanting.

"Then I will bear it." He had never spoken words that cost him more. "But I will not abandon her again without giving her the chance to know

who she truly is."

A silence settled. Harrison drank. Dalton stood.

"Do you love her?" Harrison asked.

Dalton went still. The question was so direct, so stripped of courtesy, that it caught him unprepared. Which, he suspected, was the point.

"My feelings for my wife are my concern alone, Doctor. I don't have to explain myself to you or to anyone."

He meant it. He also knew the answer was yes — so completely, so ruinously, yes that the word felt like something he could not afford to let out of his mouth. Not here. Not to this man.

Harrison watched him. Those pale blue eyes were too sharp for a man three drinks deep. A physician's habit, trained to read what people preferred to keep hidden.

Dalton held the look. He had faced down foreign ministers and men who would have had him killed over a handshake. He was not going to flinch before a country doctor.

"I can't stop you from taking her," Harrison said at last. "Much less if she wishes to go. But I know something you do not. Something even she does not understand."

"What is that?"

"Even if she is your wife, she is not the person you knew. The woman you married, your duchess, is gone. In her place is Grace. A woman made by seven years on this island, who built herself from nothing, who learned to go on without a past. Grace is quiet and humble. She can't walk back into a life she does not remember and become the woman that life requires."

Harrison leaned forward. His gaze was fixed, and none of what burned in it came from the whisky.

"She won't know the rules of your society or the names of your friends. Your world will bewilder her. Your castle will dwarf her. She will be miserable trying to become someone she is not. Eventually, she will want to come back to the life she knows. The life she remembers. See that you honor your word when that day comes."

Dalton wanted to believe this was the desperate argument of a man who could not accept what he had lost. Part of him dismissed it. But another part — the part that had watched Vivienne faint in the church, that had seen the blank terror when she looked at him without recognition — could not ignore the warning.

Was it possible? Could she look at the life they had shared and choose this island instead? The quiet, the modesty, the small rhythms of a place where everyone called her Grace and no one asked her to be anything more?

No, he wouldn't think about it. She had loved him once. Loved him with a force that matched his own. He needed only to remind her. To show her the life she had lost. Their love had been real, and some trace of it must live in her still. The way she said his name in the vestry, as if her mouth had never forgotten it, was not nothing. He could work with that.

He unclenched his fists. Steadied his breathing.

"I will do what is best for her. And I will always protect her with my life."

He turned to leave.

"One more thing," Harrison said.

Dalton stopped. Did not turn.

"You will be tempted to fill her head with everything she has forgotten. Portraits, letters, places, stories. To tell her every detail of the life she lost, hoping to bring her memory back. I would advise against it."

Now Dalton turned. "Go on."

Harrison set down his glass and sat straighter. The bitterness was gone from his face. What replaced it, Dalton recognized, was professional authority.

"You saw what happened in the church. She collapsed. The mind that has sealed away its memories has done so for a reason. Whether from injury or shock, the mechanism is protective. To force against that seal is to risk destroying the faculties you hope to restore."

He reached behind him and pulled a slim volume from the shelf, its spine cracked from use. "There is a case described by Dr. Russell Reynolds, published in his *System of Medicine* last year. A soldier at Sebastopol who lost all memory after a head wound. His wife surrounded him with familiar objects, stories and anecdotes. Read him his own letters, took him to the places they had courted. Within a month, the man could not sleep, could not stop shaking. He had fits of terror and did not recognize even the wife who had been trying to help him. Reynolds concluded that the memories, when forced, did not return as recollections. They returned as attacks. The mind could not tell the difference between remembering and living through them again."

Harrison met his eyes. "She is more fragile than she appears, Your Grace. Let her memories come in their own time, if they will. Resist the urge to narrate her past to her. Do not tell her what she should feel. Let her body find its way back. The mind will follow when it is ready. Or it will not. But forcing the matter could break her."

Dalton's first instinct was to dismiss it. The man was staking a claim to knowing Vivienne better than her own husband did. And there was self-interest in that, no question. Harrison could be using medical authority to keep Dalton at a distance.

But the man was a doctor. He had been caring for her health for seven years. He had studied her condition — the books on the shelf proved as much. And the case he cited was not vague counsel, but a documented outcome, concrete and grim. Dalton could see how the same might happen here. How the weight of his own need to have her back could become the thing that drove her further away.

He thought of Vivienne crumpling in the church. Her eyes rolling back. The terror he had felt holding her listless body in his arms.

He would consult other doctors. He would find the best minds in London — specialists in disorders of the brain and memory. But until then, Harrison's advice was all he had. And the man had earned the right to give it.

He nodded once.

"You have my word."

He didn't wait for a response. He walked through the narrow hallway, past the single coat and the muddy boots, and let himself out.

Next stop was the harbor. He still needed to arrange passage for four.

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CHAPTER 8

IT TOOK THREE DAYS to dismantle seven years of living.

It should not have been so easy. Vivienne—as she had begun to think of herself, because the name settled into her bones the way Grace never had—packed her belongings into a single trunk and a carpetbag. Two dresses suitable for travel. Her brush and comb. The lavender sachet she'd made with Mrs. Helier's dried flowers. A copy of *Villette* with a cracked spine, and a small watercolor of the harbor that she had once painted.

That was it. Seven years on Guernsey, and the sum of her existence fit into a space smaller than a coffin.

She had stood in the doorway of her little room at the rectory and felt the absence of permanence. No jewelry box, because she owned nothing worth locking away. No letters tied with ribbon, because she had no one to write to. The room was as bare as the day she'd moved in, and the realization that she could vanish from this island without leaving so much as a dent struck her as the loneliest thought she had ever had.

The rector pressed her hand and told her God would light her path. The parish schoolchildren had made her a card, twenty small signatures in varying degrees of legibility, and she had tucked it into her carpetbag with hands that wouldn't stop trembling. Margaret embraced her and whispered, *I'll be right beside you.* Paul said nothing at all. He picked up her trunk and carried it to the cart, his jaw set like a man bearing a casket.

And now, the sea.

The deep blue of the Channel held the yacht's hull as the vessel cut the water with its sharp prow. Vivienne stood at the railing, her face lifted to the late summer sun. The breeze cooled her cheeks and teased the straps of her hat, pulling loose a few tendrils of auburn hair that she tucked back without thinking.

The sea sparkled. The sky was enormous, and the yacht was luxurious beyond anything she could imagine. Brass fittings polished to a mirror finish. Teak decks that gleamed honey-gold. A saloon below, with velvet settees and crystal decanters secured against the roll of the sea. Rather like the duke himself, she thought. Efficient. Sleek. Opulent. Designed to move through the world with the minimum of friction. They both produced the same feelings in her. Awe. Unease. The suspicion that she was out of her depth.

She still thought of him as the duke. He had asked her to call him Valentine. She had nodded, but after that first conversation, she had not done so again. It was not that the name felt wrong. It was that it felt too right. Intimate when she had not earned it.

"We are almost there."

She startled, even though his voice had been low. He always spoke to her as if he feared she might bolt. Not without reason, judging by her flinch.

"It has been a most pleasant crossing, Your Grace."

"Valentine," he corrected.

She offered him a nod and nothing else.

A silence settled between them—not hostile, but watchful. He stood close enough that she could feel the warmth of his arm through the sleeve of his coat, but he didn't touch her. She had noticed he was careful about that. Careful about everything, in fact. Where he stood, how long he held her gaze before looking away first. As though she were a problem he was solving with great patience.

"Is it far from where we dock to your home?" she asked.

"Not at all. The pier is on my land, so from the moment we step off the gangway, we'll be home."

Home. He said it as though it were a small thing. A cottage with a garden gate and a cat on the step.

"How very convenient," she said. "I assume you also own the sea between here and there."

Something shifted in his face. A crack in the composure, gone before she could be sure of it. Not offense. Surprise. And then the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Only the territorial waters," he said. "I have not yet managed to annex the Channel, though I have a man looking into it."

She stared at him. He gazed out at the horizon with an expression of perfect gravity, as though he had not just made a joke. Had the Duke of Dalton made a joke?

"I feel certain the French would have something to say about that," she managed.

"The French always have something to say. It rarely stops me."

She laughed before she could prevent it—a short, startled sound she had not intended to make. His eyes cut to her, sharp and swift, and the look in them winded her. Hunger. Not for her body, but for the sound she had just made. As if he had been starving for her laughter.

He looked away. The composure returned. But she had seen it, and it had changed something between them.

The coast had been growing clearer by degrees—a smudge of gray-green becoming hedgerows and buildings, fields stitched together with stone walls, a church spire catching the light. She watched it sharpen, this land that was supposed to be hers, and felt nothing. No recognition. No sense of homecoming. Only the queasy awareness that every mile the yacht covered was a mile farther from anything she knew and a mile closer to unfamiliar territory.

And then the vessel rounded a steep headland, and she saw it.

The castle rose from the clifftop as though it had grown there. Seven bays of pale stone, four stories high, blazing white-gold in the afternoon light, towers and battlements sharp against a sky so blue it hurt. Below it, the sea crashed against black rocks in plumes of spray. Above it, gulls wheeled and cried. It was enormous and absurd and magnificent, and it looked like something out of a fairy tale.

Her breath stopped.

Not from awe, though awe was part of it. Something else happened that she could not account for. Her hands, which had been gripping the railing hard enough to ache, loosened. Her fingers uncurled. The tension in her shoulders released. She drew a deeper breath than she had taken in hours, and the salt air filled her lungs with a sweetness that felt like relief.

Her body knew this place. She was certain of it. Even as her mind found no memory, no image, no whisper of recognition, something beneath thought had softened at the sight of it.

She put it aside, with all the other things she didn't understand, in the growing collection of mysteries that made up her former life.

"There it is," the duke said. "Penrose Castle. Our home."

Her head snapped toward him. "That is your home? You live in a castle?"

He smiled, and his brow drew together, as though he could not tell whether she was truly astonished or having him on.

"When I'm in the country, yes," he said. "We have a residence in London as well. And a few other estates throughout England, though I visit those only as needed to oversee their management. They're inhabited by elderly relatives."

"You have several homes besides a castle."

The merchants of Guernsey had fine houses. The rectory was a decent size. But this was wealth on a scale she had no framework for. The distance between the woman she was now and the woman she had apparently been opened beneath her like a chasm.

"Yes," he said. "But take heart. None of the others are quite as large or as freezing as this one. The drawing room alone requires its own weather system."

She searched his face. His expression gave away nothing, and this time she was not sure he was joking.

Despite the dread in her stomach and the castle growing larger with every passing second, she smiled. A small thing, reluctant, but real.

"I shall endeavor to avoid the drawing room," she said.

"A sound strategy."

The lightness could not hold. She watched Penrose grow until it filled her vision. The windows catching fire in the sun, the crenellated walls, the great stone steps leading down to the water where a pier jutted into the cove. Figures moved on the dock. Staff. Waiting.

The dread settled back into her chest.

"It's just the scale of it all," she said, and her voice came out smaller than she intended. "Everything is so grand. So far beyond anything I know. I can't imagine being equal to it. To being a duchess."

"You are a duchess," he said. Not unkindly. "It may feel overwhelming now, but I believe it will come back to you in time."

"But I don't remember any of it. What if I embarrass you? In front of your staff, your family, your…" She trailed off. "I don't even know who lives there. What if I do everything wrong?"

"You could never embarrass me."

She gripped the railing, knuckles whitening. "You cannot know that."

"I can." He turned to face her. His eyes held hers—dark, steady, with an attention that made retreat impossible. "And I won't let you fail. I will never ask more of you than you can give."

"But a duchess must have duties. Responsibilities. People to manage, events to oversee, important guests to entertain—"

"The only thing I need you to do is rest and recover. Nothing more."

"That can't be all you expect from me." The words came out sharper than she intended. "What use am I as a wife or a duchess if resting is the full extent of my contribution? I may not remember who I was, but I know who I am now, and I am not an invalid."

He went still. She watched the recalibration behind his eyes, the adjustment of a man accustomed to command who was meeting, perhaps for the first time in years, resistance.

Good. She might feel lost, but she was not fragile.

And then, to her astonishment, he smiled.

"You are right," he said after a pause. "I expressed that poorly. What I meant is that there is no obligation, no test you must pass. Whatever you wish to do, I will support. Whatever you do not wish to do, I will not demand. The household runs itself. The staff is competent. Your only task, if you want to call it that, is to decide what you want."

That was far more frightening. Decide what she wanted. She had spent seven years letting the current carry her. The idea of wanting something, and choosing it, reaching for it, made her dizzy.

He lifted his hand and brushed a strand of hair that the wind had pulled free. His fingers grazed the curve of her ear as he tucked it back, and the touch sent goosebumps down her neck and along her arm to her fingertips. She could not move. Could not look away.

"If you knew how much I have missed you," he said, his voice rough in a way she had not heard from him before, "how much I cherish your existence, you wouldn't doubt for a single moment that finding you alive is more than I ever dared to hope for." His hand dropped. He stepped back.

The composure resettled, smooth as a door closing. "Never doubt it, Vivienne. Your presence is enough."

The sentence stayed with her as the yacht slid into the cove and the castle's shadow fell across the water. She savored it as the crew secured the lines and lowered the gangway, and the figures on the dock resolved into servants standing at attention. She let it sink into her heart and mind as the duke offered his arm, and she took it, her hand trembling against his sleeve, and stepped onto the pier.

Your presence is enough.

She wanted to believe it. She was not certain she did. But she held the words close. Wherever she was going, whatever the future held, there was at least one person glad she was alive.

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CHAPTER 9

DESPITE HIS REASSURANCE, SHE still looked ill at ease as the carriages rounded the curve of the drive and stopped before the massive front doors.

The footmen jumped down. He descended first and offered his hand.

"Thank you," she said, but she was looking up at the façade the way a prisoner regards the walls that will hold her.

She placed her hand on his arm, and he felt the tremor in her fingers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dr. Harrison alight from the second carriage and offer his hand to Mrs. Carteret. The doctor's eyes swept the castle front with an appraising coolness that set Dalton's teeth on edge.

He could tolerate Mrs. Carteret, who was chatty and good-natured. But having his rival for his wife's affection stay under his roof was contrary to every instinct he possessed. If it was what she needed, he would bear it. He would bear anything. He could not pretend to enjoy the man's company.

"Welcome home, Your Grace," Prowse intoned. "I have prepared the guest rooms and the duchess's room as you requested."

A faint question lurked beneath the words. Prowse's impeccable training prevented him from outright questioning an order, but the instruction to prepare the duchess's room for occupation after seven years must have strained even his considerable discretion.

Then the butler's attention moved to Vivienne as the hood of her traveling cloak fell back.

Prowse gasped, his hand flew to his chest, and he staggered a full step backward. It was the most undignified thing Dalton had ever seen the man do in thirty years of service.

Dalton would have found humor in the butler's reaction if he had not known how it felt to see her face again after believing her dead.

"Yes, Prowse. This is indeed the Duchess of Dalton. My wife. And I assure you she is no ghost."

"Forgive me, Your Grace. I didn't mean — " He collected himself with visible effort and turned to Vivienne, performing a bow so deep it bordered on genuflection. "Your Grace. It is an absolute delight to have you back."

"Thank you, Prowse." Only a slight hesitation. Only the faintest stiffness.

Behind the butler, a young footman named Thomas had gone rigid.

"Oh, sweet saints above!"

The exclamation had come from Mrs. Trevena, who had just appeared in the doorway. White as chalk, one hand at her throat, she stared at Vivienne, her eyes enormous.

"Mrs. Trevena, Mr. Prowse. My study in fifteen minutes."

Their reactions were his own fault. He had sent a telegram announcing his arrival, not a letter explaining the impossible. There had not been time to plan, to announce, to bloody prepare. He had been managing crises as they arose and managing them badly, if this was the result.

"Of course, Your Grace." Prowse had recovered. Almost.

"These are our guests." Dalton indicated Harrison and Mrs. Carteret. "Dr. Harrison and Mrs. Carteret, Her Grace's friends who have accompanied us from Guernsey. Please guide them to their chambers and see to their comfort."

"Right away, Your Grace," said Mrs. Trevena, dropping a hurried curtsey. Still shaken. Trying to regroup. "If you would follow me."

Harrison gave Dalton one last measuring look before allowing himself to be escorted away.

Dalton turned to Vivienne. She stood rooted to the marble, eyes wide, shoulders drawn in, her whole body angled toward the carriage as though she might still bolt.

"Come, my dear. I will take you to your rooms."

She took his arm, and he led her through the doors.

They boomed shut behind them. The echo rolled through the vaulted space, and her fingers tightened on his sleeve.

He slowed his pace. The entrance hall had been designed to impress visitors with its soaring arches, stained-glass windows, and polished marble. He had grown immune to it years ago. But she had forgotten it. She was seeing it anew, and it was having an effect on her.

Her eyes traveled upward, across the vaulted ceiling ribbed like the inside of a ship, and her throat moved as she swallowed.

"This is… enormous."

He wished she had said *familiar* instead.

"You always said the scale made it feel like a cathedral," he told her.

She startled. "Did I?"

"You used to claim it was a house built for echoes."

A wavering smile touched her lips before it died. She wrapped her free arm around her waist, and the movement undid him. She looked so small in these halls. So unsure. Just as the doctor had predicted.

He guided her along the runner toward the grand staircase. Ahead, the gallery of portraits stretched the length of the hall — generations of St Aubyns in gilt frames. He watched her eyes move across them, searching, though he doubted she knew what she was searching for.

Her attention caught on one painting and held. He could understand the fascination. It was his favorite painting — alive in a way the other portraits, with their rigid formality, were not. A woman in pale blue, seated in a garden with a toddler on her lap. Both were laughing. The painter had captured the mother mid-turn, her expression unguarded and warm.

Vivienne stopped and stared at it for a long moment.

"That painting…"

"My mother," he said.

"And you?"

"Yes." He said nothing more. Talking about his parents was difficult at the best of times. Now, he was not sure he could manage it.

Thankfully, she looked away and asked no more questions.

He led her on.

They passed beneath the chandelier with its thousands of crystals breaking the light, and she slowed again.

"Vivienne."

She turned to him.

"No one expects you to remember any of this. Least of all me."

"The butler and housekeeper were in shock. Do they know what happened to me?"

"Not yet. I will explain now — that is why I asked them to meet me. Everything will be fine."

"What about the other servants? Will they recognize me? Expect me to act a certain way?"

"Most have been here for years, so yes, they all know you." He held her eyes. "I will leave it to Mrs. Trevena and Prowse to explain the situation to the staff, but they will all be glad you are back, Vivienne. They like you."

She looked away. "It all seems so far above me. I feel like an impostor walking through someone else's halls."

"This place is not above you. It is yours." He kept his voice low. "These corridors were part of your daily life. You laughed here. Argued with me here. Once, you ran down that hallway during a storm." He gestured toward the east passage. "Daring me to catch you."

A flicker of recognition crossed her face, gone before he could be certain. He bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from disclosing more information before she was ready.

They reached the landing. Her chambers were ahead. He paused before the doors.

"The duchess's chambers. Your rooms."

Her fingers brushed the carved wood as though afraid it might burn her.

"Whatever you are feeling, remember this: you don't have to perform a role or fit anyone's expectations."

She looked up at him.

"Not even yours?" she asked.

"Especially not mine."

"But I can see the hurt in your eyes every time I don't know something I should. Every time you are reminded that I don't remember you." Her voice dropped. "I don't want to hurt you. But I don't know how to be her."

"You already are." He felt the conviction in his bones.

"No. I am not."

He smiled, and it cost him. "I see you, Vivi. Below the confusion. I still see you."

He raised his hands to cup her face. Her skin was warm under his palms. Her breath caught.

Too close. Everything in him was pulling toward her. He kept breaking every resolution he made of taking things slow. The warmth of her skin under his touch was enough to undo him.

He dropped his hands. Turned from her. Pushed open the doors.

He had not been inside these rooms in years. At some point he had stopped entering them. It was too painful.

But he had needed to preserve her. So he had ordered the staff to keep everything as she had left it. Every bottle on the dressing table, every garment in the wardrobe. The bed linens changed and pressed on their usual schedule. As though the duchess were merely away for the week. The servants likely considered him crazy, but they nonetheless obeyed without question.

The room looked as it had on the morning they departed for the crossing that was meant to last seven days and had lasted seven years.

Even the air smelled of her. Fainter now, but there. Her perfume of roses, bergamot, and lily of the valley.

She moved into the room. He stayed by the doors.

He watched her fingers trail across the dressing table — the silver-backed hairbrush, the hand mirror, the small bottles of cosmetics arranged in the order she had always kept them. She unstoppered the perfume and lifted it to her nose.

Her eyes closed.

"This feels… familiar."

His throat tightened. "What does?"

"The perfume. I can't explain it. It didn't bring back any memories, but it feels as if I have known it before. It makes me…" She paused. "Happy. It brings me peace."

"I’m glad." Two words. Insufficient. But all he could manage.

She moved to the canopied bed in shades of emerald and rose, and skimmed her hand along the counterpane. He looked away and studied the crown molding with an intensity it did not merit.

When he trusted himself to look again, she had moved to the window and thrown the curtains wide.

She drew a sharp breath.

"The view is magnificent," she said.

She was standing in the full light of the setting sun. It caught her hair, turned the red to copper and gold, traced the line of her jaw and throat.

Behind her, the terraced gardens fell away to the sea. The view truly was breathtaking, but what stole his breath was the woman standing before it.

She turned. Her eyes met his, and for a moment, neither of them moved.

"I think fifteen minutes have passed," she said.

He blinked.

"You told your servants to meet you in your study. To explain my return. My condition."

Ah. Yes. The domestic crisis he had created by arriving without warning. He could imagine the speculation belowstairs. His servants were loyal and discreet, but curiosity was a powerful force, and his wife's return from the dead was not an everyday occurrence.

"You are right. Would you like to come with me?"

She was shaking her head before he finished. "I wouldn't know what to tell them. They are your servants. You do it."

"They are your servants too. But do not fret, I will handle it. Is there anything you wish to keep private?"

A pause. Then: "I would rather you didn't mention my wedding to Paul. They might think poorly of me."

"You are not to blame for that." He meant it. As much as it burned. "But I will do as you wish. Though I cannot guarantee your friends will not disclose it themselves."

"I will speak to them." She moved toward the door. "Where are they?"

"In the West Wing, where the guest rooms are located. The East Wing is family apartments only — your suite, mine, and my sister's."

"Your sister." Her expression shifted and became careful. "You mentioned her. Does she live here? Do any other relatives live here? I… I don't think I can face anyone yet."

"My sister lives in London most of the time, and there are no other relatives living here. We will take it slow. But you must consider notifying your parents soon. They suffered greatly, Vivi. They deserve to know."

"I will. Just let me settle. I cannot handle the expectation or disappointment of more people who knew me. Not yet. I want to be more sure of myself."

"It will be as you wish, and not a moment before." He moved toward the corridor. "If you need directions anywhere in the castle, ask any servant. If you need me, at any moment of the day or night, just send for me. I will

send a maid to attend you now. Would you like a proper tour of the castle tomorrow?"

"Of course." She paused. "And Dalton — "

He turned. Waited.

"Thank you. For everything. For being so patient with me."

"No thanks are necessary. You are my wife. I would do anything for you."

He left before he could say what he was not ready to disclose and she was not ready to hear.

The study steadied him, as it always did. The familiar piles of papers, the locked drawers, the brandy on the sideboard. And beside the brandy, incongruous and untouched, the small bottle of crème de violette he kept because it had been her favorite.

He didn't drink it, but he could not bring himself to throw it away.

Prowse and Mrs. Trevena arrived on time. They stood before his desk like stoic soldiers who didn't wish it to show how much the events had shaken them.

"Sit down, both of you."

They sat, and Dalton told them what they needed to know. The amnesia. The seven years Vivienne had spent on Guernsey believing herself to be someone else. He omitted the marriage to Harrison, explaining the doctor's presence as that of a trusted physician and friend. He described the condition in plain terms: she had no memories of her life before the accident. Nothing of this house. Nothing of them.

Mrs. Trevena pressed a handkerchief to her eyes. Prowse stared straight ahead, jaw working.

"She is overwhelmed," Dalton said. "She does not remember any of you, and being surrounded by people who know her when she cannot return the recognition is distressing. I need you to communicate this to the staff. No one is to treat her with excessive familiarity or remind her of things she ought to remember. Kindness, patience, and discretion. That is all I require."

"Of course, Your Grace." Prowse's voice was rough. "I shall personally inform every member of this household. You have my word."

"The staff loved her, Your Grace," Mrs. Trevena added, dabbing her eyes. "They will be gentle. I will see to it myself."

"Good. One more thing." He leaned back. "Dr. Harrison and Mrs. Carteret are her guests. They are to be treated with every courtesy,

regardless of how long they stay."

Regardless of how much I wish them gone.

"Very good, Your Grace."

He dismissed them and sat alone.

The evening light came in long and low, stretching shadows across the desk. He poured a measure of brandy. Did not drink it. Looked instead at the crème de violette, its color catching the last of the sun.

On his desk, beneath the household correspondence, lay the telegram from his contact in London. He drew it out and read it.

UNABLE TO LOCATE THE SUBJECT. TRAIL LOST IN NANTES. OPERATIVES REDEPLOYED. AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS.

Alfred had vanished. The man he had planted inside the ship that took them to Guernsey said he never returned. Which meant his cousin had another vessel, a plan, and a head start that grew with every hour Dalton sat here sorting domestic affairs instead of hunting him.

His cousin had slipped away during the chaos at the church. Dalton had seen it, and had chosen Vivienne over pursuit. He would make that choice again. A thousand times. But the cost was not small. Alfred was loose. Alfred, who had sold Crown secrets to foreign handlers. Who had likely engineered the shipwreck that nearly killed Vivienne, hidden her for leverage, then bartered her survival for thirty thousand pounds and his own freedom. Alfred, who carried in his head the names of compromised peers and the threads of a conspiracy that reached deep into the Foreign Office.

Dalton should be on a ship right now, chasing his cousin across whatever stretch of water Alfred had put between himself and justice. The officer in him tallied the days lost, the widening radius.

But Vivienne was here. Alive and breathing. She needed him. The husband had overruled the spy without hesitation before. And it did so again now. He would deal with Alfred in due time. But not today. Today, she came first.

She would always come first.

Instead, he did the only thing he could do from here. He wrote dispatches alerting contacts in every port from Cherbourg to Lisbon. He drafted a response to his agent's telegram. Deployed his remaining agents. Set the machinery in motion.

Dalton called for his trusted secretary and handed him the telegrams to send immediately.

Later that night, when the house had settled into its nighttime quiet, he stood in his bedchamber before the connecting door that led to her chambers.

Carved oak, thick and solid. A brass handle he had turned a thousand times. Faint sounds were coming from beyond the closed door. Soft footsteps and low voices where before there had been seven years of silence.

He raised his hand and lowered it again. He wouldn't knock. Not yet. It was too soon.

He just stood there for a long time, until the sounds faded. Until the light spilling under the door went out. Only then did he go to his bed. But he was not alone anymore. He was accompanied by the knowledge that she was here. Under his roof. Alive.

For now, it was enough. More than enough. It was a miracle he had not dared hope for.

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CHAPTER 10

SHE WOULD NEVER HAVE found the way without Lucy.

The castle was a labyrinth. Corridor after corridor, each turn opening onto another stretch of polished stone, another painting, another window with a view so fine she had to stop herself from gawking. Ten minutes of walking just to reach the guest wing. She was supposed to be mistress of all this, yet she could not find her friends without an escort.

Lucy pointed to two doors near the end of the corridor.

"These are Mrs. Carteret's rooms, Your Grace. And the ones across the hall are Dr. Harrison's."

Vivienne knocked on Margaret's door first. Being alone with Paul in his bedchamber would not be proper, and Dalton was being tolerant enough. She wouldn't give him cause to doubt her.

"Enter!"

Margaret's sprightly voice called, and Vivienne opened the door.

Shades of yellow and gold decorated the sitting room. Cheerful. Warm. It suited Margaret. The older woman was at the writing desk, but she rose with a briskness that belied her seventy years.

"I came to see how you were settling in," Vivienne said. And because what she wanted was the company of someone who expected nothing from her.

"Settling in? My dear, I am positively wallowing." Margaret spread her arms as though to embrace the room itself. "Have you seen the view? I have been trying to describe it to my son, but he will have to come and see it for himself. Three-quarters of a page and I still have not managed to do it justice."

The delight was so unguarded it loosened a tightness in Vivienne's chest she had not known she was carrying. Margaret had always been able to receive good fortune without suspicion, to find wonder in a window and say so without embarrassment. Seven years of living with this woman had taught Vivienne that joy didn't require an occasion. It required attention.

"Would you like to have tea with me?"

"I thought you would never ask. But can we have it here? As much as I long to explore this magnificent pile, my knees have opinions about stairs, and I have learned to respect them."

Vivienne turned to Lucy, who waited by the door. "Could you have tea sent up for Mrs. Carteret and me?"

"Of course, Your Grace."

The title still sat wrong. She saw Margaret catch it too.

"It is so strange," Vivienne said, sinking onto the settee beside her friend, "hearing people call me that."

"Stranger for you than for anyone, I should think." Margaret took her hand in her warm, dry, papery one. "But I will tell you something, my dear. We always knew you were well-born. It wasn’t just your accent or your manners, though those were unmistakable. You had a way of carrying yourself. Something in the set of your shoulders."

"So you think I belong here? That this…" She gestured at the gilded molding, the damask curtains, the cut-glass vase on the mantel that probably cost more than the rectory's annual coal bill. "This grandeur suits me?"

Margaret considered it, her head tilting to the side.

"Only you can decide if it suits you, dear. But I think it is the world you were born into. Whether you choose to remain in it — well, that is a different question, and one you need not answer today."

A knock at the door. Margaret called entry, and Paul came in.

He looked better than he had at the church, but not by much. His coat was the one he wore for house calls, good serviceable wool, and he tugged at the

cuffs as he entered. Vivienne recognized the gesture from seven years of watching him brace himself before delivering bad news.

His gaze moved across the gilded cornices, the silk wallpaper, the marble-topped side table. Not with Margaret's frank enjoyment. Something more guarded.

"Grace." He looked relieved to see her, then caught himself. "I'm glad you are here. I was wondering how one finds anyone in a place this size."

"One asks a servant," Margaret said. "They seem to know everything."

Paul gave a tight smile that stopped at his mouth. He turned to Vivienne. "How are you settling in? Are you comfortable?"

"I think I should be the one asking you that. I am the hostess, after all."

He stiffened. His jaw set. The same expression he wore when a patient made light of a symptom he took seriously.

"Only in the strictest technical sense. As your doctor and friend, your well-being remains my primary concern. So many changes in so little time would be disorienting for anyone." A pause. "More so for someone with your condition."

There it was again. Every time he said *your condition*, *your affliction*, or *given your circumstances*, it relegated her to the position of a patient. She found that she didn't want to play that role anymore.

"I am quite well, Paul. Thank you for asking." She kept her voice steady. "And you? Are your accommodations comfortable?"

"More than adequate."

Not *fantastic*, as Margaret had said. Not *magnificent*. *More than adequate.* A man's words when he has decided to be unimpressed.

"And where have they put you?" he asked.

"In the duchess's chambers. On the east wing."

"Of course." His mouth compressed. "He is wasting no time thrusting you into the role, is he?"

She understood his bitterness. Paul had married her just a few days ago — or tried to — and before the day was out, a stranger had claimed his bride and installed her in a castle where she slept in a duchess's bed while Paul slept in a guest room on the far side of the building. The humiliation would sting. But underneath it, she sensed something else.

Paul had been the authority in her life for seven years. Her doctor. Her adviser. The man who explained her condition, managed her treatment, and decided what she should pursue and what she should avoid. He had never

been unkind about it. But he had been firm, and she had deferred, because he was the expert and she was the one with the broken mind.

Now someone had eclipsed that authority. Not another doctor. A husband. A duke. A man whose position and wealth and sheer force of presence made Paul's quiet competence disappear. It was not jealousy alone she heard in his voice, though jealousy was there. It was the discovery that in Dalton's world, Paul Harrison was superfluous.

"Dalton did not thrust me into anything," she said. "He has been patient and undemanding. But if I am his wife, those were my rooms. It would have been strange to put me elsewhere."

"It also places you close to him and far from your friends. Convenient, would you not say?"

"We have no reason to question the accommodations, Dr. Harrison." Margaret's voice had gained the firmness she used on the parish children when they tested her patience. Gentle, but with an authority earned over decades of managing difficult men. "Nor to cast aspersions on the duke's intentions. If he had wished to keep Vivienne from us, he need only have refused to let us come. His willingness to house us speaks well of him."

A flush crept up Paul's neck.

"You are right, madam. I apologize." He turned to Vivienne. "I worry about you. That is all."

"I understand. But for the moment, there is nothing to worry about. The duke has been very considerate. He has given me no reason to doubt him."

She meant it. And the fact that she trusted Dalton after mere days was not a thing she cared to examine. Not yet.

"I must ask a favor of both of you." She looked from Margaret to Paul. "Dalton is explaining my amnesia to the staff. But I would rather we did not mention my marriage to Paul." She held his gaze because she owed him at least that. "The servants might think poorly of me. A woman who married one man while still wed to another, even unknowingly — "

"My lips are sealed, my dear," Margaret said at once. "Very wise."

"Paul?"

A beat. His eyes narrowed a fraction.

"Of course. The whole fiasco reflects poorly on all of us. I have no desire to discuss it." Another beat. "It will be as though it never happened."

The words had a finality that made her wince. She had hurt this man. Not on purpose, but she had taken something she could not give back. Had let

him believe she was free when she was not. She should have searched harder for her past before attempting to build a future. Her cowardice had created so many problems.

"Thank you," she said.

A knock spared them from the silence. Lucy entered with the tea service, followed by two more maids bearing trays of sandwiches, scones, and small cakes. Margaret's eyes widened at the extravagance.

Vivienne poured. Margaret reached for a scone. Paul took his cup without comment and set it on the side table. Vivienne let her gaze move across the trays.

And stopped.

On a small plate near the center of the spread, half hidden behind the sandwiches, lay a cluster of small, golden-brown biscuits, their tops crinkled and glossy.

Something pulled at her.

"What are those?" she asked before she could stop herself.

Lucy dipped a curtsy. "Cornish Fairings, Your Grace."

Vivienne reached out. Took one. Brought it to her lips.

She was aware that snatching biscuits before she had even taken the first sip was not how a duchess behaved at tea. Her hand had moved before her mind weighed in.

She bit into it.

Ginger. Cinnamon. A deep, dark sweetness. Treacle, perhaps? The spice bloomed across her tongue, and the sweetness followed, so comforting that she closed her eyes.

And the room was gone.

Blinding sunlight. The open sky, wide and hot. Sand beneath her. The crash and pull of waves close enough to taste the salt. And warmth. Not from the sun. A body. His body pressed along hers. His hand lifting a biscuit to her mouth. Her lips closing over it, brushing his fingertips, and the ginger and the sea salt and the taste of his skin all at once, and she was laughing, and they were… naked.

Both of them. Under a blue sky, on pale sand, nothing between their bodies and the world but light. Her back against a blanket. His arm beneath her head. His fingers at her lips, feeding her a biscuit with a smile she could almost see. Not his face, not yet, but the shape of it. Tender. Amused. Possessive.

One searing heartbeat, then gone. Scattered. The edges dissolved even as she reached for them. It all vanished — the sand, the sun, his body. She was sitting in a yellow room in a castle with a half-eaten biscuit in her hand and her heart hammering in her chest.

She opened her eyes.

Margaret was watching her. Paul was frowning.

"Are you all right, dear?" Margaret asked.

"Yes." Her voice came out rough. She cleared her throat. "Yes. These biscuits are…" She looked down at the Cornish Fairing in her hand. "They are wonderful."

She took another bite. The flavor was the same, but the vision didn't return. It had come and gone in a flash, leaving only the afterimage: a happiness so physical, so simple, so instinctual, that it made her careful life on Guernsey seem thin by comparison.

She had been happy here. With him. She didn't remember it. Not as a story, not as before and after. But her tongue knew. The ginger on her palate was a key, and it had unlocked something warm. Safety. A life she had lost without knowing what she had lost.

She finished the biscuit and poured herself tea with hands that were not quite steady.

"I think," she said to Margaret, "that I used to eat these often."

"I would say your body remembers what your mind has not caught up with yet. Which is rather encouraging, would you not say?"

Paul said nothing. He was looking at the plate of Cornish Fairings as though they had personally offended him.

Vivienne took another biscuit. Nothing else happened. No more memories. No more doors unlocked. But she didn't need another vision.

She already knew she was where she was supposed to be.

After tea, she left Margaret to her letter-writing and walked back along the guest corridor. Paul fell into step beside her uninvited. The silence between them was not comfortable, but not hostile either. Two people adjusting to new terrain.

"I want to apologize for earlier. Margaret was right to correct me. The duke has been… generous."

The word cost him.

"He has," she agreed. Then, because she owed him this: "Paul, I know this is difficult for you. I never intended any of it."

"You couldn’t have known." He stopped walking. They were at the junction where the guest corridor met the main hall. The border, she realized, between his territory and hers. "But I want you to know I am here for you. Whatever you decide at the end of these seven weeks."

"Thank you, Paul. That means a great deal."

He nodded. Turned. Walked back toward the guest wing, spine straight, chin up, holding his dignity with both hands.

Lucy was waiting in the duchess's chambers.

"I have drawn back the curtains, Your Grace, and laid out some things. Would you like to see the wardrobe?"

Vivienne crossed into the dressing room and stopped.

Wardrobes lined every wall, floor to ceiling, carved from dark wood. Lucy began opening doors, and her mouth fell open. Silks in dove gray and sapphire, and a green the color of deep water. Velvets in garnet, amethyst, and midnight blue. Cottons and linens trimmed with lace so fine it looked like frost. Furs — sable, ermine, fox. And shoes. Rows of shoes: kid-leather slippers, walking boots with pearl buttons, satin dancing shoes in colors she didn't have names for.

"Was all of this mine?" It seemed too much for only one person.

"Every stitch, Your Grace. The duke ordered nothing moved or given away."

Seven years of a wardrobe standing idle, maintained and preserved, while its owner wore the same three cotton dresses on a Channel Island and mended them by candlelight when they frayed.

She ran her fingers along a gown. The silk was cool, smooth, and beneath the lavender of the sachet she caught another scent. Roses and bergamot. Her own perfume, still held in the fabric after all this time.

Lucy cleared her throat, snagging her attention.

"Excuse me, Your Grace. I was wondering if you would require my assistance with your bath and getting ready for dinner."

She had not had a lady's maid at Margaret's house. If anything, she had been the lady's maid. Not that she had been required to help Margaret dress every day. Her friend was a practical lady who wore simple gowns that she could don herself. But occasionally, when Margaret had attended a ball or event at the town hall, she had helped her benefactress dress and done her hair. She seemed to be good at it, and the older lady had appreciated the help.

Now the idea of having a maid dedicated to helping her dress seemed extravagant, but given her wardrobe, probably necessary.

"A bath would be lovely, thank you," she said.

"Of course, Your Grace. I already instructed the kitchen to have hot water ready. They will bring it up at once."

Half an hour later, lounging in the hot bath while her maid washed and rinsed her hair, she contemplated that she could get used to this.

"Tell me, Lucy, were you my maid before?"

"No, Your Grace. I was merely a kitchen maid at the time. I got promoted to parlor maid and then to upstairs maid last year."

"What happened to my lady's maid? I presume I had one?"

"Yes. Lynwood. The duke offered to keep paying her wages if she wanted to stay, but with no lady to serve, she decided to find another position where she could apply her talents. She left with a good severance and a glowing letter of recommendation. She is a superb lady's maid. Very much in demand. I hear she found another position in no time."

"And how did you become a lady's maid?"

The girl hesitated. "I am not really," she confessed. "But I want to be. I have been practicing on my fellow maids in my free time. And last spring I had the opportunity to put my skills to the test when Lady Venus visited without her maid. She was very pleased with my efforts."

Lady Venus? Venus, the goddess of love, beauty, and desire. What kind of name was that? It sounded seductive. Risqué. Something a high-flying courtesan might be called. Oh, God. Was she her husband's mistress? No. Surely not.

But she found it difficult to dismiss the thought. He was a man of wealth, power, and — she had noticed, however much she wished she had not — no small physical appeal. It would be naïve to think he had spent those years in monastic solitude. Men of his position kept mistresses as a matter of course, even when they had their wives by their sides. Dalton had been alone for years. He had considered himself a widower. It was to be expected that he would have a mistress. Or possibly several.

The jealousy hit before reason had a chance. Irrational. Premature. Scalding.

She wanted to be sophisticated about it, but could not. Every fiber in her being rebelled against the idea. Where on earth was this possessiveness coming from?

She barely knew the duke. She could not remember his face from before last week. And yet the thought of him with another woman made her hands curl into fists.

She unclenched her fists. Arranged her voice into something she hoped sounded idle.

"Who is this Lady Venus?"

Lucy's mortification was swift and painfully evident. A flush climbed from her collar to her hairline, confirming her suspicions. Lady Venus was Dalton's mistress, and the maid had committed a terrible faux pas by mentioning it to the wife.

"Oh. Oh, Your Grace, I'm so sorry. I forgot. Mrs. Trevena explained about your memory, and I just assumed you would know, but of course you do not — "

Had she known about her husband's mistress? And she accepted it? Unlikely. But of course, the woman she used to be seemed to be a completely different person from who she was now.

Lucy pressed both hands to her cheeks. "Lady Venus is the duke's sister, Your Grace."

"His sister," she said, then laughed.

Not a polite laugh. A real one. Startled out of her, half-embarrassed, and entirely beyond her control. The jealousy collapsed, and what replaced it was worse: the clear, undeniable proof that she cared about this man far more than she had been admitting to herself.

The curiously named Lady Venus was not her husband's mistress, but his sister.

Of course, that didn't mean he did not have a mistress. Would it be impertinent to ask Dalton about it? She felt rather strongly about mistresses. She cared whether another woman touched him, heard his voice go quiet, coaxed out that reluctant half smile he sometimes aimed at her. The degree to which she cared was fierce, and it had no business being this fierce this soon, and there was not a damn thing she could do about it.

"Of course. Venus is an interesting name."

"I am told the late duke and duchess were… very romantic."

"Valentine and Venus." She shook her head. "Indeed, they must have been. What sort of person is she?"

"Spirited, Your Grace. Speaks her mind. She and the duke are close. She is the only person I have ever seen talk back to him without getting the

eyebrow."

"Does she visit often?"

"Not so much anymore. She has her own household in London."

"Is she married, then?"

"No, Your Grace. Lady Venus is a spinster. And seems quite proud to be so. She could have married any time she wanted, for she is beautiful, rich, and well-born. But she never wanted to. And His Grace allowed her to set up her own household when it was clear she didn't wish to marry. He quite dotes on her."

Interesting. The forbidding, controlled duke was a doting brother who granted his sister freedoms that were rather uncommon. She tucked that information away in the ever-growing collection in her mind dedicated to the Duke of Dalton.

The maid poured another vial of water over her head, where it rested against the edge of the bath, her hair draped over the rim into a basin placed behind it.

"Your hair is done, Your Grace. If you want me to dry it and style it before dinner, we had better begin now."

"Yes, of course." She sat up, and Lucy held a huge bath sheet and wrapped her in it as she climbed out. Then the maid led her to a seat in front of a merry fire and began the tedious process of drying her hair. Followed by the less tedious, but perhaps more difficult one of styling it.

Her hair done, the maid came back, her arms overflowing with two silk dresses. "Which one do you prefer, Your Grace? The blue one or the rose one?"

Her eyes went to the rose one without hesitation. "The rose, please."

The warm, dusky shade of a late sunset. She reached for it without thinking. The silk slid against her fingers.

She should not wear rose. Everyone knew the color did not suit redheads. And yet her hand had gone to it the way it had gone to the Cornish Fairing — without asking permission, certain of something she could not name.

She drew the gown out of Lucy's arms and held it against herself, turning toward the glass.

The color was right. Warm and rich. It made her skin glow without clashing with her hair. Whoever had chosen this dress knew what suited her.

And then, standing before the mirror with the rose silk pressed to her body, the air changed.

She was in this same spot. This mirror. This gown, but wearing it, fitted snug at the waist, the skirts falling in a soft bell. Her hair was up, elaborate, the work of skilled hands. And behind her…

Him.

Dalton. Close enough that she could feel his chest through the silk at her back. His hands raised, and in them, something that caught the light. A necklace. Red rubies set in gold. He was fastening the clasp at her nape. His fingers grazed the fine hairs there, and then his head dipped to her shoulder. His lips grazed her skin just below the clasp. So light it was more breath than kiss. She shivered — both the woman in the mirror and the woman holding the dress.

His reflection straightened. His eyes found hers in the glass.

Gone. She was standing in the dressing room with the gown against her chest and her pulse in her throat and the ghost of his mouth fading from her skin.

Was that a memory or a fantasy? The edges were too soft to be sure. It might have been longing dressed up as the past.

But the necklace had been specific. Red stones. A gold clasp. And the kiss… She pressed her fingers to the spot. The curve between her neck and her shoulder. It tingled. That was not the sort of sensation she would have imagined. It was something her body remembered.

She laid the dress on top of the bed.

"Lucy, do I have a ruby and gold necklace?"

"You do indeed, my lady."

"I shall wear it tonight."

"Wonderful choice. It will complement that dress beautifully."

Half an hour later, she stood in front of the mirror once again, observing her reflection. The dress fit her perfectly. The necklace sparkled around her neck. Lucy had done a great job with her hair. She had arranged it artfully atop her head, with a few tendrils allowed to escape to graze the curve of her neck, where the ghost of that kiss still tingled. She didn't look like herself in these grand clothes.

No, she looked like the lady in her dream-memory. And that was exactly what she wanted. She wanted to look into Dalton's eyes when he saw her and see if he remembered that moment as well.

Tonight, she wanted to remind Dalton of her.

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CHAPTER II

THE TRAIL HAD NOT merely gone cold. It had disappeared.

Dalton read the report twice, then set it down with deliberate care. The handwriting was cramped, apologetic. No witnesses. No vessel. No record of passage.

Alfred had neatly stepped around the net.

Dalton rose and crossed to the window. The sea lay flat and gray beyond the headland, as impenetrable as the report in his hand.

The sequence was plain enough. Alfred had expected the trap. Of course he had. A decade in the Foreign Office had taught him its methods. He knew how Dalton operated. He would have arranged another vessel in advance. Something small. Forgettable. Gone from St. Peter Port while Dalton stood in that vestry, watching his wife's face for recognition.

Preoccupied. That was the word. While Dalton had been distracted, Alfred had been walking to a waiting boat, counting his thirty thousand pounds, and vanishing into the Channel fog.

He had chosen Vivienne over pursuit. He did not regret the choice. But the professional cost was sitting on his desk, and it was considerable.

Alfred was the best lead they had secured in two years of hunting the network. A cell of foreign operatives embedded within the British government, feeding information to a rival power through intermediaries that shifted and scattered at the first sign of scrutiny. Alfred was not the

architect. He was a courier, a facilitator. But Alfred knew names. Routes. Methods.

And Dalton had let him walk.

Not let. Allowed the conditions under which walking became possible. A mere technicality. The truth was that he had been careless. He had permitted his personal crisis to degrade his professional judgment.

The realization settled cold and sharp beneath his ribs. Not yet fury, no. Something quieter and more dangerous.

Shame.

He had seen what devotion did to a man. He had buried the proof at seventeen. And he still had made the same choice.

Dalton turned back to his desk and pulled a fresh sheet of paper toward him. Orders flowed from his fingers in swift succession.

London — review every known associate.

St. Peter Port — compile a list of every vessel that had departed in the days around Alfred's disappearance.

The Foreign Office — assume compromise.

Three letters, and he did not waver.

The fourth gave him pause.

Hargreaves. The name had been needling at him since Guernsey. Since the moment he had understood that his wife had lived there openly for seven years.

After the shipwreck, Dalton had hired Thomas Hargreaves. Former Bow Street Runner. A man whose reputation for thoroughness bordered on the obsessive. Hargreaves had spent three months combing the coasts of the Channel. Every port, fishing village, hospital, and parish register between Plymouth and Cherbourg. His reports had been meticulous. Interviews conducted, descriptions circulated, morgues visited. The search had cost a small fortune and yielded nothing.

Guernsey had been on the list. Dalton could see the entry as clearly as if it lay before him now. Four days on an island small enough to walk across in an afternoon. Four days to check every church, doctor, and household that might have taken in a stranger.

And Hargreaves had found nothing.

The man had not been negligent. Dalton would have staked his life on it. He had found nothing because someone had made certain there was nothing to find.

Dalton set down his pen. On the wall above his desk, a map of the Channel Islands hung alongside a naval chart of the shipping lanes. Guernsey. Twelve miles across. A population of thirty thousand. A woman with auburn hair, a face not easy to forget, no memory of her own name. Taken in by the parish. Treated by the local doctor. Known well enough that schoolchildren made her cards upon her departure.

Hargreaves should have found her. The fact that he had not meant one of two things. Either the investigator had been bought, or someone on Guernsey had concealed her.

Alfred had known she was alive. Had used that knowledge as leverage, which meant he had known where she was for some time. Possibly from the start. If Alfred had arranged her concealment, he could not have done it alone. He would have needed someone local. Someone with access to her. Someone in a position to deflect inquiries, to vouch for a false identity, to tell a visiting investigator that no, no woman of that description had washed ashore.

The doctor.

It was not proof. But the pattern aligned.

Harrison had treated her. Had given her a name, a home, and a life on an island small enough to keep contained. Harrison had, until a few days ago, been on the verge of marrying her.

And Harrison was one of a few, if not the only, doctor on the island. The first person any investigator would consult.

Dalton sat again and wrote.

Mr. Hargreaves, I require a full account of your inquiries on Guernsey…

He requested names. Interviews. Any obstruction, however slight.

He signed it, sealed it, and set it with the others.

Maybe Harrison was innocent. It was possible the doctor had taken in a confused woman in good faith, had cared for her without knowing who she was. Had never been approached by anyone asking about a missing duchess. Possible.

But Dalton had not survived twenty years in intelligence by accepting the most comfortable explanation. He had survived by following the thread that made him most uneasy. And the idea that Harrison — kind, competent, protective Harrison, who looked at Vivienne with an expression Dalton recognized because he saw it in his own mirror — had concealed her

existence, whether through malice or manipulation, sat in his chest like a swallowed coal.

He could not confront the man yet. Not without evidence. And not while he served as Vivienne's physician and her anchor in this strange new life. To accuse him now would shatter the one structure of trust keeping his wife in this castle. She would probably take Harrison's side. She trusted the doctor. She did not yet trust her husband.

He locked the letters in his desk drawer and pulled out the naval chart. Alfred's escape route. Think. Where would a man go, fleeing Guernsey with money and a head start? France was the obvious answer. The coast was close, the ports numerous, Alfred's contacts well established in Paris. But Alfred did not choose the obvious. He would go where the network could absorb him. Jersey, perhaps. One of the smaller islands, a place with a harbor and no questions. From there, a merchant vessel to the Continent. From the Continent, anywhere.

The trail was already cooling. And Dalton was here in Cornwall. With a wife who did not remember him, a rival under his roof, and a drawer full of letters he could not send until morning.

He could leave.

He could be in London by tomorrow. Paris within days. If he left now, he might catch Alfred. He might dismantle the network. Secure the Empire's intelligence against a dangerous conspiracy.

But he could lose her.

Not to danger or to death. To absence.

Seven weeks. That was all the time she had granted him. Seven weeks to win back his wife. To go from a stranger to someone she could trust.

Dalton exhaled slowly.

He would stay. He would hunt Alfred from Cornwall — with letters, with agents, with patience.

He would win back his wife.

And he would not fail at either task again.

He reached for another sheet of paper.

A soft knock sounded at the door.

"Come."

The door opened. A hesitant step. He knew it was her before he looked up. Vivienne lingered just inside, as though uncertain she had the right to enter.

Before, she would have crossed the room without invitation. Teased him. Interrupted his work with far more interesting pursuits.

The memory struck with disorienting clarity.

That dress.

He remembered that dress. Remembered taking it off her, kissing a trail over every inch of exposed skin. It was the first time since he found her that she wore her own clothes. She looked like his Vivienne. The one from seven years ago. As if time and absence had dissolved. He stared, mute.

"I apologize for disturbing you," she said.

"No, not at all. You never disturb me." He belatedly regained the use of his faculties and stood, extending his hand for her to come closer. "Please, come in. Have a seat."

She approached, but did not sit. Instead, she wandered around the office, taking in every object as if it were a rare artifact to be studied. She brushed her fingers over a globe. Touched a bust that rested on a bookcase, making him jealous of a marble statue. He let her explore. It almost seemed as if she was reacquainting herself with him through his environment.

This study was his private space. His retreat. He spent long hours here, so he guessed the objects in here told her something about him.

"It's dinnertime," she said at last. "When you didn't appear, the butler informed me you have a tendency to forget such things. He also said I was usually the one to remind you."

A flicker of something familiar, almost teasing, softened her voice in the last sentence.

She had come for him.

"I owe you an apology, then," he said. "I lost track of the hour."

Her attention drifted to the sideboard. To one bottle in particular.

The violet glass caught the lamplight.

"What is that purple bottle?" she asked, her hand hovering over the tall, violet-glass decanter.

"Crème de violette. You used to — " He stopped himself before he said too much. He mustn't put thoughts into her head. Let her remember things at her own pace. "Would you like to try it?"

Her curiosity lit. "Is it truly made of violets?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "Then I should like to know what violets taste like."

He poured a small measure. Offered it.

She lifted the glass. Sipped. Her eyes fluttered shut. For a heartbeat, she was still. Her delicate brow creased as though she were chasing a memory just out of reach.

He held his breath.

"It feels… familiar."

Hope struck sharp and sudden.

"You favored it," he said.

"I can see why." Another sip. Thoughtful. "Do you?"

"Not particularly."

"And yet you keep a bottle in your study," she observed.

It was not a question, although there was an inquiry hidden in her statement. He could have deflected. Maybe. If he had enough time or presence of mind to do so. But he chose the truth.

"I like to keep a bottle close because it reminds me of you."

The words landed between them.

She stilled. "Oh…"

Too much. Too soon. He saw the retreat, subtle but unmistakable.

God, it was so difficult to talk to her now. She was so dear and he knew her so well that he kept slipping into the familiarity of their old interactions, when he had not had to mince words or withhold anything. And she felt the same; he could tell. She might not remember him, but at times she seemed at ease in his presence. Until she was not. Until he crossed some invisible line, tripped over some invisible obstacle, and she retreated.

He adjusted at once.

"We should go to the drawing room," he suggested. "Join our guests before dinner."

He absolutely did not want to join the doctor and Mrs. Carteret. In fact, he would love nothing more than to have them depart his castle altogether. Especially the doctor. But they made her feel safe, so he would plaster a polite smile on his face and treat their guests with the utmost courtesy.

"Yes, of course."

He offered his arm. This time, she took it without hesitation. A small victory, but he allowed himself to savor it.

They entered the drawing room together as a couple.

The doctor looked up. And in that brief, unguarded instant, something in Harrison's expression sharpened.

Possessive.

Watchful.

The look of a man who had just lost ground.

Dalton stilled. The coal in his chest burned hotter. And the suspicion took full shape. What precisely had Harrison been protecting on that island — and for what reason?

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CHAPTER 12

EVERY DISH WAS A seduction of her senses.

They brought out the first course: a dark and rich soup that teased her nose before she even took one spoonful.

"Turtle soup," Dalton murmured, inclining his head toward her.

The duke had forgone formality and instead of sitting her at the other end of the table, far from him, he had her seated to his right. Margaret sat opposite her, at Dalton's left, and Paul next to Margaret. So he was close. So close she could feel his warmth. The vibrations of his low voice as he spoke rippled over her senses like a caress.

She dipped the spoon and brought it to her lips. Then closed her eyes and sighed as the comforting, rich flavor exploded in her mouth. When she opened them, Dalton was watching her like a hawk. He had not touched his soup.

"It's delicious," she said, then saw his gaze sharpen as she licked her lower lip.

"I'm glad you approve."

The next dish was Sole à la Normande, or so Dalton informed her. Margaret frowned at it, as if she found suspicious or confounding the bits of fish, mushrooms, and shellfish swimming in their creamy sauce. She anticipated the taste before she even reached for the fork, instinctively reaching for the correct utensil to pry the oyster from its shell.

It did not disappoint. The flavor of the fresh seafood, the tangy saltiness perfectly balanced by the creamy sauce. She ate every oyster on her plate.

The dishes kept coming out, although by the third, she started taking little bites instead of finishing the entire serving. It was tempting because everything was delicious. The spices, the aromas, the textures. They entranced her palate and caused fireworks of pleasure to go off in her head, but if she wanted to try them all, she had better pace herself.

Vivienne could never have predicted that a simple meal could stir so many emotions. Not that the veritable feast paraded out in perfect synchrony could be called *simple*. But she had felt more — not quite memories, but stirrings — in the past half hour than in the last seven years.

Was it possible that taste and smell were the keys to her recovery? If that was the case, how come nothing she had smelled or tasted before had even remotely stirred her? Maybe because she had never had these delicacies in Guernsey. The rector was not poor. The rectory, where she had lived as a companion to his mother, was a handsome house, and she had never found any fault with the meals served there. But they could not compare to the sophisticated dishes of a duke's table. They had been sober, simple foods. No elaborate sauces or interesting spices.

Was this how she used to eat?

"I couldn't possibly eat more," Vivienne said with a satisfied sigh as the sixth — or was it the seventh? — course was removed from the table.

"Nor should you," Paul said. He had spoken little throughout the meal. "It's not good for the constitution."

"But now comes the best part," the duke retorted, looking at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement. "Dessert."

"Oh, I love sweets." If they were as good as every other dish she had tasted tonight, she was in for a treat.

His smile grew. "I know."

"Maybe I can eat a tiny piece of dessert," she said, responding to his smile.

"I cannot recommend this excess of rich foods," Paul said.

"Come now, Harrison," Dalton replied without taking his eyes off her. "Don't be a spoilsport."

It was said without heat, but Paul stiffened nonetheless. "I'm merely looking out for her health. She's not used to such rich sauces and exotic spices. It might upset her digestion or overstimulate the mind."

She wanted to protest that she felt just fine. Diffuse the tension between the two men. But before she could get the words out, Dalton replied, at last taking his gaze off her to turn to Paul.

"My wife is used to such meals. Or did you not notice how she knew how to eat each dish, what fork to use for each course?"

Oh! Even she had not noticed that. It had all been instinctive.

"Some of the dishes served tonight are among her favorites," Dalton continued. "And a little stimulation of the mind might be a good thing. She has never eaten in excess and never to her detriment, so I trust her judgment in this."

"I feel fine, Paul. Really. There's no cause for concern."

"Well, I, for one, am looking forward to the dessert." Margaret, bless her, interjected with a bright grin. "I may regret it tomorrow, but I'll deal with the consequences later."

"That's the spirit," Dalton replied, returning her smile.

At that moment, the servants entered and placed a small glass bowl of something creamy, buttery, and sweet in front of her. The aroma of sherry wafted up to her nose.

"That's tipsy cake. And it used to be your favorite," Dalton said.

She had the feeling it still was. If the cake tasted as good as it looked, she would devour the entire thing. The first delicate spoonful bathed her in comfort and warmth. The feeling of well-being, of belonging, more than the mere flavor of the cake could inspire.

No, this was coming from a deeper place. From inside her. This was not just a cake. This had not been merely a dinner. It had been a journey for her senses. An exploratory mission. Clever of him to realize that flavors and smells might evoke feelings and then memories faster than mere conversations. If that was the case, then yes, stimulation of the mind was a very good thing indeed.

One thing was for certain. Her mind might not remember the details. But her body definitely remembered. Her senses remembered. For the first time in a long time, she felt optimistic that she might, in time, recover her memories. Surely they could not be gone when they shaped her tastes, her senses, and even her dreams.

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Chapter 13

She had dreamed again.

Not her usual nightmare of being chased and bound, but a different one. Disjointed images she could not make sense of.

A high-society ball. Except everyone in it was from Guernsey. She was exploring the corridors of a beautiful mansion, and she knew it had been her home, but everything lay abandoned, the furniture under holland covers. She had made it to what she thought was her bedroom. Dusty. As though it had been left abandoned for decades, not seven years. The bed curtains were stiff and fragile with age. Nothing like what she had found here, where her room had been maintained with meticulous care.

And yet, walking through the abandoned mansion did not cause terror in her. It was like a homecoming. She recognized things. It awakened a strange sort of melancholy.

Vivienne rose slowly. She had slept well, despite being in a strange place. Although she supposed it was not so strange after all, if this had once been her home. Maybe that was what her mind was trying to tell her with the weird dreams. Maybe her body remembered.

She should keep a diary. Start writing down her dreams, her impressions, the tastes, smells, every fragment of memory, and try to piece together the woman she had been.

She pulled on her dressing gown and had just tied the sash when someone knocked on her door.

She bid entrance without thinking, her mind still tangled in the dream.

The connecting door opened, and Dalton stood on the threshold.

Not the impeccable duke. Not the controlled, intimidating aristocrat she had been learning to navigate. He wore trousers and a half-buttoned shirt, untucked, his feet bare, his hair disordered. As though he had risen from bed and quickly thrown on whatever came to hand.

She stared at the wedge of exposed chest at the open collar. She could not help it. No man had any business looking so good.

"Good morning." His voice was rough from sleep. "Forgive me for intruding. I wanted to ask how you slept."

"Very well, thank you." A lie, but she was not about to describe her dreams to this man. "And you?"

The corner of his mouth twisted. Not quite a smile. "Well enough."

Silence. She searched for something to say, but his presence — barefoot, shirt undone — made him seem younger, less guarded, and scattered her thoughts.

"I thought it was the maid knocking," she said, because the quiet had become unbearable.

"She will be here presently, I'm sure. Have you rung for her? If you need anything, you only have to say so. All the servants in the house have the order to obey your every command."

"Thank you. No, I haven't rung for the maid. It hadn't even occurred to me, to be honest. I'm not used to having servants."

"I see." But he frowned as if he did not see at all. Could not comprehend not having people at his beck and call. Then pointed to a cord by the bed.

"Well, you only have to pull on that cord and someone will come to you."

She nodded. "Thank you, I know."

Why was it so difficult to talk to him now? They had conversed more easily on the previous two days. Maybe it was the intimate setting, their state of undress. In some ways he was so familiar, and yet he was also a stranger. She did not know what she should talk to him about. How to say the words he wanted to hear.

She supposed he felt the same, for he treated her with both familiarity and awkwardness. Knocking on her door half dressed had been an act of

familiarity, and yet the conversation that followed was stilted. As if her hesitation reminded him that things had changed.

Her eyes kept dropping to that sliver of chest uncovered by the V of the half-undone shirt. Had he noticed her looking?

He stepped back, and the tension eased enough for her to breathe.

"Shall I come back in half an hour?" he said. "I can escort you to the breakfast room, and then we'll do the tour I promised."

"Yes. Thank you."

He closed the door. She stood a moment, her hand at her throat, her pulse still going too fast.

The tour took over an hour and took her through rooms with ornate ceilings and even more ornate walls. Galleries hung with stern ancestors in gilt frames. Drawing rooms carpeted in silk from distant lands, with chairs too beautiful to sit upon. Had she really been the mistress of all this?

Dalton walked at her side, unhurried, his voice deep and steady as he guided her from chamber to chamber, narrating the history of the place.

"They added this wing in my grandfather's time," he said, his hand at the small of her back as they turned a corner. Brief contact, barely a touch, but she felt it through her stays. "The older stones lie to the west. You can tell by the windows — narrower, meant for defense rather than light."

She tried to imagine it. Waking each morning to this, knowing which stair curved where, which corridor led home. It should have felt familiar. It did not. She was a guest in a life that ought to have been her own.

He offered small pieces of history as they walked — a fire in the east wing, a restoration after a storm, an eccentric great-uncle who had planted palms against all advice and coaxed them to thrive. Servants bowed as they passed. They looked at her with warmth. Relief. Something close to wonder.

As though she had returned from the grave.

Which, she supposed, she had.

By the time they descended toward the kitchens, the air had changed. It was warmer. Richer. Bread and herbs. Copper pans on the wall. A kitchen maid bobbed a curtsy so deep Vivienne feared she might not come back up.

Then she saw the door.

Thick oak, darkened by centuries, iron-banded, its hinges black with age. It did not belong here, not among the flour-dusted worktables and the cheerful clatter of pots.

Vivienne slowed.

Something stirred at the edge of her mind. Not a thought. A sensation. Cold stone under her bare feet. Darkness pressing close. The echo of steps down corridors that went on and on.

Her pulse tripped.

And beneath the prickle of unease, something else she could never account for. A quickening. One that was not caused by fear alone.

She moved toward the door before she knew she meant to.

"Where does that lead?"

Dalton answered too fast. "The larder and wine cellar. Old service passages. They run underneath half the castle." A wave of his hand, studied in its carelessness. "Drafty places, used only by the servants. Nothing you need concern yourself with."

She turned to him, but before she could press him further, he was already leading her away, his voice resuming its measured cadence. "Come. I want to show you the south terrace. The view at sunset is unmatched in the county."

She allowed him to lead her.

What else could she do?

Yet as they reached the far end of the kitchens, Vivienne glanced back.

The door called to her, signaling something. She just did not know what.

Yet she knew with a certainty that made her skin prickle that Dalton might not have lied. But he had not told her the entire truth either.

Something lurked beyond that threshold. Secrets he did not want her to know. Perhaps memories he did not wish her to remember.

Very well.

She would discover it on her own.

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Chapter 14

DALTON HEARD THEM BEFORE he saw them.

Vivienne spoke in a low voice threaded with warmth. He knew it well. She had used it with him before, in what felt like another lifetime. Reserved for the dark, for their bed, for the moments after they shut out the world.

Now she reserved it for Harrison.

He slowed in the corridor outside the morning parlor, a tightness gathering in his chest.

A week. She had been beneath his roof for seven days, and in that time he had managed only one hour of uninterrupted time with her. One sustained conversation, the day they toured the castle, during which she had been polite but overwhelmed, and had asked about a locked door he could not explain.

Since then, nothing. Breakfasts where she paid more attention to her toast than she did to him. Afternoons where he arrived in whatever room she occupied only to find Harrison already there, deep in some discussion that quieted at his entrance. Evenings where Margaret kept up a stream of warm, impenetrable chatter that filled every silence before it could become an opening.

He was being managed. The doctor and the old woman had drawn a perimeter around Vivienne as neatly as any military cordon, and they were

holding it with the ruthlessness of people who believed they were protecting her.

From him.

Her own husband.

The absurdity did not lessen the sting. He had been reduced to seeking opportunities to speak to his own wife as though he were a petitioner begging for an audience — timing his appearances, lingering in doorways like a man who had lost the right to walk through them.

And at night… Christ, the nights. She slept in the chamber adjoining his. Every evening he stood in the dark, aware of the connecting door between them. A taunt and a prohibition. Once, he would have crossed that threshold without knocking, and she would have received him eagerly. The only question between them had ever been which bed — his or hers — and the answer had rarely mattered because they would both be in it regardless.

Now the door stayed shut.

She had not invited him. And after that awkward encounter the first morning, he would sooner cut off his own hand than risk knocking again and seeing fear in her eyes.

He pushed open the parlor door.

The three of them gathered around the writing desk near the window. Vivienne seated, Harrison standing with a folded paper crushed in his fist, Margaret upright in the chair opposite. They had been speaking in urgent, hushed tones. A second paper lay open on the desk beside a teacup that had gone cold.

No one looked up when he entered.

"— worse than the rector's letter suggested," Harrison was saying, his voice tight. "This is a telegram. The scarlet fever has taken hold. There are new cases every hour. The families are frightened, and old Mrs. Le Page has no one to sit with her through the night."

Margaret had gone pale, but her voice did not waver. "I shall go with you. The fever will not take me, for I already had it as a girl. I can sit with the sick and relieve the younger women who have children to mind."

Dalton's gaze settled on the crushed paper in Harrison's hand, then the letter on the desk. So there had been a first warning, sent by the rector, and then the wire. The island was in crisis.

"I could go as well — " Vivienne started.

"Absolutely not."

Three pairs of eyes snapped toward him. They had not heard him come in. The words had come out harder than he intended, and he saw Vivienne stiffen.

He did not take the words back. His wife, in the middle of an epidemic. Unthinkable. He would fight her on this. He would fight all three of them if he had to.

She turned to face him, chin lifting in a gesture he recognized from before. From the old Vivienne, who had never backed down from an argument in eight years of marriage. The gesture struck him somewhere between recognition and grief.

"If there is anything I can do to help," she said, "it is my duty to do so."

"You can help in other ways. But you will not set foot on that island while there is an epidemic raging."

Her eyes narrowed. "You cannot simply — "

"I can. And I am."

He watched her gather herself for the argument, saw the defiance in those hazel eyes, and braced himself. The last thing he wanted was to antagonize her. Their marriage was so fragile it barely existed. But he would forbid it. Grovel afterward if necessary. Whatever it cost him with her, he would keep her safe.

Harrison intervened before the thing could detonate.

"The duke is right, Grace." That borrowed name still grated, the one she had carried for seven years while he grieved a woman he believed was dead. "You must not come. I am only permitting Margaret because she has already survived the fever once and is therefore less vulnerable. But you have no such protection. As your physician, I cannot advise it."

Vivienne looked at the doctor. Then, after a long moment, accepted his verdict with a nod.

Dalton noted it. She had yielded to Harrison's authority. Not his. The same prohibition, the same reasoning, and she had bristled at her husband and deferred to the doctor.

But this was not the time to quibble about that. Their opinions aligned, and that was enough.

"When do you leave?" she asked. Resigned.

"This afternoon, if I can secure passage. The packet steamer — "

"You shall not waste time with packet steamers," Dalton said.

They all turned toward him. He stepped further into the room, hands clasped behind his back. "My yacht can be ready within the hour. She is faster than anything in the harbor and will carry you to St. Peter Port directly."

The silence that followed was, he thought, almost insulting. Harrison blinked. Margaret's lips parted. Vivienne stared at him as though he had performed some trick rather than offered a boat.

Did they think him incapable of basic decency?

"Your Grace," Harrison began, "that is — "

"Necessary." He would not allow gratitude to cause awkwardness. "And you shall not go empty-handed. Make me a list. Medicines, fresh linen, preserved foods, coal for the hospital — whatever you believe they will need. My staff will gather what they can before you sail. Anything we cannot source in time will follow on the next tide."

He met the doctor's eyes. Whatever else lay between them — the suspicion, the jealousy, the unspoken contest over Vivienne's loyalty — it did not belong in this room.

"The island saved my wife's life," he said. "It sheltered her for seven years. I am in its debt."

Harrison's expression changed, the guarded wariness giving way to reluctant gratitude. Perhaps even a smidgen of respect.

"They will be grateful, sir. More than I can say."

"And if you require more help once you have assessed the situation, you need only send word and I will see to it."

Margaret reached for his hand and squeezed it with surprising strength. Her eyes were bright.

"God bless you, Your Grace."

He inclined his head. He was not comfortable with blessings he had not earned. But the old woman was not thanking him only for the yacht. She was revising her estimation of him, and if that influenced Vivienne's opinion, he was not too proud to let her.

Vivienne was watching him. The wary assessment he had grown accustomed to was gone. In its place… not trust, not yet, but something similar. Approval, perhaps.

"Thank you," she said.

"I should see to the preparations," he said, uncomfortable with her gratitude. "Harrison, your list. Within the half hour, if you please."

He turned and left the room before the feeling could reach his face.

In his study, he rang for Prowse and began giving orders about the yacht.

The departure consumed the next two hours. Supplies requisitioned, the crew summoned, provisions loaded under Mrs. Trevena's supervision. Margaret packed with the brisk economy of a woman who knows how to handle herself in a crisis. Harrison compiled his medical list with grim efficiency.

Dalton read it, doubled the quantities of carbolic acid and quinine, and added a crate of fresh linens without being asked.

By half past three, the yacht was ready.

They gathered in the entrance hall. Vivienne stood near the bottom of the staircase, her fingers twisting in the fabric of her skirt.

Harrison appeared with his medical bag and a single valise. He looked drawn. The urgency that had carried him through the morning had settled into resolve.

It was Margaret who came last. The old woman descended the staircase in her traveling cape and sensible bonnet, her spine straight, her pace unhurried. Vivienne turned to meet her, and her face crumpled.

"Now then," Margaret said, taking Vivienne's hands in both of hers. "None of that. I shall return before you know it."

"Promise me you will be careful."

"I have survived a great deal worse than scarlet fever, my dear. I survived raising three sons and burying two husbands. A little island epidemic is hardly going to finish me off."

A watery laugh escaped Vivienne, and Margaret drew her closer. For seven years, she had been the nearest thing to a mother Vivienne possessed. This kind old lady had taken in a woman with no name and no history and given her a home, a purpose, and the plain, steady fact of being wanted.

"You are braver than you know," Margaret said. She cupped Vivienne's face. "You always were. Even when you could not remember being brave, you were. You do not need me here to tell you."

She glanced at Dalton over Vivienne's shoulder, and the look she gave him was a command. *Take care of her. Or answer to me.*

He held her gaze and nodded once.

Margaret patted Vivienne's cheek, adjusted her bonnet, and bustled toward the door.

Dalton watched her go. Harrison's farewell was harder to witness.

The doctor approached Vivienne with the easy intimacy that had been under Dalton's skin for eight days. He took her hands and held them as though he had every right. In a sense, he did. He had been her protector, her physician, the man she had once agreed to marry. The fact that the marriage was void did not erase the intention behind it.

"You will take care of yourself?" The worry in her voice made Dalton look away, examining the stonework as though the grouting required his professional opinion.

"I shall try," Harrison said with a small smile.

He bent and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

Dalton absorbed the familiarity, the tenderness, the ease with which she permitted it. An ease she did not yet feel around him. His hands stayed at his sides, and his face betrayed nothing. He had spent twenty years in the intelligence service. He could endure a kiss on the knuckles.

Then Harrison drew her into an embrace. Brief. Decent. No sane husband could take offense.

The burn behind his sternum suggested sanity was not the governing factor.

He still said nothing. Watched Harrison release her, step back, incline his head.

"I will send word when we arrive."

"Please do." The catch in her voice was a small, precise wound.

Harrison turned to him last. The two men regarded each other across the entrance hall. For a moment, the old antagonism held. Then Harrison extended his hand.

"Your Grace. Thank you."

Dalton took it. The handshake was firm and brief and contained more honesty than any conversation they had managed in eight days.

"Bring them through it," Dalton said. "And bring yourself back in one piece. She will worry until you do."

Those words cost him more than the yacht full of supplies.

Harrison stared at him for a moment. Then he nodded, collected his bag, and followed Margaret out into the afternoon.

The great door closed behind them.

Vivienne remained at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the newel post, her face turned toward the door. Her eyes were bright, and the sight of them nearly cracked him open.

He ought to say something. Offer comfort. Reassure her. Suggest tea. Anything that might bridge the distance without shattering the fragile truce they had built.

Instead, he said nothing. Because the first thought he could hold was that his rival had left, and he was glad Harrison was gone.

He was glad. God help him.

The shame came next, and he did not fight it. He deserved it. He would have preferred different circumstances, of course. But he would not pretend he was sorry to have his wife to himself. He had long since learned that lying to himself was a luxury he could not afford.

He would help the island. He had already set it in motion: money, supplies, physicians — whatever it took. Because it was the right thing. Because the people who had been Vivienne's friends and only protectors for years were ill.

But the man who had occupied her hours, her confidence, and her affection, who had stood between Dalton and his own wife with the tenacity of a sentry, was gone from his home.

And if Dalton had his way, the doctor would soon be gone from her thoughts as well.

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CHAPTER 15

THE CLINKING OF CHINA was the only sound in the breakfast parlor.

Vivienne lifted her teacup. Set it down without drinking. Across the table, Dalton turned the page of his newspaper, yet she would have bet he was not really reading it.

Three days since Paul and Margaret had sailed for Guernsey. Three days of meals like this one — well prepared, well served, and so polite she wanted to scream into her napkin.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Very well, thank you."

"Good."

Silence, only broken by the ticking of the clock on the mantel.

She had written to Paul every day since his departure, but other than the brief telegram confirming their arrival, she had heard nothing. No response to her questions about the scarlet fever, the supplies, or the state of the islanders. The silence from Guernsey gnawed at her.

"I confess I'm worried about Guernsey," she said. "I haven't heard from Paul or Margaret."

Something crossed Dalton's face, too fast for her to read.

"If the situation were dire, the yacht crew would have sent word." His voice was calm. "We will know more when they return this morning."

"You seem very certain of that."

"Certainty is preferable to speculation."

She nodded and smiled for his benefit. He had done more than anyone would expect him to do. His yacht had made two more trips, crammed to its rails with provisions and medicines. He did not know those people. He owed them nothing beyond the refuge they had once offered her.

And yet he spoke of it as though it were nothing.

She did not know what to make of it. What to make of him.

"That portrait," she said instead, nodding toward the wall behind him. She had been staring at it for ten mornings and decided it was as good a topic as any. "Who is it?"

Dalton turned in his chair. The painting depicted a man in an elaborate periwig and crimson coat, one hand upon a globe, the other extended toward a parrot that appeared to be biting his finger.

"The third duke," Dalton said. "Renowned explorer. Or so he claimed."

"He looks rather alarmed."

"The parrot was ill-tempered. It bit three footmen before escaping through a window." He paused. "They found it in the village church, perched upon the pulpit. The rector took it as a sign from God, though no one understood what the sign meant."

A laugh escaped her before she could stop it. Startled and bright, and it changed the air between them.

Dalton's expression loosened. For a moment, she saw something unguarded in his eyes. Surprise. Pleasure. It made the breath catch in her throat.

"You're making that up," she accused.

"I'm not. Venus can confirm it. She was terrified of parrots until she was twelve."

"I can't imagine your sister being terrified of anything."

"Then you remember more than you think." The words came out easily, almost teasing, and then he seemed to hear what he had said. The openness in his face faded by several degrees and he reached for his teacup.

The moment passed, but the thinnest fissure opened in the wall of courtesy they had been building for three days — and she did not intend to let it seal.

"What else?" she pressed. "What other dubious ancestors are hiding in these corridors?"

He studied her over the rim of his cup. Whatever he found seemed to satisfy him.

"The fifth duchess kept a badger in her dressing room. The sixth duke lost a thousand pounds at cards and won it back by betting he could swim the ornamental lake in January."

"Did he succeed?"

"He did. Though his valet reported certain parts of the duke's anatomy did not recover their natural dimensions until April."

She choked on her tea.

Dalton handed her his handkerchief without comment, but the curve of his mouth deepened into something close to a smile. It changed his face. Made him appear less guarded. More approachable.

"I think," she said, pressing the linen to her lips, "that your family is more interesting than you let on."

"I think," he replied, "that discretion has been an undervalued virtue among the St Aubyns."

She laughed again, and this time, he almost joined her. Not quite. But the effort it cost him not to was visible, and that was better.

At that moment, the butler entered, carrying a silver tray.

"A letter for Her Grace, from Guernsey. Delivered by the captain of the yacht."

She was on her feet before the tray reached the table. She tore open the envelope, eyes racing across the page, then slowing, searching between the lines.

"It's from Paul." She looked up, remembering Dalton. Wanting to include him. He deserved that after what he had done.

"So I surmised." The openness from before had vanished.

"He says the supplies arrived. He thanks you." She glanced down again and read. "*With the excellent stores His Grace so generously dispatched, we have been able to keep the sufferers warm, nourished, and properly tended.*" Vivienne lifted her gaze to her husband. "He says the epidemic has assumed a milder character than feared. No fatalities. Most are recovering."

"I'm glad."

"They are grateful beyond measure. And so am I."

"Think nothing of it." Gruff. As though her gratitude bothered him.

She folded the letter, watching him return to his newspaper. He turned the page. Then another. He definitely was not reading it.

"If you will excuse me," he said, standing, "there are matters that require my attention."

"Of course."

He left without another word. The earlier ease they had achieved through laughter and banter gone as if it had never existed. And yet, in every interaction, she could see the yearning in his eyes, the press of a thousand words he held back. And underlying it all, a beat of something that felt like disappointment.

She wanted to scream in frustration.

Ah, if only she were able to solve the puzzle that was her husband.

She needed to get away from the house. Breathe some fresh air.

The past few days had been rainy, but today the sun blazed bright and warm, the sky was a clear blue. The perfect day to be outdoors.

Half an hour later, armed with a blanket and directions, Vivienne left the house.

The gardens unfurled before her in a haze of color and heat, gravel paths pale beneath the sun. She ought to explore them another time. Today, she had a different destination in mind.

She followed the path as it dipped, curved… and the sea revealed itself in a glittering sweep of blue so sudden it stole her breath.

This was not the same cove where the pier was. This one lay on the other side of the cliff. Hidden even from the castle. So secret she had not known it existed until Lucy mentioned it. Private.

The cove lay cradled in a perfect crescent, cliffs rising on either side like guardians. Within, the waves gentled to a murmur, lapping at sand as pale as sifted flour. The shallows shone aquamarine, clear enough to reveal the rippled patterns beneath.

There was no one in sight. Only gulls and the murmur of the tide. She stood at the bottom of the path with her shoes in her hand, the sand warm beneath her stockinged feet, and felt something tug at her chest.

Not a memory. Something older. Joy without a source. The same sun, hot upon her skin. The same brightness upon the waves. The water closing over her shoulders, her throat, her hair, her entire body. Weightless. Free. Wrapped in liquid light.

The heat pressed against her skin. The water glittered.

She should not. There was no bathing machine, no costume, no propriety to speak of.

She went in anyway.

She stripped to her undergarments behind a boulder, folding her clothes with care. Then ran toward the waves with childish joy. The first touch of water made her gasp. It was cold, but not bitterly so. So she waded in, the thin cotton of her undergarments billowing and floating around her. When the water reached her waist, she pushed off the sandy bottom and…

Oh…

Her body knew what to do. Arms pulling in clean strokes, legs kicking in a steady rhythm, her breathing falling into a pattern she had not learned. Procedural memory, Paul called it, when her body knew how to do something her mind did not remember.

She floated on her back, eyes closed, the sun warm against her face. For a moment, she was simply a body in the water. No past. No questions.

And then she felt it.

Warmth beside her. A shoulder brushing hers. A presence. Close. Intimate.

She turned sharply.

No one. Only water.

But her skin insisted it had been real. She dipped her head underwater and swam a little longer, chasing that fleeting touch.



DALTON RETREATED TO HIS study and accomplished nothing.

He sat at his desk. Opened the same report three times. Read the first paragraph with devoted attention and retained none of it.

Before the amnesia, conversation between him and his wife had been as natural as breathing. They had ranged from politics to philosophy to the most intimate nonsense, and the silence itself had been companionable. Now every topic felt like a minefield. Say too little and he seemed cold. Say too much and he pressed where he had no right.

This morning, for a little while, they had regained that ease. He had told her silly stories and she had laughed. Twice.

Then the damn doctor's letter had arrived. He had watched the way her face had opened, the way her fingers had trembled at the seal. She wrote to

Harrison every day. She watched for the post the way other women watched for a lover's carriage.

Her heart was in Guernsey. With the doctor.

Not here. Not with him.

A curse slipped from under his breath. He pushed back from the desk and went to the window. The restlessness in his limbs was too sharp to sit still.

The day blazed. Too warm for September. He dragged off his coat, then his necktie. Sunlight poured across the lawns, down to the glittering blue beyond.

The sea.

Once he had loved it. Had run toward it with a boyish joy.

Now he saw an enemy. A thief.

He turned from the window. Tried the report a fourth time. Gave it up. Went to find her, because the alternative was sitting in this chair pretending he was not counting the minutes.

"Where is the duchess?" he asked the first footman he encountered.

"She went to the cove, Your Grace."

Alarm bells exploded in his brain.

"To the private cove?"

"I believe so."

"By herself?"

The footman took a step back, alerted by his rising tone.

"Yes, Your Grace. She requested a blanket."

Alone. To the cove. To the sea that had taken her seven years ago.

He was running before reason could catch him.

He was acting like a fool, he told himself as he took the stairs two at a time. A ridiculous, overbearing fool. She would be sitting on the sand with her parasol.

Except she had once loved swimming in that cove.

He ran faster.

Overgrown foliage covered the path to the beach. A path he had not used in seven years. He pushed through it, rounded the last bend, and stopped dead.

A blanket on the sand. Shoes. Stockings. A pile of clothing arranged with neat precision.

His wife was nowhere in sight.

Good God, she must have gone into the sea. Cold dread swamped his chest, spreading through his body faster than a tidal wave. He ran to the shoreline, frantically scanning the waves. Nothing. No movement. No sound but the gulls.

"Vivienne!" he roared, already wading into the water.

A head surfaced a few yards ahead.

"Dalton? I'm right here."

His knees almost buckled. He wanted to weep. He wanted to fall on the sand and give thanks.

"Get out of the water this instant!" he bellowed.

"I can't."

Fear sharpened her voice. He waded toward her.

"Why not?"

Was she stuck? Hurt? Two more strides and he was almost within arm's reach of her.

"Because I'm in my underwear. Turn around, please."

He stared at her. Then the absurdity of the thing struck against the terror still running through him. Modesty. She was worried about modesty. When he had nearly lost his mind.

"You should have considered that before you stripped off your clothing and got into the sea." He reached her in two more strides and hooked an arm around her waist.

"Let me go!" She squirmed against him, one hand pressing her chemise flat against her breasts, the other shoving at his chest. The thin cotton clung to every curve, revealing the shape of her, the dark circles of her areolas… he tore his gaze away.

"Stop. I'm your husband. I've seen you naked before."

Rougher than he had intended. She gasped and threw him a wounded look, but she stopped fighting him.

He carried her to the blanket. Set her down. Turned away.

Or tried to. His eyes kept returning. Wet cotton. Fair skin.

"Did you at least bring a towel?"

"No." She was crouching over her clothes, wringing water from her chemise. "I hadn't planned on swimming. It was an impulse."

"Evidently."

She snatched up a petticoat and blotted herself as best she could, then tried to step into her hoops — a maneuver made impossible by wet skin and

the sea breeze. The movement parted the slit in her drawers, and he caught a flash of auburn curls at the apex of her thighs.

He looked away. Looked back. The view had not improved. Or it had improved too much. Depending.

"For God's sake." He took the damp petticoat from her hands and dropped it over her head, settling it at her waist.

"I need to put on the hoops first!"

"You need to cover yourself fast," he gritted out, snatching her corset from the pile and lifting it over her head. Thankfully, she obediently put up her arms to let the garment fall over her head. He turned her by the shoulders and laced her with quick, sure pulls until she was tightly bound. Secure.

His hands knew this work. The distance between eyelets, the tension of the cord, the way the boning sat against her ribs. His fingers moved through motions they had performed a thousand times, and the familiarity of it ached in a place he could not name.

"The skirt will drag without the hoops," she protested when he pulled the skirt over her head.

"You'll hold it up."

"I'll look absurd."

"At least you'll be dressed, which is the improvement we are after."

Her skirt in place, he handed her the blouse and turned his back. His pulse was still hammering. Clothes soaked to mid-chest. His hands, which had just laced her corset with the surety of long practice, were shaking.

"You may turn around," she said.

He did. She was glaring at him like a bedraggled kitten, wet hair plastered to her face, spiky eyelashes magnifying the fury of her hazel-green eyes. Water dripped from her hair onto the sand.

He wanted to kiss her senseless. Or take her over his knee and spank her for what she had put him through. No, he should not be thinking about spanking her. That last image did not help the state of his cock, or his mood.

"Of all the harebrained, reckless, idiotic ideas — " he started.

"Why is it idiotic? I was perfectly fine before you arrived like a madman to drag me out."

"Like a madman? Damn right I was. I was mad with terror. How can you even bear to go into the sea after what happened? I found your clothes on the sand, and you were gone, Vivienne. Gone."

The word fell between them. Heavier than he had meant.

Her face changed. The fight left her eyes.

"Oh," she said. "I hadn't realized. The sea… what happened to me. This must have been — "

"Don't." He turned away, raking a hand through his hair.

He had caught her wet, undressed, and utterly exposed. But while her nakedness had been skin deep, he had just completely exposed his soul. Every feeling raw and visible.

Her hand settled on his arm. Light. Careful. The first time she had touched him of her own choosing since Guernsey.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't remember my ordeal, so I'm not afraid of the sea. From the moment I first saw the cove, I felt a pull I couldn't explain. As though I'd done this before."

Because she had. They had both spent summer afternoons in this cove. Swimming, laughing, making love on the sand with only a blanket beneath them and the sky above. He could taste the salt on her skin if he let himself remember. He could feel the sun on his back and her fingers in his hair.

He could not tell her any of it. The doctor had warned him. Do not force her memories. Do not tell her too much too soon.

"Did you remember anything?" He kept his voice level.

"No." A pause. "I'm sorry. I had a sense of familiarity. Of having been here before and having loved it. But nothing I could hold."

He nodded because he did not trust himself to speak.

"This was worse for you, wasn't it?" Her hand slid down his arm and found his. She laced their fingers together. "My amnesia has been its own kind of hell, but at least the missing memories spared me the worst. The grief. The unbearable memories. You had no such mercy."

He swallowed a knot that had lodged itself in his throat. If she kept speaking, if she kept looking at him with those eyes, he was going to break, and he did not know how to put himself back together.

He pulled his hand from hers and saw the hurt cross her face.

"I'm fine." Too brusque. "You are the one who needs care. Just promise me you won't swim alone."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll set someone to follow your every step."

She drew herself up. Five feet and four inches of wet, bedraggled indignation. "As if I were a prisoner?"

"As if you were a woman who just gave her husband a decade's worth of gray hair in five minutes."

Her lips twitched. She fought the twitch and lost, and then won again, pressing her mouth flat. But he had seen it.

He tried once more. Slower.

"I don't mean to limit you. But the cove can turn dangerous — the tides, the currents, a cramp. If you wish to come here, tell me. I'll come with you."

"You would come with me? To the sea?"

She did not know what she was asking. Seven years of nightmares compressed into the seconds before her head broke the surface.

"Yes," he said.

She nodded. "I promise."

"Good. Now allow me to escort you to the house. I wouldn't want you to catch a chill."

For the first time, she looked down the length of his body.

"Goodness, you are still wearing your shoes! I'm afraid those are quite ruined."

"My valet will be devastated, I'm sure." He replied as he bent to gather the blanket. He did not give a damn about his shoes. Had not given them a second thought. He gestured toward the overgrown path. "After you, Duchess."

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CHAPTER 16

SOMETHING HAD SHIFTED IN their relationship since this morning. That scene at the beach would not leave her mind.

After arriving home, she had not seen him again until dinnertime. But the effect of their interaction had not faded. Where before their silences had been heavy and uncomfortable, now the very air seemed to shimmer between them. The dinner passed in a blur of candlelight and silver.

Vivienne would be hard-pressed to mention what dishes were served, although everything was delicious as always. But she was aware only of him at the head of the table, of the way the light burnished the dark locks of his hair and carved weary lines beside his mouth that had not been there in the portrait above the mantel.

Every time she lifted her glass, she felt again the iron band of his arm about her ribs, the violent hammer of his heart against her breast, the way his hands had searched her as if to reassure himself she existed whole and living beneath them.

She had been half naked.

The knowledge warmed her cheeks now, and she brought the glass of wine to her lips to hide her reaction. And yet there had been nothing improper in him. Only urgency. Relief. Pain so raw she had felt almost ashamed to witness it.

His eyes that did not miss anything must have seen her heightened color.

"No ill effects from the swim?" he asked.

"None whatsoever."

"You were chilled."

She had been chilled by the time they made it back to the house, but it had helped that he had ordered a hot bath for her.

A cold man would not be so attuned to her needs and well-being.

A distant one would not have trembled with fear at the thought of any harm befalling her.

Something had altered upon that strip of sand. She felt it in the quiet awareness that pulsed between them each time their eyes met and skittered away again.

She did not remember loving him. But she had understood, in those breathless moments while he dressed her in her garments with hands that knew exactly how, that once she must have trusted him beyond thought.

His fingers had laced her corset with firm certainty. Had arranged her skirts with a husband's touch.

The conviction of it had followed her back to the castle. She felt married to him now in a way she had not that morning.

"What did we talk about? Before."

Dalton's fork paused halfway to his mouth. He set it down before answering.

"Everything," he said.

She had been in this house for weeks now. Performing the role of an amnesiac wife who had returned to a life she could not remember with what she hoped was grace and endurance.

She was tired of endurance.

"Everything is not an answer," she said. "It is an evasion. Give me something specific."

The corners of his eyes creased, and his lips twitched, as if he were about to smile.

"You used to say things like that," he said.

"Did I?"

"You did. It was one of the reasons I fell in love with you. You didn't fawn or demur. You spoke your mind. Challenged and teased me."

The revelation sat in her chest. Warm and startling. This was not only a revelation about their past relationship, but about her own personality. She had felt this urge to speak her mind. To be daring. But in recent times she

had always repressed it. Not knowing one's identity could make a person fearful and unsure.

"Tell me more about it," she pressed. "Not what we discussed. What we were like. Together."

He regarded her. The candlelight caught the silver threaded through his dark hair.

"We argued about poetry and literature," he said. "We debated politics and social issues. You had opinions that would have scandalized half the House of Lords, and you delivered them over breakfast as though commenting on the weather. We laughed. You made me laugh, Vivi, which was no small feat." A pause. "We were happy."

The last two words cost him. She saw it in the tightening of his jaw, in the careful way he laid his napkin beside his plate, as though precision in small things could compensate for the rest.

The kind of marriage he was describing… she yearned for that.

"Why don't you talk to me the same way now?"

"Because you don't remember anything about our past life. Every time I think of a subject, I don't know if it will be adequate. I'm afraid to say the wrong thing and make matters worse."

He feared one misplaced word might shatter her.

"You can speak to me about anything you used to before. If I don't know something, I'll say so, and maybe you can enlighten me. Treat me the same way you used to. I want to learn more about my past life."

He paused. Hesitated. She had the impression that he was checking himself. Holding back.

"I want that too. But wouldn't that be considered manipulating your memories if I'm giving you my version of events? I don't know how much to say. Also," another pause, "you seem to be uncomfortable around me. Not that I blame you. If you don't remember me, then I'm only a stranger to you. And yet we are married. It must be difficult for you to grapple with that. And for me as well, to feel like an intruder at your side, when you are so familiar to me."

"I see…" He did not feel like a stranger at the moment, but she did not know how to bridge this gulf between them. If only she could remember something. A small detail to offer him. To let him know she was still the same woman. That same tension that had simmered between them since this

morning was still humming in her body. But she did not know how to tell him that.

"Show me," she said instead. "Show me something we did together. Something real."

He looked at her. The crease between his brows deepened, then smoothed.

"Will you walk with me? The gardens are beautiful at this hour."

"I should like that very much," she said.

Relief softened him. An endearing gratitude that was almost boyish.

He summoned a maid, and before Vivienne quite understood his intention, she brought him a wrap. He stepped behind her.

"Allow me."

The wool settled around her shoulders. His fingers brushed her nape, steady and reverent. Arranging the folds with meticulous care, as though the simple act mattered.

He did not offer his arm, yet she walked beside him, their steps matching. Through the open doors, across the terrace, amid the formal beds, clipped hedges, and on gravel paths raked to mathematical precision. At this hour, the last glimmer of daylight turned the stone walls to honey, and the air held the warmth of the day.

Gravel whispered underfoot. Somewhere a fountain murmured, but most of her awareness was on the man walking beside her, hands clasped behind his back. As if he were restraining himself.

Ahead, set on a rise at the garden's farthest edge, stood a small folly. White columns supporting a domed crown. The sunset caught the stone and set it glowing. By unspoken accord, they walked toward it and climbed the steps into the circular space together.

Classical in proportion but intimate in scale — a lover's retreat.

But it was not the folly that stopped her.

That scent… rich and honeyed, yet sharpened by something green and wild beneath.

She stopped.

Dalton was beside her. "Vivienne?"

She heard his voice, but her eyes turned inward. Her mind was no longer in the present. She was chasing an inkling.

The fragrance curled through her senses, slipping past reason into some locked and waiting chamber of her mind.

"That fragrance… I recognize it. I've been here before." She heard her voice as if from a distance. As if she were in two places at the same time. She was watching herself. On this very spot. Long ago. In a moment forgotten in the mists of her mind.

"Naturally. We have strolled through these gardens numerous times over the years."

But his voice was cautious. Guarded. He was holding back.

"No, but I mean… something important happened here." She let go of his arm, took two steps to stand in the center of the folly, turning around, her eyes touching over every piece of greenery that swathed the artificial ruin. As if the statues could give her the answer she sought. She pressed her hand to the nearest column. The stone was warm. That smell… She went to a flower, inhaled deeper. Something else stirred. Another image.

A moonlit night. Soft music spilling out of the house. A melody surfaced in her brain, and she hummed it. She could not remember the name of the song, but the entire piece kept coming to her, the previous note conjuring the next, creating a path in her brain.

She looked at Dalton, and her breath caught. Her heart tripped and tumbled inside her chest. He was frozen, as immobile as the stone statues that adorned the perimeter of the folly. He was looking at her with such an intent expression. His eyes bright with so much yearning and sorrow. He looked almost stricken. Their gazes met and locked.

His face, younger, lit by moonlight. The music. His hands found hers.

"I have asked your father for your hand in marriage." His voice was low and gravelly.

The sentence did not make sense in the present. No, he was speaking to the Vivienne from long ago. And just as if his words had summoned her, that Vivienne from before smiled and asked.

"And what did he say?"

"He accepted." He stepped closer. "Vivienne, I am not a man given to poetry, but from the moment I saw you across a room full of people, I was drawn to you. As soon as I spoke to you, I knew you were my destiny. So I ask you now. Would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes." The word rose from deep in her chest, from the part of her that knew things her mind had lost. They were joyous and yearning. "The answer is yes."

His eyes widened.

"You remember," he breathed.

"I don't. Not really." The images were already breaking apart. She grasped at them: his younger face, the music, the moonlight, the rightness of his hands in hers. They came away in fragments. "I can see it as if through a dream. But I can't hold it."

He took a step, closing the distance between them, and took her hands in his. Brought them to his mouth, kissed each one. His lips warming her palms with reverence and fervor. Unleashing a wave of heat that traveled up her arms to the rest of her body. It was… transcendent.

And she wanted more.

"Aren't you going to kiss me properly?" she asked, knowing she was echoing words from long ago and meaning them in the present as well.

One corner of his mouth twitched, but his eyes were molten with longing and suppressed desire. As an answer, he brought her hands to his shoulders, letting his hands travel down her arms to her back. One wrapped around her waist, bringing her body flush against his, while the other cradled her jaw, his long fingers teasing the back of her neck. Such warmth and strength enveloping her, supporting her. A gasp broke free, and her lips parted in invitation.

"Do you remember what I did next?"

He had broken away from the playacting. He was talking to her present self now. Her present self who was befuddled and yearning. Hungry for a taste of his kiss.

"Maybe. I don't know. Everything is muddled, coming to me in bits and pieces." Was he going to stop? She would die if he did not kiss her now. Her hands curled into his lapels, wanting to hold him close.

His head lowered an inch. His warm breath fanned over her lips when he said, "Then let me give you another piece."

And then his mouth pressed against hers, and the world tilted. She could not tell past from present, memory from reality. He was everything, the only place where she belonged or wished to be. His taste, his warmth, his essence.

For a man who seemed so reserved, sometimes even cold, his kiss was all fire and tenderness. So much feeling, so much intensity. His mouth slid over hers in wonder and adoration. She sensed it all. His yearning, his fear, and above all, his all-consuming adoration.

She parted her lips in a needy moan, past reservations, past embarrassment. Her want was too great to allow for such weak emotions. She wanted to inhale him. Consume him. Make him a part of her and let him fill all the gaping holes in her world.

Thank goodness he seemed to feel the same. With a feral groan, his lips angled over hers, deepening the kiss, and his tongue stormed her mouth. Hungry. Persuasive. It claimed her with tenderness. Not too aggressive. Rather… familiar. Like he owned the space. She reveled in his possession, in surrendering to him.

His arm around her waist was a vise, holding her ever tighter against him, while his hand on her face kept her head immobile for his ravaging. Not that she sought escape. Her hands threaded through the silky strands at the back of his neck, softly scratching his scalp in her urgency to hold him to her.

He kissed as if pouring his soul into her — focused, intent, driven by something fierce and unrestrained. Like time had ceased to exist, and they lived only in this moment.

This had been the place of their first kiss. She was sure of it. It was something to ponder later. Right now, she could only feel.

She felt it all. His hungry desperation beating against his iron control. The hardness that prodded her belly. Its heat branding her even through the layers of their clothing. Although she had no memory of ever engaging in the act of love, she knew immediately what that hardness meant. Writhing bodies, naked skin, lips, heat… untold pleasure.

Her body remembered even when her mind could not. She whimpered as a rush of warmth flooded the place between her legs. The place that felt empty and pulsing to the rhythm of her heart. The place where that hard rod belonged.

She burrowed deeper, pressing herself against the hardness, undulating against it. Seeking relief for a very particular ache…

He hissed as if in pain, and she froze. Had she done something wrong?

But then the arm curled around her waist loosened. Slowly, as if exercising a supreme effort, he nudged her away from his body. Cool air flooded the space between them, and she could have wept with the loss.

"We need to stop, Vivi." His voice was ragged, almost panting.

"Why?"

His chuckle was rueful. "Because if we don't, I'm going to ravish you. I'm a breath away from lifting you onto the stone balustrade and taking you right here in the garden."

Her eyes went wide as saucers at the image he painted in her mind. No doubt he meant to shock her into retreating, but it had the opposite effect.

"And if I want that?"

He shook his head, moving a few more steps farther from her. Leaning back against the low balustrade, he gripped the stone edge until his knuckles whitened and leaned his torso forward. "You tempt me almost more than I can resist. But no. It's too soon. It wouldn't be right."

She tilted her head, confused by his refusal when he so obviously desired her.

"How can it be too soon? Didn't you say we have been married for years?"

"Yes. And you don't remember any of those years." He looked at her, and his eyes reflected the conflict within. "When I make love to you," he said, "I want you to know who I am. Not a memory. Not an echo. Me."

He wanted her memory. All of it. And she wished to give him that. She wished it for herself. How many precious moments like this had she lost?

She wanted to hold on to this one, but she could feel it drawing back behind the locked door in her mind. Trying to go the way of dreams that disappear upon waking. She reached for it and held it tight. She would not lose it. Not this memory. This feeling. The certainty of her answer. The warmth of his hands.

Yes, she wanted to remember the past, but also to build something new. The present.

Him beside her. The press of his fingers. That rough note in his voice when he said stop, and what it had cost him to say it. The way he kissed her, hungry and desperate, yet searching too. Exploring. Learning her anew.

He was not kissing a ghost.

He was kissing her.

And she was not falling in love with a hazy memory. Not with the husband she could not remember, not with the man in the moonlit fragments that surfaced and dissolved before she could hold them. She was falling in love with the man in front of her now.



SHE WAS THE ONE with amnesia, but Dalton had not realized how much he had forgotten as well.

No, not forgotten. Willingly buried deep in his mind, where it could not reach him. It had been the only way to survive — to encase his feelings in a sheet of ice so thick he could no longer touch them.

But the first brush of her lips against his began to crack that ice, like the first rays of spring sunlight striking a frozen lake. Cracks appeared. Small at first, then spreading, branching, until the entire surface threatened to collapse beneath him.

He could not allow that to happen. What turbulent waters lurked underneath? He did not know, but judging by the strength of his response, it was a wild and dangerous thing. The newly liberated waters were bound to rush and devastate everything in their path.

His body wanted things his mind knew were dangerous. Her beneath him, around him, nothing between them. But what might follow if he was not careful — what had followed before, three times — was blood and grief.

He could say none of this. So he needed to keep his control. For her sake, even more than for his.

She said she wanted this. Did she even realize what she was asking for? Could she remember the act? He didn’t know, but he knew that when he made love to her again, she would know who he was. And he would have his emotions under control.

Her hand found his, and she laced her fingers through his. He looked up, startled by the unexpected touch.

She studied his face, and whatever she saw in it, her next words nearly undid him.

"I think," she said, "that I am beginning to see you, Val."

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CHAPTER 17

VIVIENNE SAT UP FROM her lounging position on the blanket Dalton had spread over the sand, loosely arranging her skirts about her knees. The remains of their picnic still lay between them. Above, the cliffs held the cove in a sheltering embrace. The sun was warm, the breeze fresh, heavy with salt and late-summer sweetness. It was perfect. Idyllic.

"I must go to London."

He said it gently, yet the pronouncement settled like a block of ice in her stomach, breaking the perfect peace of the lazy afternoon by the sea Dalton had arranged.

She should have known it would not last.

"You are leaving? When?"

"Tomorrow."

So soon.

The cove seemed suddenly smaller. The sheltering cliffs less secure.

She did not wish him to go.

The realization rose swift and undeniable.

A week ago, that evening in the garden had changed everything. Or perhaps not everything. But something essential. They had not spoken of the kiss afterward. They had not needed to. But it had become a turning point in their relationship.

There was an ease between them that had not existed before — fragile, yes, but real. Dalton still worked with relentless discipline. She saw little of him in the mornings while he read reports or dictated correspondence, his voice firm through the study door. He rode out across the estate most afternoons, speaking with tenants, settling disputes, seeing personally to matters no steward could manage.

But he made time.

Tea each day. Walks through parts of the grounds she had not known existed — winding paths through parkland, shaded alcoves, a bench hidden beneath climbing roses. Evenings in the parlor instead of immediate retreat. Chess. Books. Music. Conversation.

Courtship, she had thought more than once. It felt like courtship. Even though he had not kissed her again.

But every glance held the memory of it. Every accidental brush of fingers lingered a heartbeat longer as if they were reluctant to part. They moved with exquisite caution, as if both feared shattering the delicate miracle unfolding between them.

As if they had all the time in the world.

It had been perfect.

Magical.

She had never felt so quietly certain of at last having found what she had been seeking for years: belonging.

What if distance undid them? What if this careful tenderness dissolved beneath the weight of absence?

She kept her expression composed, but something must have betrayed her, for Dalton sat up as well, dusting the sand from his hands. He stretched one across the blanket and closed it over hers.

Warm. Steady.

"You could come with me," he said softly, studying her with a thoughtful, almost regretful expression.

Not a command. No expectation.

Invitation.

Her breath faltered.

London.

Society. Faces she did not remember. Questions she could not answer. Her own family, discovering her survival not from her lips but through rumor and print. Explanations. Scrutiny. The humiliation of not knowing.

Here, the castle had been a fortress. Her return had remained contained within its walls. Safe. In London, nothing would remain private.

"I — " She swallowed. "I don't think I'm ready to face the world. And I don't think we can keep my existence private if I go to London."

His thumb moved faintly against her knuckles. "No, you are right. As soon as you set foot there, the news will spread. That is inevitable."

She nodded. "My parents will hear. And they will ask why I did not send word sooner. Everyone will ask."

He did not contradict her.

"You can't remain hidden forever," he said gently. "And you have nothing to be ashamed of. You are making progress every day. You remember more than you realize."

She looked at him then.

"And when the world presses?" she asked quietly.

"I shall be at your side," he answered without hesitation. "In every room. Before every question. You won't stand alone."

The certainty in his voice loosened something tight within her chest.

"I know," she said.

And she did. But the thought of London felt like standing at the edge of deep water without knowing whether she could swim.

"Only… a little more time," she murmured. "This has come upon me very suddenly."

"Of course." There was neither impatience nor reproach in his tone. "I wouldn't force you into anything for which you are unprepared. I wished only for you to know the choice was yours."

Gratitude washed through her, tender and bright.

"When will you return?" she asked.

"As swiftly as I can. Three days at most."

Three days felt at once brief and interminable.

"If you require me," he added, "send a telegram and I shall be on the next train back. I give you my word."

"You make it sound as though calamity might strike in your absence."

A faint smile touched his mouth. "I don't expect calamity. But I will come if you need me for any reason."

"Why must you go at all?" she asked, curiosity overcoming unease. "What business do you have in London that is so urgent?"

"The Foreign Secretary has summoned me." He said it as one might remark upon a change in the weather, but she sensed the tension under the nonchalance he tried to project. "There are… explanations to be made."

"The Foreign Office?" she echoed.

"I do a little work for them from time to time."

Nothing more.

Yet something stirred faintly in her mind. Late nights. Absences. A whisper of unease, of waiting for letters that did not come. Worry she had once tried to conceal.

The impression dissolved before she could grasp it. She did not press him.

"I shall miss you," she said, the confession slipping free before pride could intervene. "And I will breathe easier once you return."

Dalton lifted her hand and brought it to his lips. The gesture was slow. Reverent.

"I shall miss you most of all," he said quietly. "And I will return to you with all haste."

She had the sense that these occurrences of him having to go away for days were not uncommon. That flicker of unease, of worry for him, whispered again. Was he going into danger? He had mentioned the Foreign Office. That sounded familiar as well. And dangerous.

It was at moments like these that her inability to remember frustrated her most of all.

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CHAPTER 18

DALTON HAD BEEN EXPECTING the summons. He had known since the morning he let Alfred walk free that this conversation was coming. He resented the timing all the same.

The Foreign Office at four o'clock on a Tuesday was its usual beehive of activity. Clerks carried papers through corridors. Secretaries murmured behind closed doors. His own office was in a quieter part of the building. He had not set foot in it in almost a month.

He paused outside Stanley's door long enough to settle his cuffs.

He knocked once and entered without waiting.

Lord Stanley did not rise. He sat behind his desk with his hands folded over a file and regarded him with unreadable eyes.

"Your Grace. Close the door."

Dalton shut it. Took the chair without being offered one. Crossed one leg over the other and waited.

Stanley let the silence hold for three beats. Dalton had been using that trick on foreign agents since Stanley was reading Classics at Oxford.

"It has come to my attention," Stanley said at last, "that you aided the escape of a traitor."

"That assessment is incorrect."

"Is it?" Stanley opened the file. "After apprehending Alfred St Aubyn — your cousin — you gave him thirty thousand pounds, escorted him to a

neutral vessel, and permitted him to sail beyond the reach of English law. Which part of that have I misrepresented?"

"The word *aided* implies cooperation. He blackmailed me. The facts are in the report I submitted."

"Ah yes. Your report." Stanley turned a page. "Which neglects to mention that you acted without consulting this office. Without notifying the Home Secretary. Without, in fact, telling a single soul until the ship had, quite literally, sailed."

"Time was against me."

"Time is always against you, Dalton. That is the nature of the work. The difference is that on every previous occasion, you managed to exercise the judgment the position requires."

The blow landed. Not because it was unfair. Because it was not.

Dalton uncrossed his legs. Leaned forward.

"He told me my wife was alive."

Stanley's mouth thinned. "So your report states."

"She had been living on Guernsey for seven years. Suffering from amnesia. No memory of her name, her family, or her marriage. He was the only person who knew where she was, and he made it clear her safety depended on his freedom. I made a tactical decision under duress."

"You made a personal decision dressed in operational language."

"I planted an agent on the ship to track him. The plan was sound."

"It is misprision of treason." Stanley tested the phrase. Let it sit. "You knew your cousin had committed treason. You chose not to surrender him. The statute does not make an exception for sentiment."

"The statute does not make an exception for bureaucratic delay either. If I had waited for this office to authorize a response, my wife would have married another man before I reached Guernsey. The marriage would have been void, but she would have been living with him. As his wife in every way that mattered. You may consider that an acceptable outcome, my lord. I did not."

A muscle worked in Stanley's jaw. For all his rigidity, the man was not heartless. Dalton watched the calculation — sympathy meeting duty, and duty holding, as it must.

"I'm glad the duchess is alive and in your care," Stanley said. Stiff. "But gladness is not a policy position. You exchanged a traitor's freedom for personal gain. If that becomes public — "

"It won't."

"If it does," Stanley pressed, "no one will consider it a husband's devotion. They will view it as corruption. A duke using the apparatus of the Crown to settle a private matter. Parliament will want blood. The press will give it to them."

Dalton said nothing. Stanley had only voiced what he already knew. If the affair became public, it would not only end his career. The gossip sheets would devour every detail. A duchess returned from the dead. Seven years under an assumed name on a Channel Island. A marriage ceremony to a country doctor. The questions would be vicious. Had she lived with him? Had there been intimacy? Was the amnesia real, or a convenient fiction?

And Vivienne, who was only now beginning to trust him, to laugh in his company, to reach for his hand, would suffer all of it. She would be examined. Picked apart. Reduced to the ugliest reading of her suffering.

He would see this building in ashes first.

"It won't become public," he said again. His voice had dropped to the register that made men in small rooms reconsider their answers. "Because I'm going to find Alfred. I'm going to take apart what remains of his network. And I'm going to deliver him to you in chains. That is not a promise. It is a plan."

Stanley held his gaze.

"One month," the Foreign Secretary said. "You have one month to locate your cousin and bring him before this office."

"I'll need resources. My continental network reinstated. The Admiralty's shipping manifests for every vessel that left any port on both sides of the English Channel since August."

"You'll have the manifests. The network is your own affair."

"And I'll need you to keep Barrington at a distance. The Home Secretary has never grasped the difference between intelligence work and policing. His involvement will scatter Alfred's contacts before I can reach them."

Stanley's eyes narrowed. He was not used to a man receiving an ultimatum turning it into a requisition. But he was not a fool either. He knew what Dalton was. Knew the networks he ran, the agents he controlled, the debts owed across half the capitals of Europe. You did not replace a spymaster by advertising in *The Times*.

"I will manage Barrington," he said. "But hear me. If you do not produce Alfred St Aubyn within the month, I will accept your resignation. And if I

discover you have again put your personal affairs above the interests of this nation, I will not stop at resignation. I will refer the matter to the Attorney General."

"Understood."

"Is it? Because I am not persuaded, Your Grace, that you appreciate your position. You are the finest operative this office has produced in a generation. You are also, at present, the most compromised. The two cannot coexist."

Compromised. The word Dalton had been circling for weeks without letting himself land on it.

He stood. Buttoned his coat. Gave Stanley a nod.

"One month. You'll have your traitor."

He walked down the corridor at an unhurried pace. Nobody looking at him would have guessed his jaw was clenched hard enough to ache.

His carriage was waiting just outside. He climbed in, shut the door, and sat in the dark a moment before rapping the ceiling.

One month.

He had left Vivienne at Penrose this morning before the sun had even risen. Three days away. It should have been straightforward — see Stanley, gather intelligence, return before the distance between them hardened.

Nothing about it was straightforward.

Alfred was not a fugitive cousin with a grudge. He was part of something larger — a foreign network threading itself through the British government, engineering deaths, moving compromised men into positions of power. Dalton had spent eighteen months mapping it. Alfred's capture was supposed to be the thread that, when pulled, unraveled the rest. Instead, Dalton had cut the thread loose.

Stanley was right to be furious. The professional failure was real. The danger it created was not abstract. Alfred had likely engineered the shipwreck. Had hidden her for seven years. He would not hesitate to do worse. And if his cousin sensed him closing in, he would reach for the weapon that had already worked once: Vivienne.

He could not allow that to happen.

The carriage stopped in front of his mansion in Kensington Palace Gardens. He opened his eyes. Straightened his coat, and stepped into the lamplight wearing the face of a man with nothing to fear.

He would find Alfred. He would keep Vivienne safe. He would hold it together by force of will if nothing else. And if it came apart, he would choose her again.

Compromised, Stanley had called him.

He was right.

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CHAPTER 19

THE NIGHTMARES RETURNED THE moment Dalton left, as though his presence alone had kept them at bay. Which was its own bitter irony, because for the first time the face of the man who hunted her through her dreams was clear.

It was Dalton's.

The same face that watched her across the breakfast table each morning. The mouth that had kissed her in the folly as though nothing else existed. Those hands — the ones that had caught her when she stumbled on the garden path, and held her a breath too long.

How could he be such a tender, considerate, and caring husband, and also the tormentor in her nightmares? It made little sense, but it was not the first time she had sensed her nightmares were tied to him.

She sat up, drawing the counterpane around her shoulders. The wooden door in the kitchen beckoned. Calling her to explore it. She had felt that pull since the castle tour. The way her pulse had tripped when she first saw it, as if her body recognized what her mind could not reach. Old service passages, Dalton had said, and she had known he was lying with the same certainty that made her reach for the correct fork at dinner, that made her hum melodies she had no memory of learning.

The corridors in her dreams matched something real. A chill ran through her, and it had nothing to do with the night air. Behind that door were the

answers to this conundrum. She was sure. The explanation for this dichotomy she sensed in her husband's character.

What if she discovered he was not the man she believed him to be? What if the lover who had trembled when he pulled away from their kiss was a performance? She had begun to care for him. In these few short weeks, he had become the foundation upon which she was rebuilding everything.

If that foundation were false, nothing would survive it.

And yet. Was it not better to know now, before it was too late? What if there were some horrible secret buried in her past? What if her first instinct of fear for her past life, which had made her hide away, afraid to find answers for seven years, had been correct?

She needed to find out. Right now. There might never be another opportunity like this one. He was away. If she found something that compelled her to run away, tonight was the best chance to do it. Before he came back. Even thinking about leaving him made her want to burrow back into her bed and ignore the nightmares. But ignoring the signs had not protected her before. She must be brave and face reality.

Moonlight flooding through the window provided enough illumination to see the time on the clock above the mantel. Ten minutes past four in the morning. Soon the kitchens would stir. The baker kneading dough. Scullery maids stoking fires, cooks laying out provisions. She would never pass through that door undetected once the household woke.

The time to act was now.

She threw off the counterpane before her nerve could fail. Grabbing an oil lamp that was always left by the bedside table, she lit it using a match. Then she threw on her robe, donned her slippers, and slipped out of her room silently.



DALTON RESTED HIS HEAD against the edge of the bath and took a deep breath, eyes closed, letting the warmth of the water work the tension out of him. He was so lovesick for his wife that, rather than spend the night in London as any sensible man would, he had finished his tasks early and started home a full day ahead of schedule.

He was a fool. He could have slept tonight in his London mansion, caught the morning express from Paddington, in his own private train carriage as he had originally arranged, and arrived at the castle in the evening, rested and put-together.

Instead, he had taken an afternoon train, made three awkward connections, traveled half the way in accommodations beneath his station, added at least three hours to the journey, and arrived home in the middle of the night, tired, dusty, and disheveled. All to steal a few more hours with his wife.

He smiled.

It was worth it. If it meant he got to meet her for breakfast. Got to take her for a stroll around the gardens in the afternoon.

Oh yes. He was well and truly besotted with his wife. But that was nothing new. The surprising thing was that this time, the vulnerability, the potential for pain that his feelings engendered, did not cause outright panic in his chest, only a small twinge.

Nothing was settled between them. There were complex issues to resolve. Her trust to earn. Her love to reclaim. But for the first time in his adult life, hope was eclipsing fear. Especially after last week. Maybe that was the real reason he had rushed back home. He did not want to risk losing the ground they had gained. The ease they had found together. Especially after that kiss.

By God, he could still feel the softness of her plump lips against his. Taste the warm honey of her mouth. The kiss was never far from the forefront of his mind. Intruding at inopportune times. And making him ache to repeat it.

His thoughts had the predictable effect on his body, and he reached down to provide the comfort he had not allowed himself to take from her body.

A small sound coming from her room startled him to attention. It was the soft creak of a floorboard. But it had been enough for his always-on-alert senses to notice. A faint light shone from under her door. His wife was awake at — he glanced at the mantel clock — just past four in the morning? A soft shuffle of slippers and the light moved away. She was leaving her room. What on earth?

He rose from the bath dripping water and ran to the door that led to the hallway, not even bothering to grab a towel. Vivienne, clad only in her robe

and slippers and clutching an oil lamp, disappeared around the hallway corner just as he peeked out.

He almost instinctively gave chase before reason asserted itself. He was naked, hard, and dripping with water. And she could not be going far. She was wearing her nightclothes and slippers, for goodness' sake. She probably woke in the middle of the night and decided to go down to the library for a book, or to the kitchen for a nibble to eat.

He would dry himself, put on proper clothes, and then seek her out and join her.

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CHAPTER 20

THE HALLS WERE DARK and still. The castle at this hour was a vast, echoing, unwelcoming structure. She had grown accustomed to its comfortable grandeur in daylight, when the sun warmed the stone and servants filled the halls. At four in the morning, Penrose showed its medieval roots.

She moved fast, lamp low. Down the main staircase, past the gallery of gilt-framed ancestors, through the servants' corridor and into the kitchens. Her slippers were silent on the flagstones. Only her heartbeat marked the rhythm of her steps.

The kitchen was empty. Moonlight caught the edges of copper pots, the scrubbed surface of the great table, the cold mouth of the range. And there, across the room — the door.

She opened it expecting the squeal of rusty hinges, but it moved without effort or noise. For some reason, that unnerved her more.

She peered into the tunnel. Dark and silent like a tomb. She nearly lost her courage. Almost turned back and ran to her bedroom.

But she was so tired of hiding. Seven years of starting at shadows. She had come this far. She would not turn coward now.

She drew in a breath and plunged forward.

The tunnel was clean. No rats or spiderwebs. It looked as Dalton had described — a hallway leading to storage rooms and cellars, maintained

like the rest of the castle. Not an abandoned secret passage used for nefarious purposes.

Her heartbeat settled. She kept going until she reached a bifurcation, and the hallway branching off to the right looked like the one in her dreams. Here the plastered walls gave way to raw stone.

She peered into the passage, but could see only a few feet ahead.

Running through a stone hallway. Being followed. Hunted.

And then she heard it — footsteps behind her. Steady and unhurried, but drawing closer.

Nightmare and reality coalesced.

Blind with panic, she took off running. The flame wavered in the rushing air, and then extinguished, sinking her into blackness. Instead of stopping, the darkness drove her faster. She reached out a hand to use the wall as a guide and kept running. To where, she did not know. Her only aim was to outrun whoever was behind her.

The wall twisted to the left. She grabbed the edge and turned. Breath sawed in and out of her lungs. Were the footsteps closer? She tried to listen but could not hear anything over the drumming of her own heart. Two more steps — and the floor disappeared from under her. The lamp flew from her hand as she pitched forward and fell onto the hard stone floor with a resounding crash of breaking glass.

The fall knocked what breath she had left out of her. She sat up and assessed. She had not fallen far. A couple of steps at most, not an entire staircase. She could have broken her neck if that had been the case.

The footsteps were very close now. A light bloomed around the corner. She needed to keep going. Fighting with her tangled nightgown and robe, she scrambled to rise. But before she could get her knees under her, strong arms closed around her waist and lifted her off the floor.

Dalton.

She knew his touch at once. And yet, instead of relief, his presence here hewed too close to her nightmares to bring any comfort. Why was he here now? Was he not supposed to be in London until tomorrow? She twisted and pushed at his chest.

He let go and raised his hands in a placating gesture.

"It's me, Vivi. I was only trying to help you off the floor."

"I'm fine. Don't need help." She heard how absurd that was, even as she said it.

But he did not point it out. He was being his usual careful self while she acted like a lunatic. A lunatic. Oh God. Would he think she was not well in the head? What would he make of her running through darkened tunnels in the middle of the night?

"Are you hurt?" He extended his hand, careful, as if she were a skittish horse. "Your palms are scraped. You must have fallen down the steps. What were you doing down here in the dark?"

"It wasn't dark before. I brought a lamp." She waved at the shards of glass scattered in the puddle of oil. He had placed his lamp in a niche carved into the stone. "I was exploring the castle. I wanted to see the cellars, the only part I hadn't visited. But then I heard footsteps, and I got spooked and ran. That's when the flame went out. It's silly, I know," she added, knowing the story would not hold under scrutiny.

He frowned. Not fooled. But thankfully did not press. "You shouldn't have come down here alone, much less run in the dark. You could have been hurt."

He extended his hand again, and she backed away. Her foot slipped on the oil.

"Careful." He frowned, then moved toward her. "Let's go. I'll send a servant later to clean this up."

"You go ahead. I'll follow."

A line appeared between his brows. His dark eyes studied her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"N-nothing. I'm shaken from the fall. That's all."

He shook his head. "That story doesn't make sense. If something troubles you, I need to know. How can I help if I don't know what's wrong?"

"Maybe you can't help me."

"I can try. Please let me try."

She looked at him. His face was set in the same forbidding lines that had frightened her when he burst into her life in Guernsey. But she knew him better now. Knew he was patient and accommodating. Tender, even. He could not be the monster of her nightmares. Those had to have a different explanation. Just as with her previous dreams, where she mixed people and locations. But perhaps he was the one who held the key to this one. If she dared to tell him.

Monsters lost their power once dragged into the light. She drew a breath and plunged in.

"I've been having nightmares," she said.

He tilted his head. "Have you always had them, or is this more recent?"

Trust him to know what to ask. In their short reacquaintance, she had learned that her husband had a sharp mind.

"I've had them throughout the years. But they've become more frequent of late."

"Since I barged into your life." Not a question.

"More like since I came to this castle."

He frowned. "Is there something here that disturbs you?"

"It's just that being here… I don't know if these are memories or fabrications. Dreams are just a jumbled mess of different people and events that don't make sense. I can't tell them apart. But these images… they are disturbing. And recurrent."

"Tell me about those images." Kind but firm. He was not going to let this go.

She hesitated. How to tell this powerful, forbidding man who held her freedom in his hands that she was having nightmares of him as her torturer? But if he were the monster, would he not have forced her by now? He had made concessions he did not have to make. That had to mean something.

"The nightmares are about you."

Only his right eye flickered. She might have missed it if she had not been watching. But she was.

"What about me?" When she still dithered, he added, "I think I can explain them. But I need to know what you've seen."

"Promise me you won't be angry. I can't help what I dream."

"Of course not, Vivi." As if he could not help himself, he took a step closer and held out his hand. She looked at it. When she took it, he drew her to him until they stood toe to toe. "I promise you are safe with me. Always. Whatever your dreams hold, I would rather hurt myself than cause you a moment of distress."

How could she resist him when he said things like that? She believed him. She took a breath and told him everything.

"I dream of being chased through stone corridors like these. Then I'm in a dungeon, and there are shackles. And…" She stopped, her cheeks warming. "I'm naked. Someone ties me up and does unspeakable things to me. For the longest time, the identity of my captor was a mystery. But today I saw his face… it's yours."

It came out in a rush, head bowed. Only at the end did she dare to peek at him.



HIS HEART KICKED HARD.

Of all the things she could have remembered, that it had been this…

This was what he had feared when he descended to the kitchen and saw the tunnel door standing open. He lifted her chin with one finger.

"Those are not dreams, but memories. You are remembering."

She pulled away.

"You mean those things happened? You did that to me?"

He had expected the horror. She was seeing only fragments without context; no wonder the images felt terrifying.

"Yes. But it's not what it seems. I wasn't harming you."

She looked at him as if he had gone mad.

"You had me tied in a dungeon. You had a whip in your hand. A whip you used on me. In the dream, your face is cruel. Like you are enjoying it."

"I am enjoying it. But so are you. It's for both of us."

"How can I enjoy being tortured?"

"Stop using that word. Please." He ran a hand through his hair. "What you are dreaming about… I understand it must seem frightening out of context, without explanation. But it's not punishment. Or maybe a little, but it was part of a game." He exhaled. "A sexual game, Vivi."

Disbelief was plain on her face.

"Before the shipwreck," he continued, and each word required its own effort, "we had an intimate life that was… unconventional."

"Unconventional how?"

"The restraints, the ropes, the whips. They were part of how we were together. How we…" He stopped. Started again. Every version was wrong. Clinical, or crude, or not enough. "Sometimes couples play these games," he added, knowing it was inadequate. "It can be thrilling."

"For the person in command, perhaps. But how can the victim enjoy it?"

"You were not a victim. You were the submissive partner. There's a difference. And you enjoyed it as much as I did."

She waited.

"One partner surrenders control to the other," he explained. "Willingly. The surrender is not coercion; it is a gift. A form of trust." He had searched for the next word a hundred times and never found one that fit. "It becomes the deepest intimacy two people can share."

"You tied me up," she said. Flat. Not a question.

"Yes. With your consent. Always. Without exception."

"And the pursuit in the corridors? The hunt, the capture…"

The heat rose in his face. How to explain this to her when she had woken scared from these images for years? She had believed these dreams were evidence of something terrible done to her. He was about to tell her those nightmares were born from pleasure, but the distance between her experience and his explanation felt uncrossable.

He still tried.

"The anticipation was part of it. You would go ahead. I would follow. The pursuit, the not knowing when I would catch you — it heightened everything." He met her eyes. "You designed that particular game yourself."

Her eyes narrowed, but at least she was giving it consideration. Rearranging her beliefs.

"You're telling me," she said, "that my nightmares are not nightmares."

"What your mind has been showing you is not a record of suffering and abuse." He paused. "They are good memories. Memories of pleasure so vivid they have stayed in your mind when everything else vanished."

"Memories," she repeated.

"Yes. Of something we built together that was — " His voice caught. "It was the most honest part of our marriage. The place where neither of us had walls."

She stared at him with naked skepticism, and he could have laughed at the impossibility of explaining this. Of making her believe he had never hurt her.

"It's difficult to explain," he said.

"Then show me."

He stared. She could not mean —

She did. By God, she did. Her gaze was direct, her chin lifted in that way she did when she was afraid but determined.

Of all the things he thought she might say next, this was nowhere on the list. They had shared one kiss since her return. He was trying to woo her

with tenderness. Their first time together since her return could not be a lesson in dominance and submission.

"I don't think that's wise. For someone without experience, it could be… overwhelming."

She raised an eyebrow. The gesture was so hers that he forgot, for a second, to breathe.

"You're saying you can't make me enjoy it? That it would scare me?"

"I'm saying that for you to enjoy it, there needs to be trust between us. Once, we had that. Now… how can you trust me, Vivienne? You don't remember me. Until a few minutes ago you thought I had mistreated you."

"I want to trust you. Sometimes I do. But these nightmares frighten me. I think if you showed me what they mean, I could put them to rest. I could trust you more."

He closed his eyes. What she was asking… he would be a liar to say his blood did not heat at the thought. His cock thickened. But it was an enormous undertaking. To show her pleasure without shocking her. To command her without shattering her boundaries. And to do it while he himself was barely holding together.

"Do you know what happens between a man and a woman?" It burst from him.

"I have a general idea, but nothing specific."

He let out a breath, feeling the weight of something that had been pressing on his chest for weeks lift. That meant she had not been intimate with Harrison.

His manner shifted. He straightened. Held out his hand.

"Come with me, then."

She looked from his hand to his eyes.

"I will take you to our playroom — not a dungeon — and give you a glimpse. Just a glimpse. You can stop it whenever you choose. I won't do anything you don't want, and if I do, one word makes it all stop. The word is *Red*."

A few heartbeats passed before she placed her hand in his.

"Why can't I just say no or stop?"

He pulled her flush against him and put his mouth to her ear. "Because resisting me is part of the game. I will give you orders. Tie you. Restrain you. Some of it might frighten you and excite you at once. You might say

no, might even fight me, when what you want is to be overpowered. So we need another word. For when you mean it."

"I see." She was breathing faster.

"Say *Red* and I stop. Immediately. Can you remember that?"

"Yes."

"What's the safe word?"

"Red."

"Good. One more thing. Playing the submissive can feel liberating. You don't have to think, only feel. But you keep the ultimate power. You can stop me with a word."

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CHAPTER 21

HE RETRIEVED HIS LAMP, took her elbow, and led her deeper into the tunnels. They stopped before a locked wooden door.

He pressed one of the stones, and it shifted, revealing a cavity with an iron key. He took it and turned the lock. The door squeaked open. Not as well-kept as the rest.

He entered first, struck the flint, and went around the room lighting deep red candles in silver candelabra. She lingered at the threshold, only stepping past when the room was lit. The candle flames cast a wine-dark glow across stone and oak.

He gestured her closer.

"Come in. Close the door."

She hesitated. Then she looked.

Nothing like the dungeon she'd imagined. It was a refined space. Beautiful, even. Dark oak panels softened the stone. Persian rugs layered the floor in crimson and indigo. A wide hearth at one end, its carved mantle severe and elegant.

The bed caught her eye first. Huge. Canopied in indigo and gold. Tall carved posts at each corner, thick and sturdy. A nobleman's bed. Substantial. Commanding.

Against the far wall, a sofa upholstered in the same fabric as the bed drapes. An ottoman. A mahogany armoire.

If that were all, it would be a dark and elaborate bedchamber. But then there were other things. Iron rings set into the stone at measured intervals. So discreetly placed, she'd have missed them if she weren't looking. Strange apparatuses in corners. A bench stood before wooden stocks. A padded structure against the wall. Leather cuffs hanging from chains.

Dalton moved about with familiarity — lighting the last candle, adjusting a wick. He belonged here.

For her part, the room didn't feel foreign to her body. Her pulse had quickened, but not in fear. It was something else…

She brushed her fingertips over a carved bedpost, leaving a trail in the dust.

"This room is not as well-kept as the rest of the house. No one has been here in seven years."

"You never came back?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't."

"But the servants — "

"Most don't know it exists. Only my valet and your maid used to clean here. Your maid left our staff, and I told my valet to leave it untouched."

The room, frozen. Holding its breath. As if waiting for her return.

"Why have it down here? Wouldn't it be more convenient near our bedchambers?"

He smiled. "That was your idea."

"Mine?"

"You read a gothic novel about a woman imprisoned by an evil prince who was obsessed with her. In the novel, the prince keeps her in his dungeon and tortures her in all sorts of creative ways until she agrees to marry him. You said you found the idea of a personal dungeon stimulating. And wanted to recreate the scenes. We had a cellar that was perfect, and I aim to please my wife."

"Good heavens. Were you not appalled?"

"Why would I be?"

"I'm sure it's not normal for a wife to read such novels. And to request her husband to do — " She gestured around. "Whatever it is that goes on here."

"We had played with bondage before. It's another way to express desire. Nothing wrong with it."

She looked at the leather cuffs on the wall. "Still. Quite deviant."

He smiled. "Yes. And I wouldn't want it any other way."

She touched the padded surface against the wall. No seat. She ran her hand across it. Soft velvet.

"Would you tell me what everything is for?"

"All in its own time." He looked her up and down. "Remove your clothing."

A command.

Her gaze snapped to his face. No softness there. No warmth. Only authority.

She hesitated.

"Say the safe word and go back to your room, or obey me now. I want to see your body. Every curve."

When she still didn't move — not from defiance, but because she couldn't make her limbs obey either impulse — he added:

"The longer you take, the longer I'll punish you for disobedience."

Curiosity won. The room didn't feel cruel. It felt deliberate. Every object placed not for punishment but for ritual.

For trust.

That's what he was asking. To trust him.

She swallowed and reached for the sash of her robe. She undressed while he watched. The candlelight cut shadows along his jaw, darkening his eyes until she couldn't read them.

Her robe dropped. Underneath, a high-necked cotton nightgown with a long row of mother-of-pearl buttons. After she removed it, she would have nothing. He remained dressed and showed no sign of undressing. A form of power, she realized. Her, naked and vulnerable, while he remained dressed and in command.

She started on the buttons.

He didn't move when the row fell open to her waist. She shrugged the gown off her shoulders and let it hang at her hips. His gaze dropped to her breasts, and her nipples tightened under his attention.

"Let it fall all the way."

A shimmy of her hips sent the nightgown to pool at her feet. She stood naked before him.

"Turn around."

She turned until she faced away. She felt him move, and it was unsettling not seeing him. She glanced back and found him right behind her. Silent.

His hand settled on her hip, and she flinched in surprise, not reluctance. He let the hand remain. She relaxed into it.

Then he moved it. Caressing her from mid-thigh to the side of her breast. Around to cup her, a finger circling the areola but never reaching the nipple.

His other joined in the mapping of her body. Running over her skin. Shaping to her contours. Every possessive stroke built heat that loosened something in her, made her want to press back into him.

Both hands met on her front — one on her belly, one between her breasts — and he pulled her against him. Her back to his chest, her bottom fitted against his groin, where his cock strained, thick and hard against his trousers.

"What do you feel?" His voice, low and close in her ear. "Afraid? Excited?"

"Both."

He pulled her closer.

"Vulnerable, isn't it? Naked. Under my power."

One hand slipped to the curls between her thighs. The other toyed with her nipple. Enough to torment, not enough to satisfy.

"Yes." The word broke apart as he pinched the nipple and one long finger slid between the wet folds of her sex.

The twin sensations were exquisite, thrilling. Novel and familiar at the same time. She didn't remember, but her body did.

"Already wet," he said, his finger sliding over the swollen bud, spreading the slickness. "And I've barely touched you. Such a good girl. You please me so much."

She could only whimper. She clamped her thighs closed around his hand.

"No. Open."

She obeyed. Barely. Something was building. She'd given herself this release before throughout the years. On nights when her body craved things she didn't understand. But this was different. Bigger.

"I think I'll make you wait a bit longer. After all, you took your time disrobing."

"Noo…" A sound of protest. She couldn't wait. His gaze, his hands, and the slow stripping had already made her wait too long.

A low laugh, and he took one wrist and raised it. The leather cuff buckled so fast that by the time she understood what he was doing, he had her

trapped. Arms above her head, and nothing on her body but candlelight and his attention.

A bolt of heat went through her.

He disappeared from her sight. She twisted and caught him opening the cabinet. He came back with a wooden bar, leather straps at each end. With his foot on the inside of hers, he widened her stance. Knelt. Fastened a strap above her knee. She craned to see, and he smacked her bottom — one sharp crack that stung and sent a rush of wet warmth between her legs.

"Face forward. Unless you prefer to wear a blindfold."

She faced forward. He buckled the second strap. When he finished, the bar held her legs apart. She was bound and spread. He had access to any part of her person he wanted, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She should have been afraid. Instead, she went soft and warm with desire.

"Do you know what is wonderful about surrender, Vivienne?"

"What?"

"You don't have to think." His hands everywhere, molding her body. "Don't have to wonder if it's right or wrong." His voice in her ear, deep and low. "It doesn't matter if you remember or not. Right now, you are my captive. You bear no responsibility. Your body is mine. For my pleasure. And yours."

A single finger. Lazy among her folds.

"Isn't it lovely?"

She was holding her breath, every nerve gathered to the place where he touched her.

Tighter… tighter… and then his hand withdrew.

She nearly sobbed.

That low laugh again. "So impatient. I could keep you here all night. Bring you to the edge and leave you wanting." Another slow swirl around her clitoris, and this time she didn't chase it. She knew he would deny her. So she leaned into him instead, gave her weight to the wall of his body.

That pleased him. He groaned and dipped his head to kiss her temple. Bit her earlobe. Dragged his mouth down her neck and sucked at the hollow of her throat.

"That's it. Stop fighting. I have you."

His mouth traced down her back. His hands shaped her buttocks. She squirmed, shy under the inspection, but there was nowhere to go. One palm cracked against her right buttock while his tongue traced a line at the peak

of the left — the twin sensations, sharp and soft, had her gasping and clenching.

Another smack. "Still."

She couldn't be still. He was taking her apart.

He moved lower, and then his head was between her thighs, and he twisted around to look up at her. His breath was warm on her flesh. So close to —

And then she was in the air. She screamed, grabbing at the rope that held her cuffs. She was going to fall. She felt untethered, soaring.

But his shoulders were solid beneath her thighs. His arms around her torso, holding her steady. He leaned her back against the padded velvet surface, and she understood what it was for.

His face was between her spread thighs. His tongue swept across her clitoris. Slow at first. Then, not slow at all. He was not teasing now. His mouth on her was ravenous, greedy — the hunger of a man who had denied himself for years. Something deeper within her understood the desperation that drove him.

She could not hide. Could not pull away. His arms pinned her hips while his tongue worked her without mercy. She looked down at his dark head between her thighs and understood he was not performing. He was taking what he needed from her body, and what he needed was her surrender.

And she — bound, spread open, suspended — she was helpless. There was nothing to do but feel.

He was right. It was freedom.

He looked up. Their eyes caught. Whatever she saw in his gaze — ferocity, devotion, a need so raw it had no name — it commanded her body the way his voice could not.

She broke. The pleasure ripped through her and she cried out, and his groan against her flesh sent another wave through her, and another, until she could not tell where one ended and the next began.

He pressed his face to the inside of her thigh. Stayed there. Then he lowered her with a care that made her chest ache, sliding from between her legs but keeping his hands on her until her feet touched stone.

"Can you stand?"

"Yes." Her knees didn't agree. But they held.

He unstrapped the bar from her thighs, and she brought her legs together, tender and throbbing. He stood and reached for her wrists.

His hands were unsteady.

She noticed because his fingers stuttered against the thin skin of her inner wrist as he worked the buckles. An uncharacteristic clumsiness. She was watching his hands the way he had been watching her body. The control he'd maintained — the precision, the patience, the iron command — had cost him. She could see the price in his tendons.

Who was this man? Cold stranger one moment. Ruthless lover the next. And now, shaking as he freed her.

When the last buckle gave, he gathered her up and carried her to the sofa. Sat with her across his lap. His hands moved over her — gentler now, soothing — and his mouth found her hair, her forehead, her nose. Maybe tomorrow she would feel embarrassed about her wicked abandon. But right now, she felt no shame at being naked in his arms. It felt like the most natural state in the world.

His touch was so tender that it took her a moment to register the part of him that was not tender at all. It was hard and urgent beneath her, pressing against the place that was still sensitive from what he'd done to her.

She shifted against it, and he grunted, gripping her hips. "Don't." Half command, half plea.

"But you… you haven't… don't you want to — "

He shook his head.

"Tonight was about you."

"But — "

"I am more than content." He pressed his face into her neck. But his arms were rigid, and a tremor ran through his whole body. He was holding himself in check so hard that she could feel the effort through her own skin.

She put her hand on his face and turned it toward her. "I'm grateful. But you know what I mean."

He sighed. "That's not how I want our first time together to be."

Something in the way he said *together* — the careful weight on the word, the deflection dressed as romance. She heard a border that had nothing to do with patience or chivalry.

"Isn't this the way we always did it?"

He laughed. "You think this is all we used to do?"

"Isn't it?"

"Oh, no. This is only one facet. I've had you in every way a man can have a woman. Slow and tender. Quick and rough. In the bedchamber, in the sea,

standing against a wall during a ball. Bent over my desk. In a carriage, in the gardens. Every way. Every place."

She absorbed that, feeling her cheeks burn and her insides clench. They had enjoyed a vigorous marital life. She could believe it. The hunger she felt for him, even when thoroughly sated, was absurd. She wanted to strip him bare. Wanted to explore every inch of the body she'd felt but not seen. Wanted to watch his control crack.

"Is there nothing I can do for you now?" She pressed her face to his neck and breathed him in. "Nothing you'll accept?"



SHE WAS UNRAVELING HIM.

Every muscle he owned locked. Seven years of his own hand in the dark, and now her scent was on his lips and her warmth was in his lap and she was asking to touch him, and the discipline that had kept him sane through the worst time of his life was giving way.

He should have kissed her forehead. Carried her to her room. And spent himself alone against the cold tiles of his washroom, as he had done a hundred times before.

But she was asking to give. And he wanted to take what she was offering. God how he wanted it.

Not just release. Release was easy. He wanted her hands on him. His skin was raw with wanting it. Seven years of nothing had left his nerve endings exposed, so that even the brush of her fingers through the gap in his shirt sent a jolt through him.

Her hands were inside his shirt. Tracing patterns on his chest. Swirling. Light scratches. Did she know — did some part of her remember — that this was how he liked to be touched? That this specific rhythm of stroke and scratch had always undone him? Or was it instinct?

It didn't matter. It was everything.

"Yes. Touch me." The words came out thick. "I'm starving for your hands on me."

She didn't hesitate. Her fingers slid around his neck, into his hair, scratching his scalp until a sound came from his throat that was not quite human. She worked his buttons. Got her hands on his chest and shoulders.

His head fell back. He watched her through half-closed eyes. Auburn hair. Pale skin. The curves of her breasts. He craved to reposition her on his lap and bury himself in the slick heat between her thighs.

His cock leaked against his trousers at the thought.

The last button gave way, and the shirt gaped. She leaned in and kissed the center of his chest. It was pure bliss. It was not enough.

He pulled the shirt off. She looked at him and smiled. Tender. Open. A smile he recognized from a different life, and his throat closed on everything he wanted to say to her.

She thought he was in control. He could bind her wrists and command her body, and she could bring him to his knees with that smile.

She kissed his neck. Trailed her mouth over his chest. Buried her nose in the hair there and breathed him in. She made a small, hungry sound against his skin, and something inside him buckled.

She slid lower. His stomach clenched. His hands closed on her upper arms as she kissed down his body and settled on her knees between his legs. Her hands ran up his thighs and converged on his aching erection.

"Vivienne. Wait."

"I think I can do for you what you did for me," she said. Honest, even now. "Tell me what to do."

His breath caught. "You don't have to."

"I want to. I want to know you, Dalton. Show me who you are."

She was not asking only to see his body. She was asking him to let go.

He held her gaze as he brought his hands to his waistband and unfastened his trousers.



SHE TOOK OVER, PARTING the fabric until his rod sprang free, thick and swollen against his belly. She wrapped her fingers around it. Solid, but the skin was smooth. She tightened her grip, and he flexed into her hand. Delicate flesh slid over the iron beneath. Her other hand found and cupped the round, velvety balls at the base of his shaft. A groan tore from his chest.

"Yes. Just like that."

She squeezed, and his head dropped back. The sound he made was close to pain. She studied him. A droplet of moisture gathered at the slit. She leaned down and lapped it up.

"Vivienne." Her name came out as a plea.

She knew what he was asking for. She took the head into her mouth and sucked it.

He made a strangled, wrecked sound. She laughed around him, delighted with herself. With no memory of ever having done this, she was going on instinct alone. But her hands and mouth knew what to do. They worked together, and the sounds they drew from him were music to her ears.

She pulled back, kept her lips on his length, kissing. Then looked up.

"Tell me what you want."

"You're doing…" He couldn't finish. "Lick me. Take me in." A broken groan as she did. His hands left her arms and found her hair, combing it back from her face, holding it gathered in his fist. Not controlling her movements. Just watching.

She looked up at him through her lashes, and what she saw on his face captivated her. Need. Reverence. Terror at how much of himself he was handing over to her, who didn't even remember him.

"Use your hands. Ahhh — yes. Take me deeper."

He kept talking, but at some point, she was already ahead of him. The sounds of his body guided her. She was learning him, so attuned to his rhythms that she anticipated what he needed —

His breath changed. Everything gathered.

"Darling." His voice, ragged. "I'm going to spend. Let go — "

She moaned around him and took him deeper. She was not going to let go.

His hand flexed in her hair. And then, a beat before the crisis, he pulled her head back. Firm. Absolute.

"No — " she protested. Confused at the sudden withdrawal.

His hand was already on himself. Two strokes and his release spilled across his own belly with a sound wrenched from somewhere deep. His other hand held her jaw, his thumb tracing her cheekbone, and the tenderness of that small gesture against the rawness of the rest didn't match. As though one hand was being honest and the other was apologizing.

The tension left his body all at once.

But something nagged at her.

He reached for a cloth from a stack on the side table and wiped himself clean. Quick. Efficient. Habitual.

"That was…" He pulled her back into his lap, tucking her against his chest. "I have no words. Thank you."

Warm against him, she asked it before she could think better of it.

"Why did you pull me away?"

A pause. Barely there, but she caught it.

"I didn't want to overwhelm you. Not the first time."

Reasonable. The answer of a careful man. And maybe that was all it was.

But the speed and precision of that gesture had not felt like courtesy. It had felt like a reflex. Something drilled so deep that he did it without thinking.

She put it away.

"I used to do that before, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Was it as good?"

He laughed, a low rusty laugh, and pulled her closer, his face in her neck. "I think the evidence speaks for itself. Any better and you'd have killed me."

She smiled, pleased. The closeness between them felt enormous. She trusted him now. Strange, given what they'd done. But he was holding her so gently. Not taking more.

"If not like this," she said, "how do you want our first time?"

His mouth found her ear. "When I take you, I want nothing between us. No doubts. No questions. It will be slow. Deep." His voice dropped. "I want to feel you close around me and watch your face when you break apart. And in that moment, you will know that you belong with me."

What he didn't know was she was already there.

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CHAPTER 22

HE LEFT WHILE SHE was still sleeping.

Not because he wanted to. But he knew that if he stayed in that bed another minute, with her warmth against his side and her hair spread across his pillow, he wouldn't leave at all.

He eased the covers aside. Drew his arm from beneath her neck, and then stood there, looking at her. She murmured and turned her face into the pillow where he had been.

The light through the curtains caught the faint bruise his mouth had left on her collarbone. The curve of her hip tempted him from beneath the sheet. She had one leg drawn up as if she were still reaching for him.

Walk away.

He picked his way out of the bedroom on bare feet and removed his rumpled shirt, his fingers stiff and stupid with the buttons. Instead of tossing it aside, he brought it to his nose. It still carried their mingled scents. He stood with his back against the wall and his eyes closed.

Without waiting for his valet, he drew on a clean shirt and a dressing gown and headed to his study.

His desk waited. The correspondence had accumulated during two days of absence. He sat and poured coffee from the pot Prowse left for him every morning.

On to the agents' dispatches.

After reading the first one, his jaw tightened.

The second was worse.

He flung it onto the desk and shoved back from the chair.

Another cold trail. A reliable source had sighted Alfred in Calais three weeks ago. The physical description matched. An agent had followed the trail to a boarding house on Rue de la Gare. But by the time they arrived, the room was empty. No trace of his cousin.

The second dispatch came from Brussels. A banker had processed a withdrawal matching the sum Alfred had taken. The account had been closed the same day. The banker remembered the transaction but not the man's face.

Dalton crossed to the window. The sea lay flat and gray under a dawn sky. Somewhere out there his cousin was spending the money Dalton had given him, enjoying the freedom Dalton had purchased with his wife's survival, and laughing.

Not at the escape. Alfred had always been clever enough to escape. He would be laughing at the fact that Dalton had let him.

The holding cell. Thirty thousand pounds. Sailing into the unknown. Every one of those concessions had seemed rational at the time. It had been the price of finding Vivienne, and he would pay it again. But rationality did not blunt the professional shame of having released a traitor because the traitor had found the one lever that moved him.

Every day he remained free was another day the network had time to restructure, to sever connections, to bury evidence.

He was running the pursuit from the edge of England by letter and telegraph, and it was not enough. London was the center. He needed to be there. In his Whitehall office, making decisions, not learning about them three days later by post.

And there was the other matter.

The detective.

He had tried to meet with Hargreaves during his visit to London, only to learn the man had retired and moved to the country. Nathaniel had promised to find him. Vivienne's safety might well depend on it.

Every thread led to London. Duty, justice, and the safety of the men who served under him.

And yet.

He turned from the window and looked at the door. Beyond it, up the stairs, down the corridor: Vivienne. Sleeping in a bed that still smelled of them both.

Every moment in this house with her was an exercise in restraint that made seven years of celibacy look simple. But she needed time. Time before she re-entered society. Time to figure out who she was. He had seen the way she flushed afterward, not only with pleasure but with the bewilderment of a woman rediscovering appetites she didn't know she had. And if he was honest with himself, he was not certain he could touch her again and stop.

He sat back down and worked to keep his hands busy and his mind from wandering upstairs. It worked until the work ran out. Until there was no more correspondence to write, nothing else he could do from here. Then the temptation to slip back into bed with her overtook him.

He went back to his bedchamber. She still slept. Her fist curled under her chin, lips slightly parted. So peaceful that he was loath to disturb her. He dressed in his riding clothes and left the house instead. A good gallop over his land was the exertion he needed to burn off his restless energy. He met with his steward, visited tenants, and rode until both he and the horse were tired.

It was late afternoon when he returned home, with just enough time to bathe and change for dinner. Judging by the anticipation he felt at the thought of seeing her again, mere hours after leaving her bed, the ride had not cured him, only steadied him.

He was crossing the entrance hall, shedding his riding gloves and jacket, when Prowse met him.

"Dinner will be ready in half an hour, Your Grace."

"And the duchess?"

"Her Grace has retired to her bedchamber with a headache and begs to be excused."

"A headache?"

He went cold inside, remembering what Harrison had said about how feeding her too much information at once could be detrimental to her health. And what had he done? Revealed their entire history of unusual sexual exploits. Tied her. Pushed her too far.

"Why was I not notified at once?"

"You were not at home, Your Grace."

Ah yes. He had left in the morning. Like a coward. And now she had a headache.

He ran up the staircase.

"Push dinner back, Prowse. Have a footman ready to fetch the doctor."

"Her Grace insisted it was nothing serious, Your Grace. That she needed rest, and you were not to be disturbed."

But the butler's words faded as he rushed down the hallway toward her bedchamber. Bloody hell, why did he have to leave the house today? He should have remained close to her. Assuaged any doubts and fears she had upon waking. He should have been there for her. Instead, he had run away.

The corridor blurred. Plans, correspondence, Alfred, London — nothing mattered but the door at the end of the passage and the woman behind it.

He reached the door. Gave a perfunctory knock but didn't wait for the reply. Turning the handle, he entered the chamber.

She was curled on her side, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around her middle. Pale. The sight of her racked with pain hit him square in the chest.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." She did not uncurl. "I just don't feel well. It'll pass."

"If you're not well, there is something the matter. I'll send for the doctor."

"No!" The sharpness took him aback. She softened. "There's no need. It's only..." A pause. Her cheeks flushed pink. "A female complaint. It's happened before. I'll be fine in a day or two."

Understanding dawned, and with it a relief so deep it almost buckled his knees. She was not suffering any ill effects from their encounter or the revelations. This kind of affliction he knew about.

"You have your monthly," he said. As if he were remarking on the weather.

Her eyes widened. The pink deepened to crimson. At least it brought color to her face.

"You know about that?"

"I know a great many things about you, Vivi. I also know how to make it better. Wait for me. I shall return promptly."

He left before she could protest. His stride was quick, eating the space between her bedchamber and the kitchens. He found Mrs. Trevena and gave her instructions to prepare the duchess's special tea. He also ordered a hot bath. As hot as she could stand.

A few minutes later, he returned to her room.

"I've ordered your tea," he said from the doorway. "And a hot bath. The water's being boiled."

"Thank you." Her voice was strained. She was still curled into herself, hands pressed against her lower abdomen.

"If we were in London, I'd draw the bath myself. The house there has hot water plumbed to the taps. Here it takes a bit longer." He brought a chair to the side of the bed and sat down. "But the footmen will be quick," he said, aware that he was babbling like an idiot.

A maid arrived with the tea tray. He supported her as she sat, and brought the cup to her. She held it close enough to inhale the aroma, and some of the tension loosened around her eyes. She wrapped both hands around it and took a careful sip.

He watched her shoulders relax and the pain ease from her brow. When the cup was empty, she lay back down and drew her legs back up. He took the cup from her hands before it fell.

A knock came from the bathing chamber door. The footman announced that the bath was ready.

Dalton came back to her. "Come. I'll help you."

"There's no need — "

But he was already lifting her, one arm under her knees, the other around her back, and the protest died against his shoulder. He was too aware of every place she pressed against him. He carried her through the connecting door into the bathing chamber.

She looked at the bath with naked longing.

"Shall I stand you on the rug and help you undress, or put you in as you are?"

She blinked. "I thought you were going to leave me to bathe in private."

He raised an eyebrow. "Nightgown it is."

He lowered her into the water, and she stopped objecting the moment the heat closed around her. Her eyes shut. Her breath left her in a long, unsteady exhale.

He sat on the edge of the bath, near her hip, and said nothing. Let the silence and the heat loosen her tension.

Then: "There is something else I can do. If you want it."

Her eyes opened.

"I'll try anything," she said. "Paul used to prepare remedies, but nothing worked well."

"I hope to God he didn't try this particular remedy," Dalton said, "or I'll have to break his hand."

Her eyes widened.

"I'm joking. I wouldn't actually break his hand. Just his fingers. Two of them. Perhaps three."

"That's not — he has been nothing but kind — "

"I don't want to discuss Dr. Harrison." He held her gaze. "Do you want my remedy or not?"

"What is it?"

She already suspected. He could see it in the pulse jumping at the base of her throat.

"A massage."

"A massage won't help with this — "

"That depends on what's being massaged. I could tell you. But I'd much rather show you."

Her lips parted. Closed. He could almost read her thoughts, attempting to work out what he was offering.

"Yes, a massage there. I promise it will help. You used to swear it was the best remedy against your monthly pains."

"You used to do this for me before?"

He smiled. "All the time."

She shook her head slowly. "You must be jesting. That's — "

"I promise it's something we have done before. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. I'll stop the moment you tell me to. Stop fretting, Vivi. I'm offering comfort. Relief."

He saw the moment she capitulated. The offer of relief weighed more than the promise of pleasure. But it didn't matter. He would give her both.

"Very well, then. Let's do it."

"Lean back."

She obeyed slowly, her shoulders settling against the porcelain, her spine unlocking.

"Draw your knees up. Let them fall apart."

"I don't think — "

"Vivi. Do it." Her body responded instinctively to the command.

She drew her knees up. Opened them.

"Good girl."

He shifted closer and slid his hand beneath the surface. The wet nightgown drifted around his wrist. His palm found her knee, and he drew it wider, his thumb tracing the soft inside of her thigh. Moving higher.

She did not stop him.

His fingers found the cloth between her thighs and eased it aside. She tensed — her whole body contracting, her hand gripping the edge of the bath.

"Relax," he ordered.

"There might be — " She turned her face away. "Blood."

"Vivi." He waited until she looked at him. "Do you think I care about a little blood?"

She searched his face. Her grip on the bath loosened.

"That's better. Give in to it."

The first stroke drew a gasp from her that had nothing to do with embarrassment. Her knees fell wider, and he worked in no hurry, reading responses he had memorized years ago: the hitch in her breath when his thumb found the right pressure, the way her hips tilted toward his hand, the small sound at the back of her throat that meant *more*, and *there*, and *don't stop*.

Her body eased into his strokes. She met his eyes, and the last of her self-consciousness fell away. Her hand released the bath and found his wrist, holding it as if afraid he might leave her.

He slid one finger inside her. She moaned and bore down against his hand. He withdrew. Her grip tightened, keeping him there. He gave her two fingers, and she took them with a roll of her hips that undid him. Sleek. Tight.

She moved against him without shame or thought. His thumb circled her while his fingers curled inside her, finding the place that made her breath catch and break, and he watched her build toward it.

She came with a cry that rang off the tiled walls. Her body clenched around his fingers, and her eyes went unfocused, lips parted, head tipped back against the porcelain as the orgasm moved through her.

He stayed. Held steady. Felt every last tremor until it passed, and she went limp in the water, flushed and breathing hard.

When she pulled at his wrist, he withdrew. Went to the washstand. Rinsed his hands. Dried them. Came back to her and pushed the damp hair from her face and kissed her forehead.

"Better?"

"Yes." Her voice was thick and a little bewildered. "Thank you."

"The pleasure," he said, and his voice came out rougher than he intended, "was mine."



LATER — AFTER HE had lifted her from the bath and wrapped her in towels and carried her to the bed, after a second cup of tea and a hot-water bottle and the blankets tucked around her, after she had dozed off with her hand curled around his — Vivienne lay in the half-dark and let her mind do what it wanted.

Which was, of course, to think about him.

How does he do that?

It was not merely what he had done. It was how naturally it had come to him. How he had known exactly what she needed.

The tea. The bath drawn at the right temperature. His hand moving beneath the water with a certainty that unwound her worst cramps. A husband's knowledge of his wife's body.

Paul had healed her. She would never forget that. He had set her broken bones and treated her fevers and tended her through seven years of headaches and nightmares with steady kindness. But Paul had cared for her body. Dalton knew it.

If she had married Paul, she might have had kindness and peace. But not this deep knowing.

This man who remembered her body before she remembered her own name. Who ordered her tea without asking, carried her when she hurt, and touched her as though he remembered every secret she had forgotten.

If there is someone who can help me piece together who I am, it is him.

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CHAPTER 23

VIVIENNE SAT IN THE morning room with a cup of tea she had not touched and a diary open on the desk before her. Most of the entries circled the same subject: her husband.

She didn't doubt anymore that was what he was. Just thinking about his hands brought warmth to her face. The way they touched her. The way he knew her. Her pleasure, her pain.

Three days had passed since he had last touched her that way. He had been gentle since — careful, restrained. She appreciated it. She also wished he would stop.

She craved that intimacy that had cracked open something sealed inside her. A trust. A sense of rightness. The knowledge of being safe in his arms.

She closed the diary and turned to the window. Rain dimmed the landscape, and the castle seemed to turn inward. Fires burned in every grate. The house felt suddenly smaller, warmer — as though she and Dalton existed apart from the world.

The sound of carriage wheels on the gravel broke her illusion.

Vivienne stood and crossed to the window. A smart traveling carriage had pulled up before the entrance, its team of matched bays steaming in the drizzle. The door opened, and a woman descended.

She was fashionably dressed and moved like a woman who had never doubted her welcome. Before the footman could reach her, she had already

mounted the steps.

Her voice, light and irreverent, carried all the way from the entrance hall.

"Prowse, you look as if you have seen a ghost. Twice, apparently, since I'm told there is already one in residence."

The butler's reply was too muted to hear, but the woman's laugh was not. It was warm and unguarded and full of affection, and it did something peculiar to Vivienne's chest. She knew that laugh. Not from memory — she knew better than to trust the phantom tugs of recognition that came and went like shore birds — but from something in her body. A sense of comfort. Of kinship.

Footsteps in the corridor. A knock, perfunctory and already opening.

The woman swept into the morning room and stopped short, her bright dark eyes finding Vivienne by the window.

For the space of three heartbeats, neither spoke.

Then the woman's face crumpled. Not into tears or theatrical grief, but into a raw expression that held joy and pain and relief at the same time.

"Oh," she said. Just that.

"Hello," Vivienne said. "Lady Venus?"

Now the tears came — sudden and fierce, flooding her bright, dark eyes. In a blur of movement, she crossed the room and took Vivienne's hands in hers. Vivienne had the impression she had only just stopped herself from launching into her arms.

Then she straightened, drew a breath, and became herself again.

"Yes, I am Venus," she said. "Do you remember me, then?"

Vivienne shook her head. "I do not. I'm sorry. It was just a guess. I — "

"You have amnesia. Yes. I heard." Venus's hands tightened on hers. "I am your sister. Well, Dalton's sister, which makes me yours by marriage and by choice."

Vivienne smiled despite herself, relaxing into Venus's directness, which cut through the stifling formality of everything else in her new life and made it easier to breathe.

"It is lovely to meet you," she said, and meant it. "Although I understand we have already met. Many times, apparently."

"Hundreds of times. You were my dearest friend." Venus's eyes glistened, but she blinked the tears away with a fierceness that reminded Vivienne of Dalton. "But we shall not dwell on that. You don't remember, and I refuse to weep over what cannot be changed. Sit down. I want to know everything

about the miracle of your survival. I am looking at you, touching you, and still can scarcely believe it. Where have you been these past seven years? What has your life been like?"

Vivienne tried to organize her thoughts. Where to begin recounting the past? Her life in Guernsey?

But before she could reply, Dalton's displeased voice made them both turn.

"Venus, what are you doing here?"

"And a good day to you too, brother," Venus said, unfazed. "I'm so glad to see you."

Dalton's lips compressed, but he came forward to kiss his sister's cheek. "It is a pleasure to see you, as always. I would only appreciate it if you did not descend upon us unannounced like a summer storm."

Venus allowed the kiss, then faced him squarely. Her voice trembled a little. "I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"There is a reason I didn't tell you. Nobody knows. Not even Vivienne's parents. She needs time, and I shall give it to her."

"But I am family. I was Vivi's best friend — "

"It was my fault," Vivienne said, not wanting the argument to escalate. "I asked Dalton not to tell anyone. It is overwhelming meeting so many people I don't remember."

"Oh, Vivi, I'm sorry." Venus came to her, her expression softening. "I didn't mean to disturb you. As soon as I heard the news, I had to come and see for myself. I didn't really stop to think how you would feel about it."

"It is all right. You have not disturbed me."

"How did you find out?" Dalton said. "I hope my wife's return has not become the ton's gossip."

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. Stanley told me."

Dalton stiffened. "Damn Stanley. One would expect more discretion from the Foreign Secretary."

"Don't be cross with Stan. He only mentioned it to me because he thought I already knew."

"Stan?" Dalton raised a brow.

"He is a good friend of mine," Venus said breezily.

Dalton narrowed his eyes but let it go. "I won't have Vivienne's peace disturbed."

"I wouldn't dream of it, brother."

"It is quite all right, Dalton," Vivienne said. "I would like to talk to Venus. I… feel comfortable around her."

Dalton looked between the two of them, his protective instincts clearly at war with her request. In the end, he gave a curt nod. "I will leave you ladies to your conversation, then."

He went, and Vivienne sat. Venus settled into the chair opposite with the natural authority of a woman who had grown up in this castle, tucking her skirts beneath her and accepting the tea Vivienne poured with an appreciative murmur.

"You always did make perfect tea," Venus said, then caught herself. "Sorry. I shall try not to compare you to who you were."

"It is all right. It is useful, actually. Small things like that — the tea, the food, certain scents — seem to stir something. Not full memories, but impressions. Feelings."

"How are you getting on?" Venus gestured around her. "All this could be a great deal to assimilate."

"I am adjusting. It was difficult at the beginning. I feel more settled now."

"And how is he? I don't mean the answer he would give. I mean the real one."

Vivienne hesitated. How was he? He was attentive, controlled, and capable of startling intensity.

"He is… careful with me," she said at last.

Venus made a sound that was half laugh, half sigh. "Of course he is. He is careful with everything he loves. It is the most infuriating thing about him." She paused, studying Vivienne with those dark eyes that missed nothing — another family trait, apparently. "Tell me. What has he told you about himself, his life, our parents?"

"Very little. I know your mother died. And your father too. He said they loved each other very much."

"That," Venus said, "is the understatement of the century."

She folded her hands in her lap, and when she spoke again, her voice had changed. The warmth was still there, but beneath it was something harder. A woman telling a story she had carried for a long time.

"Our parents were famous for their love. Papa named us Valentine and Venus because he said we were the products of love itself and should carry love's names."

"Valentine and Venus," Vivienne repeated. "Very romantic." A man who named his children for love. And from that, this controlled, precise, shuttered son who rarely permitted himself to show emotion.

"Valentine used to joke that he was grateful he was not named Cupid," Venus added.

Vivienne laughed. She could hear Dalton saying it — the dry, self-deprecating wit she was beginning to recognize as something intrinsically his.

"They were rarely apart," Venus continued. "When Mama entered a room, Papa's whole bearing changed. He lit up from the inside. And she was the same with him. I was young, but I remember it vividly."

Venus stared into her tea for a moment.

"Then Mama fell pregnant again. I was eight, Val was fifteen. The pregnancy was difficult." Venus paused. "There were whispers among the adults that frightened me, although I did not understand them. Valentine did. He understood everything, even then."

"He must have been terrified," Vivienne said. Not a question. She could see it — the boy already watching too closely, already reading the silences the way the man did now.

"He was terrified. Though he hid it from me." Venus's jaw tightened. "The baby was stillborn. And Mama…"

She stopped. Swallowed. Her hand moved to the chain at her throat, fingers closing around a locket Vivienne had not noticed until now. She held it for a moment.

"Mama did not recover. She died three days after the birth."

Vivienne's hand moved to her own chest without her willing it. "I'm so sorry, Venus."

"Thank you. It was a long time ago." Venus released the locket. "But the memory still hurts."

A silence fell between them. Some things needed space before the next thing could be said.

"What happened afterward?" Vivienne asked.

Venus straightened in her chair. "What happened afterward was worse.

"Papa could not function. He had been the strongest, most vital man I knew, and within a week he was a ghost. He stopped eating. He stopped speaking. He would sit in Mama's room for hours, holding her shawl."

"For how long?"

"He held on for a year." Venus's voice was steadier now. "There was nothing Valentine or I could do to reach him. It was as if his spirit had left with her, leaving only an empty husk. One year after Mama's death, Papa took his own life."

Vivienne gasped. The room went still. Even the rain seemed to pause against the glass.

"Valentine found him," Venus said. "He was seventeen. I was ten. In the space of a year, we lost both our parents."

Vivienne closed her eyes. Pictured a seventeen-year-old boy finding his beloved father dead by his own hand.

"That must have been… devastating."

Venus reached for her teacup. Held it with both hands, as if drawing warmth from it.

"Valentine inherited the dukedom, the estates, the responsibilities, and me." Venus attempted a smile. "A grieving ten-year-old who did not understand why everyone had left."

"He raised you," Vivienne said.

"He did." Venus looked down at her hands around the cup. "He was little more than a boy himself, but he defied the trustees and kept me close to him. He refused even to contemplate surrendering me to our extended family. Valentine did everything. He managed the estates, fought off the creditors Papa had ignored in his final year, attended to my schooling, sat with me when I had nightmares." She paused. "He used to read to me. Every night for two years, he sat at the foot of my bed and read aloud until I fell asleep. He never missed a night."

Venus's voice faltered on the last word.

This was the detail that wrecked Vivienne the most. Not the tragedy. The tenderness that had followed it. The seventeen-year-old boy reading to his sister every night while his own grief went unaddressed.

"He offered you the safety and stability he needed himself. But in order to do that, he had to become a fortress."

"Yes," Venus said. "Do you understand him now?"

"I understand he is even more remarkable than I thought."

"He is. He is also the most stubborn, infuriating man alive." Venus set down her cup with a decisive click, as if the sound could close the door on whatever had just escaped. "Because somewhere in those terrible first

months, he decided that he would never allow emotion to govern him the way it had governed our father."

Vivienne's throat tightened. She could very well imagine the boy deciding. Saw him choosing, at seventeen, to become the man she knew now. The composure. The precision. The iron discipline she had mistaken, more than once, for coldness.

"Did he use to laugh… before that?"

Venus gave a watery chuckle. "Yes. He had the warmest, most carefree laugh. He made himself into what he is now, Vivienne. The control. The sternness. It was not natural to him. He built it. Because he believed — believes still — that if he allows himself to feel without discipline, he will end as our father did."

"But he does feel," Vivienne whispered.

"More than anyone I have ever known." Venus held her gaze. "That is the tragedy of it. He feels everything. He simply does not permit himself to show it."

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CHAPTER 24

DALTON WAITED IN HIS study until the tea things had been cleared from the morning room and Vivienne had gone upstairs to rest. Then he sent a footman to find his sister.

Venus came in without knocking, the way she always did, and settled herself into the chair opposite his desk with the air of a woman expecting a battle and prepared to enjoy it.

"If you mean to scold me, Dalton, I should warn you I have traveled a great distance and am poorly disposed to it."

"I don't mean to scold you." He set down his pen. "I mean to ask you something."

She raised her eyebrows.

"How do you find her?"

The teasing went out of her face. She considered him for a moment. She knew him well enough to know he did not ask idle questions.

"I find her," she said slowly, "as I have always found her. Quick. Warm. Perceptive. Stubborn when she has thought something through and has decided." She paused. "There is a watchfulness to her now that was not there before. As if some part of her is always studying her surroundings. But Val — " Her voice softened. "She is Vivienne. Whatever else the amnesia has taken from her, that is intact. The woman I knew is still in there."

Dalton looked down at his hands. He had not realized until that moment that he had been waiting for someone else to confirm it.

"I find it so myself, but given the circumstances, I could not trust my own judgment."

"Is she frightened? Overwhelmed?" Venus asked.

"She would never describe it that way. But yes. She has spent seven years building a small, safe life for herself. Everything here is too large for her. Too much. She is wary of strangers who want her to be a person she does not remember being."

"Including you."

"Including me." He met her eyes. "Which is why I need you to be careful with her."

Venus opened her mouth, and he held up a hand.

"I am not telling you to leave. I'm glad you came. She needs a woman in this house who is not a servant. A true friend. She will trust you long before she trusts anyone else." He chose his words. "But the doctor was clear with me on one thing. He said the danger is in telling her too much, too quickly. If others crowd her with stories, she may mistake their version of her life for memory itself, and her own memories will not come back."

Venus had gone still.

"So tread lightly. Let her ask the questions. Answer what she asks and stop there." He paused. "I know this is not your way. You love her, and you have missed her, and you want to pour seven years into her lap in a single afternoon. Please don't."

"I promise to be careful, Val." Venus's voice was unusually quiet. "I would not risk her for the world."

"I know."

She reached across the desk and laid her hand briefly on his. He let her.

"And what about you?" she said.

"What about me?"

"How are you, Val? And don't say you are fine. Even if finding her was the greatest joy imaginable, this situation must be strange. Difficult for you."

He looked at her for a few heartbeats. His sister, who knew him better than anyone. From whom he could hide nothing.

"I am happy," he said at last. "Her return feels like a miracle. Something I had lost hope for. Whatever else is true, that is the foundation of everything

now."

"But."

"But our cousin is still at large. Alfred slipped me in Guernsey, and I don't yet know where he has gone or who is hiding him. He is the most dangerous man in Britain to me, because he is the only one who knows exactly what I love and exactly how to use it. Until he is in irons, I can't draw a clean breath."

Venus nodded slowly. He had already given her the essence of Alfred's crimes. He had had to, in order to make sure his sister stayed away from their cousin. But she was unaware of how it connected to Vivienne.

"And there is the rest of it," Dalton went on, more quietly. "Our life together was stolen. Not only the seven years apart, but everything that came before. Our love. Our connection. I'm trying not to be angry. I don't always succeed. When I look at her face and she looks at me without recognition… I want to break something."

"Val — "

"Don't."

But she was not going to be put off. She set both hands flat on the desk. "I owe you an apology, and I have owed it to you for a long time, and I would rather give it now than carry it any further."

"You owe me nothing."

"I do." Her eyes were bright. "When you came home from the wreck and you wouldn't stop searching, when you swore she was still alive and you were going to find her, I did not believe you. I thought you had lost your mind, the way Papa lost his, and that the only way to save you was to make you stop. I told you the cruelest thing I could think of to stop you. And you were right, and I was wrong, and if I had let you go on — "

"Venus."

" — she might have been home years ago."

"Venus, look at me."

She did, with difficulty.

"There is nothing to forgive," he said. "I have had seven years to think about that time, and what I have come to is this. You did not stop a man who would have found his wife. You stopped a man who would have died trying. You would have been left alone. At the mercy of Alfred, who turned out to be a traitor. You did not fail me. You saved me."

Venus pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes.

They sat in silence for a moment. Then he said, more steadily, "There is something else you should know. Something I have not told her, and will not tell her until I have to."

Venus waited.

"I suspect the wreck was not an accident."

Her eyes went wide.

"I think Alfred arranged it. I cannot prove every link in the chain yet, but I have enough. He meant to kill me, and when he didn't succeed, he hid her from me. That is why I could not find her."

"Dear God."

"I tell you this because I want you to understand what kind of man we are dealing with, and why I am as cautious with her as I am. He used her against me once. He will try again if he can. Until we capture him, no one in this house is entirely safe — least of all her."

Venus's face had gone pale. "And she doesn't know."

"I will tell her when she is stronger. To tell her now would be to give her a worry she can't bear. The doctor would call it the worst possible thing I could do."

"I won't say a word."

"Thank you."

She drew a long breath and let it out, and some of her color came back. "Whatever I can do, you have only to ask."

"I know."

"Even if it is to leave again, if my being here is too much for her. Say it and I will go."

"It is not too much. She likes you. I saw it on her face." He almost smiled. "Apparently, you are easier to be around than I am."

"Well, of course I am. I'm charming."

"You are exhausting."

"That too." She smiled impishly.

He looked at his sister — really looked at her — for the first time in a long while. The girl she had been was still in her face somewhere, under the woman she had become.

"Venus."

"Yes."

"I'm glad you came."

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CHAPTER 25

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON VIVIENNE found Venus in the gardens. The rain had finally let up, leaving the air scented with wet grass and turned earth.

She had not slept well. The previous day's revelations had opened a door into her husband's internal world, and behind it she had glimpsed a landscape she had not known existed. She had not only forgotten her own past; she had forgotten his. The boy who had become this man, long before she ever met him.

It was a startling realization, and a humbling one. To know her husband, she would have to learn what had made him. Not only what had passed between them, but what had passed before her, and what had passed in the years she had been gone. Dalton would never tell her any of it. He would protect her from the worst of it as long as he drew breath, and protect her with such care that she would not even notice the protection.

So she would have to ask Venus.

She found her on the bench beside the dripping rose hedges. A tea tray sat on the wrought-iron table beside her. Venus looked up, smiled, and poured a second cup without being asked.

"I was hoping you would come and join me," she said.

Vivienne sat. For a moment they were quiet together, and the only sounds were the drip from the hedges and the distant cry of a gull.

"There is more, is there not?" Vivienne asked. "Of his story. Of yours."

"There is always more, Vivi. What do you want to know?"

"What happened after the wreck?"

Venus looked at her. Then she set down her cup.

"I thought you might ask. He has told you he was on the ship."

"Yes. He told me that much."

She drew a careful breath. "I was not there, so what I'm going to tell you, I pieced together from the sailors, and from Val in fragments."

Vivienne nodded.

"The ship went down after lunch. A boiler exploded. Smoke blinded the deck, and by the time the boats launched, a storm was rising. A handful of the crew pulled Val into one of the boats. He had a broken leg, broken ribs, and a gash on his head that would not stop bleeding. They thought, at first, that they had got everyone they were going to get."

"But he did not."

"He kept asking for you." Venus's throat worked. "They told him they had not found you. He demanded that they keep searching. And the crew did. They searched for hours. Val with them. They worked the wreckage until there was nothing left to work, until the light was dim and the storm had begun in earnest. At last the crew said no one living remained. That further delay would endanger everyone, and they had to leave now."

"So what did he do?"

"He went over the side."

Vivienne gasped.

"The sailors said they had never seen such madness — a man half broken, dragging himself through storm water, calling your name."

Something like a whimper rose in Vivienne's throat. She didn't know she had made it until Venus reached out and took her hand.

"The captain of the boat begged him to come back aboard. Val swore he wouldn't leave without you."

Venus's hand tightened on hers.

"In the end, the sailors decided for him. They had a duke half dead in the water and a storm coming down on them. Another hour would have killed them all. So they pulled him into the boat. He fought them, and one of them knocked him out. It was the only way they could get him home."

"They had to knock him out," Vivienne whispered. She could see it as if she had been there: the dark water, the smoke, the wind, the man with a

broken body refusing to surrender her to the sea. The terrible mercy of the sailors who finally chose his life over his orders.

"He came home delirious," Venus went on. "I won't pretend otherwise. The doctors set his leg and bound his ribs and told us they didn't know whether he would live, and if he lived, whether his mind would come back the way it had been."

"How long was he sick?"

"He was unconscious for four days. The first thing he said upon waking was, *Where is she?* The second, *I'm going back.*"

"Oh, Valentine."

"He could not stand, let alone walk. The ribs would not let him breathe deeply enough to sit up for long, but he was planning another search from his sickbed within the hour." Venus's voice caught. "It was like watching Papa destroy himself all over again. And I told him so. It was the cruelest thing I could have said to him."

"And what did he do?"

"When I forced him to see it, something in him gave way. He stopped speaking for almost a day. Then he sent for a detective, and he handed the search over. He never sailed those waters again. He hired men to do what he could not do himself, and he waited."

Vivienne's vision blurred, the tears hot and insistent behind her eyes. For the boy who had decided at seventeen that control was the only alternative to destruction, and the man who had thrown that control away in the water, and the sister who had loved him enough to drag him out of it, even if she had to hurt him in the process.

"Venus — "

"I must ask your forgiveness." Venus's voice was very soft. "If I had not stopped him, if I had let him go on, perhaps he would have found you where the detective failed. Perhaps you would have been home years ago."

"No." Vivienne squeezed her hands. They were cold. "If you had not stopped him, he would have died. You gave us the chance to have a future."

Venus stared at her. Then something in her expression loosened. "Valentine said something similar yesterday when I asked his forgiveness. It is as if the two of you think in similar patterns," she said, her voice thick. "The amnesia has not changed that."

They sat for a while without speaking. Vivienne's mind was working, rewriting every interaction with Dalton.

"Until this moment, I had not been sure that he loved me." The truth left her mouth before she could stop it.

She believed it now. It was clear in his restraint. In the room preserved for seven years. In the way he watched her when he thought she didn't know.

"I wish I could remember," Vivienne said. "You have given me so much, and it has only made me realize how much more I still don't know. And how much it matters."

"Give it time. You can ask me anything, and I will answer to the best of my knowledge. I will send you the letters you wrote to me throughout the years. The things you talked about in those letters might give you some sense of your daily life. The things you cared about." She paused. "And there is also your diary."

She paused again. Not the brief pauses of her storytelling — a longer hesitation, as if she were deciding whether to say the next thing.

"I don't know if it survived," Venus continued. "But if it did, it might be here, or in the London house. Perhaps in your writing desk. Although — " she stopped again. "You may wish to wait before you look for it. A diary is honest. It will hold things that are joyful, but it will also hold things that are… difficult. Things he may not have told you yet. I would not want you to read your own words without the context to understand them."

Venus was not telling her to avoid the diary. She was telling her to be ready.

"I will be cautious if I find it. But I doubt it is here. For weeks I have been inhabiting the duchess's chambers. I use that writing desk daily, and have not come across it. But I have started a new diary to document my memories and impressions. I thought it was a good idea. It seems it is a habit I carry from before."

"Maybe the diary is in the London house, then. You can look for it when you go there."

"London?"

The word alone tightened her chest. She had barely adjusted to Penrose. Society, scrutiny, her parents — people who had mourned her and whom she could not remember. She was not ready.

Venus's hand rested on top of hers. "You need not worry about anything. My brother will protect you and stand by your side. And so will I, no matter the circumstances. You are not alone anymore, Vivi."

She managed a tremulous smile and squeezed Venus's hand. Already, Venus felt like an ally.

Vivienne carried thoughts of Dalton through the rest of the day. They followed her to bed.

She had been so focused on what she needed from him that she had not stopped to consider what he might need from her. And he would never ask.

What could she give him? Tenderness, playfulness. Her presence, certainly. The knowledge that she saw the real him beneath the layers of restraint created by trauma and loss. She might not remember loving him, but she could choose to love the man before her now.

But how to make him accept her love without reservations or fear?

Maybe what he needed was permission to take.

Her dream returned to her now: running. Being chased. And beneath it all, what she had mistaken for fear was really… anticipation. If she made him hunt her, he was more likely to take. That was the relationship between hunter and prey.

He had said it was a game. Tonight, she was in the mood to play.

She stood from the bed, padded to her desk in the corner, and scrawled a note. She looked at the connecting door. A sliver of light bled through the bottom. He was not asleep yet. Drawing her dressing gown around her like armor, she slipped the note under the door.

He would see it, she was sure of it. The man missed nothing.

The only question was: how long before he gave chase?

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CHAPTER 26

TONIGHT SHE WANTED SOMETHING wilder. Dark corridors. Pursuit. She wanted to be chased. And caught.

The oak door was heavy, but it swung open without protest. Though the passage ahead was cool and dark as always, it no longer filled her with fear. She slipped through and pulled the door shut behind her.

How long would he give her? She imagined him standing in his dressing room, her note in his hand, the crease between his brows deepening as he read.

Find me. I dare you.

Cheeky. Reckless. The sort of thing she suspected the old Vivienne might have done.

She reached their room and lit the candles. The bed she had made with clean sheets the day before. Everything was ready. She ducked back into the corridor. It wouldn't do to be found too quickly. The game was in the pursuit, the finding. The capturing.

She dove farther into the tunnels. The corridor narrowed. The ceiling dropped. She pressed herself into an alcove between two pillars and held her breath. Waiting.

Silence. The drip of water somewhere deep in the stone. Her own pulse, loud and fast.

Then — a footfall. Distant. Unhurried.

He was coming.

Her stomach dropped, and she pressed deeper into the shadows. The thrill, the wanting that coiled low in her body, was unlike anything she had felt before.

He advanced with deliberate steps. The thought sent another surge of heat through her. He was not chasing. He was stalking.

She shifted in the alcove. Her nightgown clung to her thighs where the cold stone had pressed the fabric to her skin. She heard him more clearly now — closer than she had expected. He had not come through the kitchen passage. He had taken another route, one she didn't know existed, and the realization that this castle held secrets she had not yet discovered made her breath catch.

The footsteps stopped.

She pressed further into the alcove. The silence was absolute. She could hear the blood in her own ears.

Then his voice, low and close, came from the direction she had not been watching.

"You gave away your position, Vivi."

She spun. He was behind her, a black silhouette in the passage she had assumed was a dead end. He must have come through another tunnel — circled around behind her while she waited in the wrong shadow.

She bolted.

Took a right turn into another passage. Stopped to listen. Was he still behind her? She couldn't hear him now, but somehow knew he was still chasing her. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. From the run or from thrill of the chase? A bit of both, she suspected. She turned and took off running again.

And made it three strides before his arm caught her around the waist. She collided with his chest — hard, warm, and the breath left her in a rush. He lifted her off her feet before she could draw another.

"Caught," he said.

She was over his shoulder before she could respond. His arm locked across the backs of her thighs, his hand splayed wide and warm against the thin cotton of her nightgown, and the world tilted. She felt the strength in him, the ease with which he carried her, and the sensation of being handled, claimed, sent a bolt of pure want through her so sharp she forgot to struggle.

He carried her into the room. Set her on her feet. His eyes moved over the bed she had made with fresh linen. Over the swept floor, the folded sheets, the silk ropes hanging from their hooks. Over her.

She watched his expression shift. Surprise. Understanding. A heat so intense it darkened his eyes to black.

"You prepared this." Not a question.

"I thought it would be a good idea. To have it ready… for the next time."

"You cleaned our room, made the bed." He was circling her. "And then you slipped a note under my door and ran."

She lifted her chin. "I did."

He stepped closer. His fingers caught the ribbon at her throat and tugged it loose. The nightgown sagged off one shoulder.

"Naughty of you, my pet, to taunt me and run from me."

Her breath stuttered. The word *pet* — spoken in that register, low, dark, and promising — did something to the base of her spine.

"Naughty girls," he said, pushing the nightgown off the other shoulder, letting it pool at her waist, "need to be caught and taught discipline." He reached for the silk rope on the nearest hook.

She stood immobile. The air was cool on her bare skin, but his hands were warm as they gathered her arms and crossed them at the small of her back.

"I am going to bind you," he said. "Is this what you came here for?"

"Yes."

He wound the silk around her wrists, up her forearms, across her chest, over her shoulders: an intricate harness that held her arms pinned behind her back and framed her breasts in bands of silk. The rope was soft. His hands were not — they were sure and precise, pulling each strand snug, checking the tension with his fingers, adjusting where the silk pressed against her skin. When he had finished, she could not move her arms. She could breathe and arch. She could do nothing else.

"Lie down," he said.

She lay on the bed. On her back, her arms beneath her — not painful, but present, a constant awareness of her own helplessness. The bindings thrust her breasts up, her nipples puckering under the cold air and his scrutiny. He stood over her, looking down, and she could see his chest rising and falling faster than his composure would admit.

He tugged off her nightgown, leaving her completely exposed. The vulnerability sent a rush of pleasure to her intimate parts. He reached for the vial of oil on the bedside shelf.

"A massage?" she said. "I thought I was being punished."

"You are." He poured oil into his palm and rubbed his hands together. The scent of almonds filled the room. "Your punishment is that I will decide how and when to touch you, and I won't allow you to rush me."

He started at her collarbones. Long strokes down her chest, his thumbs tracing the line where silk met skin, carefully avoiding her puckered nipples that begged for his attention. His hands spread wide over her ribs, pressing the oil into her skin.

When at last his hands reached her breasts, he cupped them, his thumbs circling slowly inward until they grazed her nipples. She arched into the touch. He straddled her and kept her hips down with his own, while his hands continued the slow torment of her breasts — circling, then pinching until she arched off the bed, her legs falling open in instinctive invitation.

"Close your legs," he commanded.

"You're..." She lost the word when he pinched again, rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Her hips lifted off the bed.

"Stay still."

"I can't."

"Then I shall have to make sure of it."

He flipped her over, mindful of her bound arms, settling her on her front with her face turned to one side. The silk harness pressed into her back, holding her arms. He resumed the massage from behind: her shoulders, the channel of her spine, the curve of her waist. His hands were slick and warm and everywhere, and every stroke ended at her hips, and every time he stopped she felt the absence like a dropped note.

When she undulated against the mattress, seeking friction, seeking anything that might assuage this need brewing inside, he reached for another length of silk.

"I warned you," he said.

He bound her legs together from ankle to knee — the same practiced wrapping, the same snug loops. When he finished, she was trussed from shoulders to shins. She could rock and arch. But not move her arms or open her legs.

She turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder.

"Well," she said, her voice rougher than she intended, "I hope you're pleased with yourself. You've made your favorite parts of me entirely inaccessible."

His laugh was low and dark. Without a word, he slid one hand beneath her hips, through the narrow gap between her bound thighs, and parted the slick folds of her sex to stroke her clitoris.

"You were saying?"

She could not say anything. His finger moved in slow, tight circles, and the oil and her own wetness made each touch impossibly slick, and her bound legs pressed her thighs together so that every stroke created friction everywhere, and —

"Oh God — "

"Not God. Your husband."

She came with her face pressed into the pillow and her whole body pulling against the silk. The climax rolled through her in waves — each one tightening the ropes, tightening her thighs around his hand, tightening everything until she was shaking and breathless and wrung out.

His hand stilled. Stayed. Held her through the last tremors until her breathing slowed.



SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL.

She was always beautiful, but flushed, bound, and spent like this — she undid him.

Find me. I dare you.

Five words. The cheek of her. The audacity, the playfulness. It was so like her — the essence of the woman he adored, the one who had always known how to cut through his defenses with nothing but nerve and an absolute refusal to be managed.

He repositioned her. Gentle with her bound arms, careful with the silk at her legs. He slid a cushion beneath her hips, lifting her backside and keeping her bound legs pressed together beneath him. She turned her head on the pillow, one hazel eye watching him. Trusting him.

"I am going to be between your thighs," he said, and his voice was gravel. "Not inside. Keep your legs together."

He slicked himself with what remained of the oil. His cock was aching — had been aching since he read her note, since he followed her into the dark, since he lifted her onto his shoulder and felt her go limp against him with a trust so naked it nearly broke his stride.

He pressed forward. Slid between her closed thighs.

The friction. The heat. Her thighs clenched around him, slick with oil, and the low moan she gave went through him like shot.

He gripped her hips. Pulled her back against him. Drove forward.

Not inside. Between. The distinction was important.

With every stroke, the head of his cock slid forward between her slick folds, grazing her clitoris. He could hear it in the way her breathing changed — shorter, sharper, the catching quality that meant she was climbing again. He angled his hips to press more firmly against that swollen knot of nerves, and she gasped.

"Val — "

Again. The thrust, the friction, the maddening almost. She was panting. Her fingers twisted against the silk at her back.

He shifted his angle. A fraction.

And slipped inside her.

One smooth stroke and he buried his cock in her to the hilt. Her body, wet from her climax, slick with oil, parted around him and drew him in, and the heat of her closed around his cock.

He stilled.

Every muscle locked. His hands on her hips, fingers pressing white marks into her skin. The world had narrowed to the place where his body joined hers. The tight, wet, consuming heat of her was so acute he could not breathe.

Seven years of empty beds and his own hand while he thought of her, and now she was here, bound and willing and slick with oil, and the restraint required to do anything other than drive into her was almost unbearable.

Beneath him, she gasped. Her back arched. He pressed into her a fraction deeper, and her breath left her in a rush.

"Are you all right?" His voice did not sound like his voice.

"Yes." Breathless. "Stay. Please stay. It feels — "

She did not finish. She didn't need to. He could feel what it felt like. He could feel her body remembering him, softening around him. Her hips tilting and adjusting so instinctively it could not have been conscious.

He knew he should leave. Now. He was too close. His discipline lay in ruins around him, and the old fears were pounding at the edges of his mind. His mother. The three losses they had already suffered. If he stayed and finished... if the consequence of this one moment of weakness was a child she could not carry...

But God, the pull of her. The clasp of her body around his, the slick heat, the way she held him. His cock was inside his wife for the first time in seven years, and... he could not leave.

He moved. Slowly. A withdrawal that was agony, a return that was bliss. One stroke. He felt the full length of it — the drag, the clench, the shuddering intake of her breath.

Another. And then he settled into a steady rhythm. The one he remembered she liked best. Deep. Slow. Relentless.

She was tightening around him. He could feel the gathering, the trembling in her thighs, the way her body coiled toward the climax with a swiftness that told him this fullness — the completeness of being inside her — was what she had needed all along.

She came.

Crying his name into the pillow. And the sensation of the pulsing grip of her climax tightening around him tore through every wall he had left.

He wrenched himself out of her.

The violence of the separation drove a ragged, wrecked sound from his throat. He staggered back on his knees, one hand on the mattress, the other gripping himself as his savage climax hit. He spilled across her buttocks and the curve of her lower back with a groan that came from somewhere beneath reason, from the place where his love for her and his terror of losing her shared the same dark room.

He pressed his forehead to her spine. Her skin was damp with oil and exertion, and she smelled of almonds and salt. He stayed there until the shaking stopped.

Then he untied her.

Her legs first. His unusually clumsy fingers fumbled the knots, and when the silk fell away, she flexed her feet with a small, sated sound. Then the harness: unwinding the silk from her chest and arms, rubbing the pink marks it had pressed into her skin. He kissed each one. Her wrists. The creases of her elbows. The line across her ribs where the rope had held her.

He used the sheet to clean his spend from her skin. Fetched a warm cloth from the basin and wiped the oil from her back and legs. Then covered her with the blanket and curled himself around her.



SHE LAY IN THE warm haze and felt him tend to her as though she were something precious and breakable. His hands that had gripped and commanded and driven her to the edge were gentle now, careful, wiping oil from the small of her back, pressing a kiss to the mark the silk had left on her forearm.

"Come here," she whispered.

He lay down behind her. Drew her against him. His arm settled across her waist, and her body fit against his with an exactness that made her chest ache, as though they had been designed for this single configuration.

She took his hand and pressed it to her breastbone. His heartbeat against her back. Hers under his palm. Both still fast. Slowing together.

She had felt him inside her. The fullness of him, the way her body had embraced him without thought. She had felt him move, and the tenderness in those few strokes, the care he took even while losing control, had cracked something open in her that she could not close again.

And then he had torn himself away.

She had felt that too. The sudden absence. The wet heat of his release on her skin instead of inside her.

She turned in his arms. He let her, though she felt him brace.

She put her hand on his chest. His heart was still hammering.

"Val."

"Hmm."

"Why did you not give me your seed?"

His heart kicked under her palm. She counted the heartbeats. One. Two. Three.

"I don't want to burden you with a pregnancy while you are still recovering."

The words were reasonable. Considerate, even. And yet, they made her uneasy. She turned them over in her mind. They fit on the surface. A

recovered amnesiac, finding her feet in a life she could not remember. Of course a pregnancy would be premature.

But the raw, wrecked sound he had made when he pulled out of her was not the sound of a man being careful. It was the sound of a man being torn apart.

She remembered what Venus had said about his mother and did not press. Not tonight. Tonight was about reaching him. He had given her his body and his tenderness and the ferocity of his need, and she would not repay it by pulling at threads he was not ready to unravel.

"That is very considerate," she said.

He exhaled. She felt the tension drop from his shoulders — not all of it, but enough. He pressed his lips to her forehead and held them there, and the gratitude in the gesture told her more than his answer had.

"Sleep," he murmured. "I will be here."

She closed her eyes. His arm drew her closer. The stone room was cool, but his body was warm, and his heart was steady under her hand. He had chased her through dark corridors, caught her, bound her, and touched her with a ferocity that left marks that went beyond skin deep.

Then he had left her body before making his claim complete.

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CHAPTER 27

HE BROKE THE NEWS over breakfast because he was a coward who believed the presence of his sister might soften the blow.

"Vivienne, we must go to London."

Vivienne's knife paused halfway through a kipper. She didn't look up, but he could read the tension in her shoulders, the stillness of her hands.

"Must we?"

"Yes. I have duties I can no longer ignore."

"When?" she asked.

"Friday."

She set her knife down. "May I ask why?"

He could not tell her the truth — that Alfred's network had resurfaced in Westminster, that two coded dispatches lay on his desk. She didn't yet know what he did for the Crown. That was a revelation he had to plan and execute with extreme care.

"The estate lawyers require signatures. The townhouse has been closed for months and needs attention. And — " He paused. "Your parents have written. They have heard rumors of your return."

Her face changed to something akin to a cornered animal's. "My parents," she said. "Whom I don't remember."

"Lord and Lady Kilbrannan are — " He stopped himself from saying *good people*, because that wouldn't help. What she needed was specificity.

"Your mother is warm. Forthright. She says what she thinks and expects the same from everyone around her. Your father is quieter but no less direct."

"They will want to see me."

There was still fear in her expression, but it now mingled with curiosity. With a hunger for the details of a life she could no longer access.

"They will want to devour you," he said. "But I will be there. And Venus will come with us to help. She is quite good at managing people."

"She would have to be," Vivienne murmured, "having managed you."

He almost smiled.

"You cannot stay in Cornwall forever, however beautiful it is," Venus added. "Your parents have mourned you for seven years, Vivi. And word will spread whether we manage it or not. It is better to arrive on your own terms than to let rumor precede you."

Vivienne was quiet for a long moment, no doubt grappling with the public dimension she had not, until now, allowed herself to consider. A duchess returned from the dead. The gossip sheets would feast.

"May I have some time to think about it?" she asked Dalton.

"Of course." He reached out and covered her hand with his. "But I need to go, regardless, and I will be in London for some time. I believe the moment has come, Vivi."

Their arrival in London was as uneventful as he had hoped. He had made arrangements in advance: the train cars, the coaches, the London house, all exactly as he had ordered. The dark mahogany paneling in the entrance hall gleamed. Fresh flowers on the console table scented the air. Mrs. Hewitt, who ran the London household with brisk efficiency, had everything ready.

At least most of the London staff had not been in his employ seven years ago. So thankfully there had been no tearful recognitions. No emotional displays.

Vivienne stood in the entrance hall, turning, her eyes moving over surfaces, absorbing everything. She touched the banister. Ran her fingers along the carved newel post. As if she were using touch to try to remember.

"It is beautiful," she said.

It was not the word he wanted. The word he wanted was *familiar*. Or *home*. He inclined his head and said, "I will show you to the duchess's suite."

"And where is the duke's suite?"

There was a spark of deviltry in her eyes. He was glad the overwhelm had not extinguished it.

"Adjacent." He paused. Leaned toward her to whisper for her ears alone. "With a connecting door."

Her mouth curved. The connecting door at Penrose had seen a great deal of traffic in recent days, and they both knew it.

"Adjacent," she repeated, as if tasting the word. "How convenient."

Society had not forgotten the Duchess of Dalton. And the news of her reappearance raged like a wildfire through the ton.

The first morning call arrived the next day, before the breakfast dishes had been cleared. By noon, a dozen cards had accumulated on the hall table. Some from well-wishers, most from women whose curiosity exceeded their good taste. Dalton cataloged the names the way he cataloged intelligence assets: motive, allegiance, sources of information.

By evening, the gossip columns had the story.

The Duke of D — 's long-lost Duchess has returned to London, having been discovered living in reduced circumstances on a Channel island. The details of her disappearance remain mysterious, but this paper can confirm that the lady was seen arriving at the Kensington residence in the company of Lady V — S — A — , the Duke's sister.

Reduced circumstances. As if Vivienne had been living in a hovel rather than as the companion to a clergyman's mother. As if the seven years of her absence were a matter of social status, rather than a catastrophe that had hollowed out his life and left him walking through the ruins.

He folded the paper and set it aside. He had known the gossip would come. What he had not realized was how fiercely he would resent her suffering made into a parlor amusement, their private grief turned out for public consumption.

As much as he would have liked to block access to Vivienne completely and turn away all callers, doing so would only invite more gossip and speculation. Better to reintroduce her to society slowly, while they controlled the terms and the visitors. On the third morning, the first real test arrived in the form of Lady Compton-Wells.

She was sixty, silver-tongued, and pleasant — which made her the most dangerous kind of caller. She collected other people's stories the way some women collected porcelain, and displayed them with the same indifference to their subjects.

Venus had anticipated her and positioned herself at Vivienne's right hand. Dalton took the armchair by the window.

Lady Compton-Wells embraced Vivienne with every appearance of warmth. "My dear girl. What an ordeal you have survived. You must tell me everything."

"I'm afraid there isn't much to tell," Vivienne said. Her voice was steady. Her hands, folded in her lap, betrayed nothing. "I was ill after the shipwreck. I have been recovering. His Grace has been very patient and kind."

"But the circumstances," Lady Compton-Wells pressed, leaning forward. "One hears such things — a remote island, a doctor who attended you — "

Dalton's fingers tightened on the arm of his chair.

"Dr. Harrison saved my life," Vivienne said. Something in her voice had shifted. A note of steel he recognized from their negotiations on Guernsey, from the woman who had looked at him across the vestry table and said *I will not be managed*. "And the rector's mother took me in when I had nothing. I owe them a debt I can't repay, and I would be sorry to hear anyone speak of either of them with anything less than respect."

The drawing room went still.

He could have applauded. Vivienne might not remember this life, but she was still every inch a duchess.

Lady Compton-Wells recovered fast; she had not survived six decades of society by being easily discomposed. She smiled, adjusted the angle of her inquiry, and spent the next twenty minutes asking about Cornwall with an enthusiasm that was almost convincing.

When she left, Venus exhaled.

"Well," she said. "That will be all over London by dinner."

"Yes," Dalton agreed. He was looking at Vivienne, who was staring at the closed drawing room door with a frown.

"You handled her perfectly," he said.

She turned to him. "I handled her the way I would handle anyone who insulted the people I care about."

He filed that away. She defended the people she loved without hesitation. She would, he suspected, do the same for him.

If he ever let her close enough to see where he was unprotected.

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CHAPTER 28

LORD AND LADY KILBRANNAN arrived in London three days after he and Vivienne did, which meant they had left Scotland the moment they received the news and had not stopped traveling since. He had sent a letter the morning of their arrival, by special courier. He was uncertain whether the rumor or the letter had reached them first.

When Prowse announced them, he was in his study. He did not go to Vivienne first. He met them alone because he knew what was coming, and he intended to absorb the worst of it before it reached her.

Lady Kilbrannan came through the study door already furious. Small and red-headed, she was shaking with the kind of rage that only comes from deep grief. She stopped at the sight of him, her eyes boring into his face.

"One month," she said, and her voice shook. "You have had my daughter for a month, and you didn't think to tell us she was alive."

"I did not have her," Dalton said. "I was earning her trust. Vivienne remembers nothing, Georgiana. Nothing. She does not know your name. Did not even know her own. I could not bring her to London and bury her beneath a family she could not recognize. She needed time."

"She needed her mother."

He took the blow without flinching, because she was right, and because he had known she would be furious and hurt, and because the decision to

delay had still been the correct one, regardless of how it looked from the outside.

Lord Kilbrannan stood behind his wife, taller, grayer, his jaw working. He said nothing, but his stance was no less accusatory.

"I understand your anger," Dalton said. "I do not expect your forgiveness. But I would ask you to temper your reunion with her. Her fragility is not always visible. She will want to please you. To remember. She will fail, and the failure will cost her."

Lady Kilbrannan's face crumpled. The fury went out of her, and what remained was seven years of grief, compressed into the trembling of her lower lip and the brightness gathering in her eyes.

"Take me to her," she whispered.

He did.

The reunion happened in the drawing room. Dalton stationed himself by the door because he had learned that the most useful thing he could do in moments like this was to be present without being central. Vivienne sat on the settee, her hands clasped, wearing the composure she put on when she was terrified. She rose at once at their entrance.

Lady Kilbrannan crossed the room and stopped three feet from her daughter. Her wide eyes brimmed with tears, and her expression was painful to watch. But to give her credit, she did not rush to embrace her. She looked at Vivienne and, with a voice that trembled just a little, said, "Hello, my darling girl."

Vivienne's composure held for approximately four seconds.

Then her face crumpled and she was in her mother's arms, weeping against her shoulder. Lord Kilbrannan was there too, his large hands cradling the back of his daughter's head, and Venus was pressing a handkerchief to her own eyes by the window. Dalton remained by the door. Watching, and wondering for the hundredth time whether he had done the right thing in delaying this encounter. Or if there even was a right thing to be done.



HER PARENTS HAD THEIR own townhouse in London, but for the first week they stayed with her. Vivienne learned this from her mother,

who announced it over the breakfast table on the second morning as though no other arrangement had ever been under discussion.

"We will not be away from you for a single minute more than we have to," Lady Kilbrannan said, and reached across the butter dish to tuck a curl of Vivienne's hair behind her ear. "I hope you will forgive the imposition."

Vivienne didn't know what to do with the hand, or the curl, or the easy possessiveness of the gesture. Her mother's fingers smelled faintly of rose water and something else she could not place, but that made her chest feel full and tight at once.

"You are not imposing," she said.

It was the truth. Or at least, what she wanted the truth to be. What a good daughter was supposed to answer. Her parents loved her. It was obvious in her mother's glittering eyes, in her father's deep and pensive stares. In the way they soaked up every interaction with her. And she… she could not remember them, but their love had found an echo in her heart. A sort of kinship that transcended memory.

The days settled into a pattern. Her mother sat beside her on the settee in the long yellow drawing room, their knees almost touching. Her father sat in the armchair by the window, a newspaper folded in his lap that he never opened. The silver tea service that Mrs. Hewitt brought in at eleven and again at four, and the particular sound of her father clearing his throat before he spoke, which he did rarely and always as though he had practiced the sentence before letting it out. Her mother, on the other hand, spoke enough for them both. She was full of stories. So many stories.

"There was the oak," her mother said on the first afternoon. "In the south garden at Kilbrannan. You climbed it when you were seven, and you got yourself up past the second branch. When we found you and demanded that you come down, you refused. Do you know what you said to your father?"

"I do not," Vivienne said, but she very much wanted to.

"You said, *I will come down when I get the puppy you promised me.* And your father sent a groom into Perth that very afternoon for a spaniel."

Her father made a small sound from the armchair. It might have been a laugh. It might have been the clearing of his throat.

"I got a puppy for being disobedient?" Vivienne asked, bemused.

"You got a puppy because you were impossible and we adored you," her mother said. "His name was Tam. He lived to be fourteen and slept on your bed every night until you went to London for your first Season. He died the

week after you left. I have always thought he held on just long enough to see you off."

Something moved in Vivienne's chest. Not a memory. Nothing so clean as that. A pressure. A dog called Tam. She could almost picture him in her mind.

"What color was he?" she asked.

"Liver and white. One brown ear and one mostly white one. You used to say he was wearing only half his hat."

She laughed. She had not meant to; it came out as a hiccup. But what her mother described matched the picture of the dog she had made in her mind. That had to mean something, did it not? Her mother's face lit up as though Vivienne had just handed her a piece of silver.

"There," Lady Kilbrannan said softly. "There you are."

Vivienne looked down at her teacup so that the shine in her mother's eyes would not undo her.

The stories kept coming. About the pony who threw her into a burn and the twelve-year-old Vivienne who walked home dripping and announced she would ride him again before supper. The French governess who lasted nine days. The first ball at sixteen, when she had torn the hem of her white silk in the reel and pinned it up with a brooch from her mother's dressing table and danced until dawn with the pin working loose by degrees and a trail of torn silk behind her like a comet's tail.

"You were magnificent," her mother said. "You were always magnificent. Our pride and joy."

Vivienne reached for another biscuit from the plate at her elbow, because her mother's overt feelings were too much to bear, and chewing distracted her from the stinging in her eyes.

She asked questions. She could not help herself. Every scrap from her childhood was like a gem. Her mother answered everything. The answers poured out of her the way water pours out of a jug filled to the brim.

But beneath the wanting, it was an exhausting performance. Both things were real. Both were true.

Making small adjustments to her face when a story did not land anywhere she could feel it. Producing, every few minutes, a smile or a laugh or a quiet *tell me more*, so that her mother's face would not do the small collapsing thing it did when Vivienne's expression went blank for a second too long.

The effort of being the daughter they knew, when she was not entirely certain that daughter still existed. At least not whole.

By the afternoon of the third day, her head ached in a low, even band across her temples, and she caught herself twice wishing, with a pang of shame, that she could go upstairs and lie down for an hour without anyone telling her another beautiful thing about a girl she did not know.

She wouldn't say so. She would not. Her mother had held her and wept against her hair and called her *my darling girl*, and Vivienne had felt something in her body answer to that voice. Whatever else was true, that was true. She would not trade it for an hour of quiet.

"Are you tired, my love?" her mother asked late on the third evening. Her father lifted his head from the unopened newspaper at that exact moment. He had been watching, then. He was always watching.

"A little," Vivienne said. "Not unpleasantly."

"We are giving you too much."

"You are giving me exactly what I asked for," she said, which was true, and was also the sort of sentence she had been producing all week.

Her father cleared his throat. "Georgiana."

"I will stop," her mother said. "I will sit here with my hands in my lap and say nothing for an hour."

She didn't manage even a quarter of an hour, and then she was off again. This time about a pair of red shoes Vivienne had worn to a wedding at the age of four. Vivienne listened and smiled and asked questions. But she did not look at her father, because her father was looking at her with the steady, unblinking attention of a man afraid that if he so much as turned his head, the miracle in front of him would prove to have been a trick of the light.

She loved them. At least, she was certain of that, in a way she had not expected to be so certain so fast. She simply wished, as she climbed the stairs to bed that night with her mother's latest story still ringing in her ears, that being around them did not feel like so much effort.

She had gone halfway up the sweeping curve of the grand staircase when the faint, unmistakable sound of her husband's voice came from below. The study, most likely. She paused with her hand on the banister, considering. Then she turned and went back down.



AFTER DINNER, DALTON ASKED the Kilbrannans to join him in his study before retiring.

Lady Kilbrannan took the chair opposite his desk. Lord Kilbrannan remained standing, one hand resting on the back of his wife's chair. A posture Dalton recognized from his own habit of positioning himself where he could shield and intervene at once.

"I need to speak to you about Vivienne," Dalton said. "And I would ask you to hear me out before you answer."

Lady Kilbrannan's mouth tightened, but she said nothing.

"The doctor who cared for her in Guernsey gave specific instructions before she left his care. He was clear that her recovery depends on her not being overwhelmed. Names, dates, stories, people, places. All of it at once. The mind has been protecting itself for seven years. It can't absorb everything at the pace we would wish to give it."

"I am her mother — "

"You are her mother, and I don't question for a moment what that entitles you to. But I'm telling you what the man who kept her alive told me before I took her from him. And I am asking you — not ordering, asking — to slow down. The stories. The reminding. She is working very hard not to disappoint you, Georgiana. I can see the cost of it in her face at the end of every day, even if she won't admit it."

Lady Kilbrannan stared at him. For a long moment she did not speak. Then she drew herself up in a way that would have been comic in a less formidable woman.

"Dalton. With respect, I have watched my daughter these past three days, and I don't see what you claim to see. She is tired — of course she is. She has been through an ordeal no one in this room can imagine. But she is not overwhelmed. Every story I tell her is a thread back to herself. You can't heal a woman by hiding her own life from her."

"I'm not hiding anything — "

"You are managing her." She said it without heat, which made it worse. "You have been doing so since you found her, and I understand why. You love her, and you are frightened, and that is what you do when you are

frightened. I know you, Valentine. I have known you since you were twenty-seven years old and walked into my drawing room with your heart in your eyes. But there is a fine line between protecting a person and deciding for her, and I don't think you always know which side of it you are standing on."

He didn't answer at once. He could not. Her accuracy was almost unbearable.

Lord Kilbrannan spoke for the first time. "The doctor on Guernsey. Was he a specialist?"

"He was a country physician," Dalton said. "A good one. But no."

"Then his instructions, however well meant, were those of a generalist. Not a man who has made a study of this condition." Kilbrannan's voice was quiet, thoughtful. "There are doctors in London who have. I should like her to see one."

"I have considered it."

"Consider it more seriously." The older man's hand had not moved from the back of his wife's chair, but something in his posture had. "Whatever you have been doing at Penrose has brought her further than I would have dared to hope three days ago. But there is a man in this city who knows more than your country doctor about how memory comes back. I have made inquiries. She deserves the benefit of his knowledge, and I daresay there is no time to waste. We have already lost seven years."

Dalton looked at his father-in-law for a long moment.

"You have made inquiries."

"I'm her father. I left Scotland a few days ago believing my daughter was dead. Did you imagine I would arrive in London and simply sit in your drawing room?"

There was no answer to that which wouldn't have been an insult, so Dalton gave none.

"Who is this doctor?" he asked instead.

"Dr. Linton. Harley Street. He studied under Charcot in Paris and has written two monographs on retrograde amnesia. I have not yet approached him. I wanted to speak with you first."

He recognized the courtesy. Kilbrannan could have written to Linton from his own townhouse without asking anyone's permission. He had not. He had come here, to his son-in-law's study, and offered the name.

Dalton exhaled slowly.

"Very well," he said. "I will take her."

The intake of breath at the door was very small. Yet it cut through the room like a knife.

He looked up.

Vivienne stood in the open doorway. One hand rested on the doorframe. The other was at her throat, at the place where her pulse beat when she was frightened. He knew that gesture. He had seen it in the vestry on Guernsey and in the entrance hall at Penrose and in the dark of the tunnels the night she had dreamed of the dungeon. It was an instinctive gesture of protection.

She had heard enough of their conversation. And she did not like what she had heard.

"Vivi — "

"How long have you been planning this?" Her voice was very soft. That was the worst of it. If she had been angry he would have known how to meet her. This was something else.

"I was not planning anything," he said. "Your father has just now — "

"You agreed to take me to a doctor."

"Yes."

"Without asking me."

"I would have asked you. I was going to ask you tomorrow."

"No. You were going to tell me tomorrow." She took one step into the study. "There is a difference, Val. And I think you know it."

Lady Kilbrannan half rose from her chair. "Darling — "

"Please, Mama." Vivienne did not take her eyes off Dalton. "I would like to speak with my husband."

The word *Mama* had come out of her mouth without hesitation, as if she had been saying it for thirty-five years. Dalton saw Lady Kilbrannan register it. He watched her sit back down, as if a gentle blow had landed on her breastbone.

"I will not see any doctor," Vivienne said. "This Dr. Linton or anyone in Harley Street. I already have a doctor. His name is Paul Harrison and I trust him."

Dalton kept his face still. The mention of Harrison, here, now, was a weapon she had reached for without thinking. Did she know how much it hurt him? He filed it away to address when the wound was less fresh.

"We are only trying to help."

"Why is everyone so impatient for me to recover my memories? Why does everyone keep suggesting I am unwell?"

It was not blind loyalty to Harrison, or stubbornness, that made her refuse to see a doctor. No, there was more there. And it looked like fear. He would sort this out. But not now, when her agitation was so evident. What she needed at that moment was reassurance.

"It will be as you wish, dear."

"Promise me you will not force me to see this Dr. Linton, or any other doctor."

"I promise you I will not force you to do anything against your will."

The fear did not leave her eyes, but it receded a little. She gave a curt nod.

"Thank you." Her gaze swept over the room, encompassing them all, as if she were evaluating a threat.

"If you will excuse me."

With that, she turned and left, closing the door softly behind her.

She was already in bed when he went to her bedroom that night, but he knew she was not asleep. She was curled on her side, and even in the low light, he could feel the tension emanating from her. Wearing only his nightshirt, he slid into bed behind her. She said nothing, but as he held her in the dark, her body softened against him by degrees. He tightened his arm around her waist and pulled her closer.

"Tell me what that was about." He didn't need to elaborate.

"I don't like being discussed," she said finally. "It bothers me when the people who profess to love me decide what is good for me without consulting me. As if I can't be trusted to decide for myself. I won't have that anymore."

"You will not," he said. "I give you my word."

And he did so unreservedly. He wouldn't do anything against her will. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her. Even if she was still not telling the entire truth.

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CHAPTER 29

HE HAD ONLY COME to hold her. To reassure her. Or maybe to reassure himself. But she turned within the circle of his embrace.

"I want you," she said. "Without ropes or games. They are a form of distance for you, are they not? A way to retain some control. But tonight, I don't want the careful, controlled version of you that decides what I'm allowed to have. I want all of you."

He heard what she was not saying. She didn't want to be passive. Managed. It was her way of asserting control over her choices.

In the dark her mouth found his. Bold. Demanding. Her lips parted beneath his in a breathy sound he captured with his own.

He kissed her long and deep, drinking until he could not tell whether he was quenching his thirst or renewing it. He had her and he wanted her in the same breath.

"Val…"

His name, a moan and a plea.

This woman. His woman. The texture of her hair between his fingers, the taste of her on his tongue. He wanted her with a fierceness that frightened him. He tried to rein it in. To give her what she needed without losing himself in the wanting. But he did not control it. It controlled him.

She threw one leg over his, the other circling his waist, cradling his hardness against her. He could feel her heat through the thin fabric of her

nightgown and his nightshirt. Two thin layers between him and the place he wanted to be.

Her hands glided over his back in long, restless strokes — soothing him, inflaming him. Then she closed her fists on his shirt and tugged. He helped her, pulling it over his head, and moved lower over her, kissing her neck, sucking on the lobe of her ear.

The nightgown's neckline was too high. Too many buttons. He could not manage them in his present state. He took the fabric in both fists and tore. Buttons scattered. He sat back on his haunches and ripped the rest of it from neck to hem. Her skin glowed cream in the light of the single candle. Her breasts, her hips, the dark curls at the apex of her thighs.

His mouth watered. He was so hard it hurt. But at last there was nothing between them now.

She extended a hand toward his chest, opening her palm over his heart, as if she wanted to grasp it. She could have it. It was hers. It had always been hers.

"You are so beautiful," she said.

A huff of a laugh escaped him. "Beautiful? Me? You are the one who is enchanting." He bent down and lay on top of her, kissing around her breasts before he took one stiff peak in his mouth and pulled with just enough strength to make her arch into him.

"Tempting." Another pull, a tweak of his fingers on the other nipple. Another arch of her back, and her legs opened farther. "Ravishing." He moved lower, trailing kisses along her stomach until he got to the place he sought. She was already wet for him, glistening. "Irresistible."

The first contact of his lips with her flesh, and he was lost. Lost in her taste, in the sounds she made, in her fingers in his hair, guiding him. Tightening when she wanted more. There. Pulling when it was too much, too soon. He feasted. His tongue working her until she was trembling, inserting one finger, then two, into her. He flexed them slowly as she rode them — rode his tongue and his fingers until she fell apart on his face with a choked sound.

God, he was hard. He needed to be inside her now. After helping her ride her orgasm to its end, he pushed into her, almost clumsy with need, in one stroke.

He was not delicate. Was not slow or tender. He was too far gone for that. But she didn't retreat. She opened her legs further; her flesh was slick and

soft, and it enveloped him in silk and heat.

He paused for a moment. Deep in her. Paused to gather his scattering wits, to slow down the rush of pleasure that threatened to cut this short. One breath. Two. Three. Then he could move.

Her arms reached out and pulled him close. Skin against heated, sweaty skin. Their mouths found each other again. Deep, all-consuming. He was lost in her. And coming home all at once.

He tore his mouth away. It was too much. Bliss this intense could not be safe.

"Val." Her hands, sifting through his hair. Sweeping his back. Pressing down on his arse. The way she said his name undid him every time. But she was not moaning his name in desire. She was calling him. She had something to say.

He looked at her eyes, drowsy with passion and yet clear as they looked into his. Lips parted and swollen from his kisses.

"What, my love?"

"When you are in me like this… it is the only time I feel at home. Safe. Unafraid. Don't let go. Please."

The words almost undid him. Something gave way in his chest. A slow, hot loosening he had no name for.

"Never."

It was a promise. A vow. Not only because she asked, but because every part of him demanded it as well.

"Never. Never."

He drove into her. Hard and deep. Angling his hips to find the spot that made her breath hitch and her muscles tighten and tremble around him. He was so close. She was so close. One more thrust. She came apart. And he pulled out at the last possible second and finished over her belly and her breasts.

Without a word, he left the bed, grabbed a cloth from the washstand, and returned to wipe her clean.

Then he gathered her in his arms, her head on his chest, body lying half on top of his, their legs tangled. Their breaths slowed at the same rate.

"I wish you had not done that."

She didn't need to say what. He knew.

"It is for the best. To give you time."

"Time for what?"

He didn't answer. How to tell her this was the only way he knew to keep her safe from a danger she didn't yet know existed? That he withdrew to protect her?

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CHAPTER 30

THE OPERATION TO CATCH a traitor and dismantle the biggest threat the British government had faced in a generation did not stop because of his domestic turmoil. The next morning, much as he would have preferred not to, Dalton presented himself at the Greystones' townhouse.

A maid showed him into a small drawing room — cozy, lived-in, the room of a house that was a home rather than a stage. Alice came through the door ahead of Nathaniel, and Dalton stood without thinking.

"Dalton. You look tired," she said with her characteristic directness.

"I am tired. You, on the other hand, look radiant."

She snorted. "I look enormous and apparently now require afternoon naps."

"She refuses to slow down. It is a constant battle." Nathaniel shook Dalton's hand. "Have a seat. I suspect the motive of your visit was not to discuss my wife's pregnancy symptoms, as fascinating as they are."

Alice threw him a narrow-eyed look. Nathaniel smiled, irrepressible.

They sat. Alice's hand rested on the curve of her belly without her seeming to notice it was there. Nathaniel's hand found the small of her back the moment she sat. Dalton looked away from the small, unconscious choreography of it and turned to the work.

"Alfred's network has moved," he said. "We intercepted two dispatches in the past week from a handler I have not previously identified. The signal

passed through Westminster, which means either we are closer than I thought, or the conspiracy is recruiting above the level I had been prepared to concede."

"Or both," Nathaniel said.

Alice's eyes had already narrowed into the expression he remembered from years of working for him. Her body was building a child. Her mind had not, for a moment, stopped being an intelligence officer.

"Who do you have on it?"

"Ardmore."

"Good." She nodded. "John keeps a low profile and is often underestimated, which is what you want. But he can move easily in the highest circles. Are you asking for our help, Dalton, or telling us where things stand?"

"I may need Nathaniel's help to decode the messages. But I will not have either of you back on the field now that you are expecting a child."

"I am not sure whether I am flattered or insulted," Alice said.

"Flattered," Nathaniel said immediately, wearing the harassed expression of a man trying to protect a too-independent, pregnant wife who refused to be cosseted.

Alice sighed in mock resignation, then turned back to Dalton. "Speaking of overprotective husbands. How is your wife?"

The shift was so clean he didn't see it coming. He had expected another quarter-hour on Westminster. Alice had decided the professional business was concluded, and he had not yet learned to sidestep her when she was decided.

"Vivienne is well."

Alice waited.

"She is well physically," he said again, and heard how thin the sentence sounded the second time. "Her parents are in London. The reunion has been good and difficult. She remembers fragments. Nothing like the whole picture."

"What do the doctors say?"

"She refuses to see a doctor."

Alice's expression did not change, but something behind her eyes did. Nathaniel's hand at her back went still.

"Why?"

"I don't know. Her father has found a specialist. The best man in London by any measure I can take of him. I agreed to the introduction. Vivienne overheard the conversation before I had a chance to put it to her myself, and she refused in terms that were… quite final." He paused. "The refusal was not proportional to the request. She was not angry. She was frightened."

"Frightened of what?"

"Damned if I know. I tried asking her. All I got were deflections. I'm not giving up. Just giving her time."

Alice considered him for a moment. Then she said, "Let me try talking to her."

"Alice — " Nathaniel interjected.

"I have been meaning to call on her since she came to London. I kept away because I did not want to add another unfamiliar face to a house that was already full of them, and because I know what it is to be the new woman in a room where everyone has known everyone else for a decade. But I knew her before. I met her on three occasions when I was working under you, and I liked her very much. She was kind to me when kindness from a duchess was not a thing I expected." Alice's mouth softened. "I should like to renew the acquaintance on any terms you will permit."

"You would have been welcome at any point."

"I was being careful." A small, wry smile. "Let me come to tea. Talk to her woman to woman. I think she might tell me things she will not tell you, because I'm not the husband who has been managing her, or the parents who have expectations. I am neutral. Safe."

Dalton felt something in his throat that he did not intend to acknowledge. "It is worth a try. I know your talent for reading people, and getting them to open up."

"I will ask Lady Venus to be there as well," she said, moving past the thank-you he had not got out. "Vivienne already knows her. Three women in a drawing room is a very different thing from one woman asking questions. It feels less like an interrogation and more like — " she searched for the word " — a council."

"A council," Dalton said, and the corner of his mouth lifted.

"And after that," Alice continued, "if she will permit it… Abigail's husband is a doctor."

"Lord Hartfield?"

"Yes. He is a physician by training. He is not a specialist in amnesia. But he is a doctor, and more than that, he is someone Vivienne could meet without ever being shown into a consulting room. I owe my sister a visit in any event. We could take tea. Their children will be in the room, Colin will talk to her, and what he learns from that conversation he will share with us, and no one will have used the word *examination* once."

"You are asking me to let a doctor look at her without her knowing it."

"I am asking you to let her into a room where a doctor happens to be," Alice said. "I won't lie to her. She might still be upset. I want you to understand what kind of help I'm offering. It is not a trick. It is a room arranged so that a frightened woman might choose to come into it."

He was quiet for a moment.

"The visit first," he said. "If she trusts you with her reason for refusing, then we can propose the Hartfield afternoon. But I ought to warn you, Alice — she won't be easily persuaded. I have spent too much of the past month arranging things for her, and she has had enough of my managing."

"Then it is fortunate I'm not asking for your help to arrange it."

"Why do I get the impression we are the ones being managed without even noticing?" Nathaniel asked with mock dismay.

That surprised a chuckle out of Dalton. "Because we probably are."

He stood.

He wanted this. What the Greystones had. The easy ribbing, the unconscious hand at the small of a back, a room arranged for enjoying rather than for impressing. He wanted his wife in a chair like that one, and a child on its way —

He cut that thought short, because the intensity of that want pained him, and some things he was not meant to have.

That way, only disaster waited.

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CHAPTER 31

DALTON HAD TOLD HER an old friend wished to call. The Greystones had worked with him for years, he said, and Alice was eager to see her again. Vivienne had agreed because she sensed the meeting mattered. And because there was a great deal her husband was not telling her about his work. Perhaps Alice, who had spent years working at his side, could shed some light on his professional life, the way Venus had on his personal one.

He had said he would be in his study all afternoon and would join them later. She thought that was probably no coincidence.

Alice arrived at the appointed hour, which Vivienne had come to understand was unusual in London. She was dark-haired and pretty in an understated way, dressed simply in slate-blue silk that did nothing to conceal that she was well into a pregnancy. Her manner was friendly. Her eyes watchful and warm.

She came through the drawing room door, took one step inside, and stopped.

For a long second, she only looked at Vivienne.

Then, quietly, she said, "Your Grace. It is so good to see you."

There was nothing performed in it. None of the polite masks Vivienne had learned were the norm during morning calls. It was the tone of a person greeting a friend long thought lost, and Vivienne found her throat suddenly difficult to manage.

"Lady Greystone. Please — come and sit."

"Alice. If you will."

"Alice. You must call me Vivienne, then."

Venus rose from her place by the window to make the introductions formal, though they were already past needing them. Vivienne's mother was already on her feet, and within a minute the four of them took their seats around the low table. A maid brought the tea service, and for a few seconds they engaged in the innocuous ritual of serving the tea.

"I thought," Alice said when they had poured the tea, "that I should tell you who I am. Or rather, who I was before this." She gestured down at her own waistline with a small, wry movement. "It is the part that is not in Debrett's, and I have found that people prefer to be told than to discover it accidentally."

"Please," Vivienne said.

"I worked for the Foreign Office. So did my husband. We worked for several years under your husband's direction. He was, and is, the best man at that work I have ever known."

Vivienne set her teacup down carefully on its saucer.

She had suspected something. Of course she had suspected something. The locked rooms in the tunnels that had turned out not to be dungeons. The way correspondence arrived for Dalton at all hours. She had assembled the suspicions the way one assembles a puzzle with most of the pieces still missing. Alice's small, precise sentences set the missing pieces down on the table beside the teacups and waited.

"I see," Vivienne said. "Were you a spy? Is my husband one as well?"

She didn't know what had possessed her to put it so plainly. But Alice only laughed.

"We prefer *agents of the Crown*. As for your husband's role, I will let him explain that himself."

Alice was watching her with a steady, equal attention that felt close to respect. Vivienne felt the same respect rise to meet it. Alice was speaking to her as a whole person, and the kindness of it almost undid her.

"I tell you this," Alice said, "because I would rather you know it from me than wonder at our connection with your husband. And because I am about to ask you to trust my judgment on a thing, and you ought to know what kind of judgment it is."

"Go on."

Alice glanced at Vivienne's mother. Vivienne saw the glance and understood, in the small flush of heat that rose under her collar, that they had planned this meeting with a purpose. The understanding ought to have made her angry. It did anger her for one bright second. Then she looked at her mother's face, and the anger dimmed.

It was her mother who spoke. "Darling. Alice and your father and I have been talking. About a doctor."

The word landed like a slap.

Vivienne's spine straightened of its own accord. "No."

"My love — "

"No, Mama." Her teacup was rattling against its saucer. She set the saucer down on the table to stop the sound. "I have already said this. There will be no examination. No assessment. No sitting in a room while a man with a notebook asks me whether I know what year it is and what the name of my pet was when I was six years old. I won't do it."

"Vivienne."

It was Alice. Her voice was very soft.

"May I ask why?"

There was no challenge in it. No prepared argument waiting behind the question. Only the quiet of a woman who was ready to listen.

Vivienne looked at her. The unhurried hands. The sympathetic eyes. Then at Venus, sitting forward with her own hands folded in her lap. At her mother, whose lower lip was doing the small trembling thing it had been doing on and off for a week.

She didn't understand why she answered.

She had refused this same conversation with Dalton. Had refused it across her father's silence and her mother's tears and her own husband's promise, and walked out of his study to make the refusal stick. And now a woman she had never met before this afternoon was asking her the question, and her mouth was already opening to give the answer.

Perhaps because Alice had not flinched. Or because of the way she asked the question. Or the curve of Alice's belly under her dress, which had given Vivienne a small pang of recognition. And she was learning to heed those.

"Because I'm afraid," Vivienne said, "of being committed to a madhouse."

Her mother made a small, awful sound and moved as if to speak. Alice extended a hand, palm down. Not a command — a request for calm. To

Vivienne's surprise, her mother heeded it.

"I overheard a conversation in Guernsey," Vivienne went on. The words came faster now that she had begun. "Two women outside the church. Talking about me without knowing I could hear them. They said I was not well. *Poor thing*, they said. *Her mind is scrambled. She should be taken to a hospital where they can fix her.*"

The drawing room was silent.

Whatever was in Alice's eyes was not surprise. It was the quiet recognition of a person hearing something she had heard before, in other rooms, from other women, and had believed every time.

"Vivienne," her mother whispered. "My darling girl. Your father and I have never, not for one moment…"

"I know, Mama." She knew her family meant well. That was not the point. "But the doctor would not be you. What if he meets me, listens to me for a quarter of an hour, and then says I require a course of treatment that can only be given in a residential setting? And you are all standing in the room loving me, wanting what is best for me. What does *no* even mean from me at that point? When everyone who loves me has just been told it is the only way?"

"Never."

The voice came from the doorway.

Vivienne turned her head. Dalton stood there, one hand still on the latch, as if he had only meant to look in, and what he heard had arrested him on the threshold. His face was white at the edges. She knew that particular pallor. She had seen it at the cove, and when he found her in the tunnels. It was the color his face went when he believed he had almost been too late.

He came across the room and knelt at her chair.

He didn't touch her. He knelt at a careful distance, his eyes level with hers, and made himself still.

"Never," he said again. "Do you hear me? I would never permit any doctor to put you in any clinic, sanatorium, hospital, or whatever name they have invented for it this season. I would take such a place apart with my own hands before I allowed you to be kept inside its walls for one night. There is no man in England, or in the entire world, with the authority to overrule me on this." His voice had gone very low and even, and Vivienne, who knew the registers of his voice now, recognized this one as the register

he used for the sentences he meant most. "I will let no one take you from me. For any reason. Not while I draw breath. Never."

The word. The same one he had used the other night, when he was deep inside her and vowed never to let go. It reached the place where her fear lived. She could see he meant it. The truth came off him like the heat from a fire.

And still the idea of a man with a notebook sitting across from her and asking her about her childhood made her stomach clench like a fist.

"It just feels so strange. Being analyzed. My mental capacity analyzed as if I were deficient…"

"I propose something different," Alice said.

Vivienne turned to her, grateful for the interruption without knowing why.

"Not Harley Street," Alice said. "Not a specialist's rooms. An afternoon at my sister's house. Abigail is married to Lord Hartfield. He is also a doctor. One you can meet in a social setting. In his drawing room, with his children present. Over cake and tea. Abigail is wonderful, and I will be there, and Venus and your parents will be there as well if you wish it. The whole occasion need only be exactly as long as you wish it to be. You leave whenever you wish. If you want him to ask you nothing, he will ask you nothing. He will listen to whatever you wish him to know. There will be no notebook. No assessment. Only tea, and a man who happens to be a doctor, in a room full of people who love you." She paused. "It is the smallest version of the thing you fear. And if it is still too much, we will not ask again."

Vivienne took a deep breath. Let it out in a rush.

She was aware of her mother's held breath, and of Venus's careful stillness, and of Dalton at her knee, who had not moved, as if he were waiting for her permission to do so. The fear had not left her. But it had taken a small step backward, far enough that she could see past it.

She looked at Alice's belly. At the curve under the slate-blue silk. Something old turned over inside her — an ache she had not known she still carried, surfacing now under another woman's hand resting unconsciously on the place where her child was.

"Yes," she said. "I will go to that."

A breath went out of three people at once.

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CHAPTER 32

THE INVITATION ARRIVED THE next day, in Lady Hartfield's own hand, in a tone so warm it almost made up for the fact that Vivienne knew exactly what it was for.

They arrived at three o'clock. Lady Hartfield met them in the hall and brought them through to the drawing room. She was a beauty without an ounce of conceit. Her warm and serene manner immediately put Vivienne at ease.

The drawing room was nothing like the room in Kensington Palace Gardens. The carpet had clearly survived something small and determined being dragged across it. There was a basket of wooden blocks under the window. A doll missing one shoe lay on the seat of an armchair. Everywhere she looked, the room felt lived-in. The air smelled of lemon polish and, faintly, of something milky and clean that Vivienne did not at first identify and then realized was the smell of a baby in the house.

Her chest gave a twinge at the recognition, and she set the sensation aside to analyze another moment.

Colin, the Earl of Hartfield, didn't look like a physician or an earl. He was big, built like a laborer, with longish blond hair and a harsh face that belonged to some northern field, not a Mayfair drawing room. But his manner was gentle, and he greeted her with warmth and without pity. He reminded her, in some small way, of Paul.

Tea was served. Lady Hartfield — Abigail, as she insisted on being called — poured with ease.

"Now," said Alice. "I want to see my niece and nephew before another minute passes. Abigail, where are you hiding them?"

"I'm not hiding them. They are in the nursery. It is the only way to ensure we have a peaceful visit devoid of disruptions."

"Bring them down."

"Alice — "

"I have been in this room for ten minutes and there is no child in it. I shall riot."

Abigail laughed and rose to send word upstairs.

What came down the stairs was not what Vivienne had expected. Even in the small world of Guernsey, children did not partake of afternoon tea with adults. She had no recollection of attending a tea as a duchess, but she was fairly certain high-society rules had not included them either.

The nursemaid set a small, fair-haired girl down at the threshold, and the girl came running. Behind her, Abigail took the baby boy from the nurse's arms and settled him against her shoulder with ease.

The little girl made directly for her father.

Lord Hartfield, in the middle of telling Nathaniel something about a debate in the Lords, broke off, scooped his daughter up, and arranged her on his knee without losing the thread of his sentence. He went on speaking. The child settled against his waistcoat and considered the room from her new vantage point. Then she put her thumb in her mouth and watched the company with grave blue eyes.

Vivienne wiggled her fingers and smiled at the little girl, who returned her smile shyly, turning her head into her father's waistcoat.

She had not known, until that moment, that a man could hold his daughter and continue an adult conversation as though the two activities were not in competition. Her own father loved her, by all accounts. He had also, she suspected from things her mother had let slip, loved her at the careful distance the nursery imposed. Lord Hartfield was doing something she didn't have a category for. He was simply being a father in the same room and at the same time that he was being an earl.

She looked at Dalton, beside her on the small settee, to see if he had noticed.

He had.

His face had not changed in any way a casual observer could see. But Vivienne knew his face now. She knew the small, particular stillness that came over it when he was looking at something he wanted very much and did not believe he was permitted to want.

After a few minutes, the little girl decided she had seen enough of the view from her father's lap. She slid down with the imperious efficiency of a person whose decisions were not subject to negotiation, crossed the carpet on a wandering diagonal, and arrived at the settee where Vivienne and Dalton sat. She looked up at Dalton. Dalton looked down at her. The toddler's small hand rose, not toward his face, but toward the gold chain crossing his waistcoat.

"Be careful, Your Grace," Lord Hartfield said, with the air of a man delivering a long-standing warning. "She is a little pickpocket, that one. Sees something she likes and will swipe it before you are the wiser."

Dalton did not move to secure the watch. Instead, he reached into his waistcoat pocket, drew out the heavy gold watch, and held it out to the child on the open palm of his hand.

"What do you want, sweetheart? This old thing?" His voice had gone soft and tender, measured to soothe a small child. "You can have it."

The little girl took the watch in both fists. She turned it over, then over again, and her small fingers set themselves to the task of trying to pry the halves apart.

"Oh, no," said Lord Hartfield, in a tone of mock dismay pitched to be heard by his wife across the room. "Now you have gone and done it. She has already broken two of mine. I have been trying very hard to discourage her habit of playing with pocket watches, but I shall never succeed so long as she is able to charm them out of other people's hands. She didn't even need to pick your pocket. You handed it to her."

Dalton lifted his shoulders in a small, helpless gesture. "What can I say? She looked at me with those sweet, big eyes, and I was unable to refuse her."

"That is the effect she has. A little charmer. She uses it shamelessly, and I shall have my hands full with this one when she grows up."

Dalton laughed — a quiet, real laugh — and laid one careful hand on the top of the child's head. A single short pat. "I do not envy you the task," he murmured.

It was a polite thing to say. It was also, Vivienne saw with sudden cold clarity, a lie.

He envied him terribly.

The yearning on his face was plain to see.

She remembered what Venus had told her at Penrose. Before his mother died in childbirth, they had been a happy family. Of course he had been carrying the absence of it inside him for twenty-three years.

Her own throat closed around something hot and difficult.

She made herself look at Abigail, who was watching her husband and her daughter with a small, soft smile full of contentment.

Vivienne wanted to weep, and she didn't know why. She made herself sip her tea.

It was Colin who spoke to her after a while.

He had moved to the chair beside hers without ceremony. The little girl had returned to her father's lap with her gold prize, the baby boy had been carried over to be kissed by his Aunt Alice, and the room had relaxed into an easy domestic disorder that was both comfortable and inviting.

Colin's voice was quiet.

"I understand you have been through quite an extraordinary ordeal."

It was such a soft opening that for a moment Vivienne did not recognize it as a doctor speaking. There was no notebook in his hands. There was a teacup. He was holding it comfortably, with no intention of putting it down for a more important purpose. The opening was an invitation, not an interrogation, and she could decline it without giving offense.

She liked him. She had not expected to like him. What she had been bracing against in the carriage ride to Mayfair did not survive the sight of a man who held his daughter on his lap while entertaining guests, and who looked at his wife across the room as though he were continuously astonished by his good fortune. A man like that did not see women as cases to be sorted into rooms.

So she answered him.

"It has been strange," she said. "Wonderful at times. Unsettling at others."

"How so?"

She took a breath, searching for the words. "For years, the absence of memory was… a fact. Part of who I was. Now I have begun to remember, and I realize how much I have lost. I want to remember more. People expect me to remember more. I just don't know how."

"May I ask what it feels like from the inside?"

She thought about it. It was not an idle question.

"Like standing blindfolded in a room that used to be familiar," she said slowly, "but someone has rearranged all the furniture. I know things are there. I can feel the edges of them. I bump into them. But I cannot see them, and when I reach for them, they move."

He nodded, and did not interrupt.

"Sometimes a smell brings something back. Like the flowers at the folly in Cornwall. Or a flavor. The crème de violette. A particular biscuit at Penrose I didn't remember eating until I tasted it, and then my body knew it before my mind did. The fragments come from underneath. Unplanned. Never when I'm looking for them."

"I should tell you," Colin said, "that I am not a specialist in this condition. I treat mostly conditions of the bones rather than the brain. What I know about amnesia I learned mostly from treating wounded soldiers from the American War when I lived in New York." He set his teacup down. "That said. What you have described is consistent with what I have observed. I believe your memories are not gone, Duchess. They are inaccessible. There is a significant difference between the two. *Gone* would mean wiped clean. *Inaccessible* means behind a closed door."

That was encouraging. *Inaccessible* was a word with hope inside it.

"I attended two soldiers who had lost memory after head wounds," Colin went on. "The first had lost only the war memories — from his enlistment to the moment an artillery shell burst near him and struck his head. He told me, when he was well enough to speak, that if the memories were anything like his nightmares, he didn't want them back. By the time he went home to his farm in Pennsylvania, he had not remembered anything.

"The second man lost his entire past. He didn't even know his name when he came to the hospital. He stayed with us much longer because his other wounds were grave. His wife came down from Boston and sat with him every day. She brought their two children. They read to him. They told him stories about himself, the way your mother is telling stories about you. I watched him for nearly four months, and I want to tell you what I saw."

He paused, choosing his words.

"He did not recover everything. Not by the time he was well enough to leave the hospital, at least. But proximity to the people who had made his memories — the voices, the smell of his wife's perfume, the feel of his

daughter's hand in his — those things brought pieces of him back. Not on a schedule. Not in any order one could predict. But they came. And by the time he left, he had recovered part of his past."

She hadn’t noticed she was crying until Dalton pressed a handkerchief into her hand, and Hartfield looked away so that she could blot her eyes unobserved.

"You can't force a door that opens from the inside, Duchess." His voice was very gentle. "But you can stand near it. Don't strain yourself, but don't shy away from it either. That is what I would tell you. Patience and proximity. The rest will come."

He glanced briefly at Dalton, who was watching her.

"I should add," Colin said, in a still quieter voice, "that you appear to be in the company of a man who understands the principle without being told."

Vivienne, not trusting her voice, only nodded.

After that, the talk turned to easier things. Such as Alice's pregnancy. Abigail had moved to sit beside her sister, and was listening with the particular sympathy of a woman who had survived two such confinements herself and remembered the worst of them in helpful detail.

"I had been told about the mornings, Abigail," Alice was saying. "But no one warned me they would take the entire day."

"They were the entire day for me as well. Both times. I will give you my remedy. It is not mine; in fact, it is Mr. Wang's. You have met him, have you not? He is Colin's associate at the clinic. He knows things about ginger that no English physician has ever bothered to learn. I swear by it. I shall write the recipe for you."

"Bless you."

"And for you as well, Duchess." Abigail turned her gentle smile on Vivienne. "For the future. Every woman ought to have a jar of that remedy in her pantry for the day she needs it. It keeps for months and tastes a great deal better than you would expect."

"Thank you," Vivienne said. "You are very kind."

She kept her smile on Abigail's face and did not allow herself to look, even for a second, in Dalton's direction.

She had walked into the Hartfield drawing room afraid of a doctor and was leaving with a hope based on doors that opened from the inside. And somewhere between the time they sat down to talk and the moment Dalton

gave his watch to the child, she had unexpectedly learned a thing about her husband she could no longer pretend not to know.

He wanted a child.

And was, for some reason she did not yet understand, refusing to make one with her.

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CHAPTER 33

THAT NIGHT, WHEN HE came through the connecting door, she was ready.

She had been sitting at the edge of the bed for twenty minutes, still in her evening dress, choosing her words.

"You want children."

It was not a question.

He set his brandy down on the dressing table and did not sit.

"What makes you say that?"

"The way you looked at Lord Hartfield's child. The yearning in your face was painful to watch."

He stood there and let the silence stretch.

"The truth, Val."

He sighed.

"What do you want to know, Vivienne?"

"Why you refuse to make a baby with me."

His jaw tightened. His hand went to the back of the chair beside the dressing table, and his knuckles whitened against the wood.

"I do want a family," he said. His voice was low. Strained. "With you. I have wanted it for longer than you know."

She crossed to him and laid her hand on top of his.

"I want it too. You may think that because of my amnesia I don't know my own mind. I do. This is not a fleeting want. I don't yet have all the words for it. But it is not temporary."

He looked down at her hand on his. He lifted it to his mouth and pressed his lips to her knuckles. Once.

"I know you do," he said. "But it is impossible."

"Why?"

"It just is. You will have to trust me."

"You are trying to control me again."

"I'm trying to protect you."

"You are deciding for me with no explanation and no regard for what I want."

"Sometimes what we want is not what is best for us."

She pulled her hand from his. Not violently. Precisely.

"Do you hear yourself? I'm not a child. I'm a grown woman, and my decisions are my own to make. Unless you believe I lack the capacity."

"Please don't return to that. I have already told you I do not consider you feeble of mind, nor will I ever — "

He cut himself off. Rubbed the back of his neck.

"You just don't have the information."

"Then give me the information and let me decide."

"Your decisions don't affect only you. They affect me as well."

"Likewise, Valentine. The decisions you are making affect me. Yet you make them alone. If they affect us both, we should make them together. With the same information. So tell me."

"I can't. It would only upset you."

"I'm already upset. Not knowing is worse than knowing. In almost every case, what I imagined was worse than the truth turned out to be. I will not hide from ghosts anymore. Tell me."

"You have endured more than — "

"Yes. And I have survived it. Stop treating me as if I were fragile."

"You are too precious for me to risk — "

"You cannot protect me from every harm. It is hubris to think you can."

"Maybe not every harm. But the known risks, I can."

She went still. They were getting close.

"Like the risks of childbearing," she said. "I know your mother died in childbirth. Other women, like Lady Hartfield, have children safely."

"It is not the same. For you, the risks are higher."

There it was.

"Did I almost die in childbirth?" She had to force the next question out. "Did we lose a baby?"

"Three."

The word came out as if torn from him.

"Three babies?" Her hand went to her chest as her voice broke on the last syllable.

"Three pregnancies. We never had babies."

"Does that make it easier?"

"I don't know. It was not easy. Each loss tore a piece of my heart out. But losing a child already born would have been worse. And losing you — " he stopped. Swallowed. "Unbearable."

He had weighed the risk against the reward, and he had chosen her life over the possibility of any other.

"We could try again," she said, and held her breath.

He shook his head. Not a refusal. The misery of a man who could see no path forward that did not cost him something he loved.

"I can tell you what happened," he said. "But I cannot make you understand the pain. I'm not sure I want to. Perhaps — "

"What?"

He went back to his room, crossed to his desk, and returned with a small leather-bound book in his hand.

"There is something I need to return to you."

She took it. The leather was soft, worn at the spine. She could feel the indentation where a clasp had once been.

"What is this?"

"Your diary. You used to keep one. I think you will find it illuminating."

"Venus mentioned a diary. I looked for it but could not find it." She stared at the book. "You had it all this time?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not give it to me before?"

"I didn't know you were looking for it. And I was trying to protect you from what is in it. But you should have it."

"You have read it."

"Yes." A pause. "Forgive me. I thought you were dead, and the diary was a way to keep you near."

She looked down at the book.

"There is nothing in there I didn't already know, Vivi. The events, the feelings. I lived them with you. But your words helped me see the parts I could not see from where I was standing."

She closed her fingers around the diary.

"Thank you. For returning it. I would like to read it before we continue this conversation."

"I understand." He walked to the door. He paused there and looked back.

"Who you were is who you still are. In that regard, nothing has changed. Which means our clash of wills will continue."

There was a weariness in his voice that chilled her. They had fought this war before, and he had known the moment he came into the room tonight that he would be fighting it again.

She held the diary against her chest.

"Good. That is what I want. A man who will face me as an equal. Not one who decides for me in the name of protection."

He inclined his head and went out through the connecting door, closing it behind him.

She sat on the bed with the diary in her hands for a long time. She breathed in the smell of old ink and leather and, faintly, his cologne. He had held this book for seven years, reading her words in a house that no longer had her in it. He had kept it in the drawer beside his bed.

She pressed her face against the cover.

Then she opened it.

Her breath caught at the first sentence. The handwriting was hers. The voice, the phrasing, the loops of the letters. And the woman who had written it had loved her husband without reservation. Had been happy, and had known it, and had wanted to set it down somewhere safe.

The early entries were full of small, ordinary joys. His dry remarks transcribed with obvious delight. A picnic at the cove. The first ball she had hosted as a duchess. Vivienne turned the pages. The first year went like that. Light. Easy. Full of the particular happiness of untested love.

Then a different note crept in.

April 12th, 1854

A child. I am almost certain. I have not told Val yet — I want to be sure.

She read it twice. The hand was steady, but excited.

She turned the page.

May 30th, 1854

Lost. There is no other word for it, and I will not look for one. Val held me through the night and did not speak. I think he was afraid that any sentence he tried would be the wrong one. He was probably right.

Vivienne closed her eyes. Then opened them and kept reading.

Two more entries of the same shape, eighteen months apart, the language sparser each time, the writing pressed harder into the paper. By the third, the woman who had once filled pages with picnics was writing in fragments. *Lost again. He is not himself. I am not either.*

By 1858, the diary had changed.

March 14th, 1858

I asked him today if he would consider trying again. He said no. Just no. Absolute. Immovable.

June 2nd, 1858

Venus says I must be patient. That he is frightened. I understand. I am frightened too. But his fear gets to decide. Mine gets to be managed.

September 30th, 1858

It has been over a year. He withdraws. Every time. Even when I beg him not to. He holds himself apart from me at the very moment I need him most, and then he holds me afterward as though tenderness can replace what he has withheld. It cannot. It cannot.

Vivienne sat still, the diary open in her lap.

He withdraws.

She could have written the same words this morning. It was the same pattern.

She turned to the last entry.

January 3rd, 1859

Val says we must wait. That my body needs time to recover. He says it as though it were a medical fact. But it has been almost two years. I have been waiting for four years to hold a baby in my arms. How much longer before he trusts my body to do the thing it was made to do?

She stared at the page through tears.

She had assumed the obstacle was new. That his refusal had to do with her amnesia, her recovery, the strangeness of their situation. That once she remembered, once she was herself again, the door would open.

The diary said otherwise. That door had been closed for years. The woman she had been, with all her memories intact, had sat at her desk and

written these very words and wept the same tears that were flowing from her eyes now.

She closed the diary.

She didn't yet know what she was going to do.

The conversation she thought was starting tonight had been underway for a decade. And whatever compromise she had hoped to find at the end of it was a compromise the other Vivienne — the one who had loved him with a whole memory and a whole heart — had already failed to reach.

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CHAPTER 34

AFTER RETURNING TO HIS bedroom last night, he had sat by the fire until four. Then he had washed and dressed without waking his valet and gone down to the study to do the only thing he knew how to do when he could not manage the rest of his life, which was to work.

He was on his third dispatch of the morning when he heard the door.

He didn't need to turn to know it was his wife. He knew the cadence of her steps. She came in and closed the door behind her without a sound. She was holding the diary.

"I have read it," she said.

He set the pen in its rest and turned.

She had dressed and pinned her hair. Her eyes were red-rimmed but clear. The evidence that she had been crying stared at him, stabbing at his heart.

"I assumed."

She came around the desk and sat in the chair by the window.

"Talk to me. Why did you stop trying?"

He had known this was coming. He had rehearsed, through the small hours, what he would say, and had abandoned every version.

He stood and went to the window. Better to observe the gray sky and dripping garden outside than to face her.

"You nearly died the third time," he said. "The bleeding would not stop. The doctor administered ergot of rye every quarter of an hour, and still it

would not stop. He was there for nine hours. I held your hand and — "

He stopped. *Prayed* was not the right word. What he had done that night was the kind of bargain men made when they had nothing left to spend but themselves.

"And what?" she asked.

"And I bargained with God." It came out flatter than he meant. "I promised Him I would never let it happen again if He would only spare you this once."

The small rustle of her skirts and the movement of the fire in the grate were the only sounds in the room. She would not interrupt him until he finished. He breathed into the silence, gathering his thoughts.

"I looked at you in that bed and I decided I would not risk your life again."

The sparrows on the railing flew off in a small gray burst.

"My mother died in childbirth. You know that. My father never recovered. A year later, almost to the day, he put a pistol to his head."

He heard her breathing change behind him.

"I was seventeen. I inherited a dukedom and a ten-year-old sister, and an understanding that has never left me. Love without control is a loaded gun. My father proved it. I have spent every year since making certain I would not prove it again."

He heard her move. He didn't look.

"Val."

"Do not pity me, Vivi." He said it more harshly than he meant. "I'm not telling you this to earn your pity, but to help you understand my motives."

"It isn't pity. What I'm offering is empathy."

She crossed the room and stood behind him. He didn't turn around.

Her hand came to rest against his back, between his shoulder blades. Flat. Warm.

"You decided alone," she said. "And you have carried it alone. Val, it is not yours to carry. I was the one who bled. I was the one whose body did the losing. You made a decision about my body in my name while I was unconscious, and you have kept that decision for ten years, and never once let me in to discuss it."

"I know."

"It has to stop."

"I know."

She exhaled. Then her hand left his back, and he missed it at once.

She came round to stand beside him at the window and looked out at the same gray landscape he had been looking at.

"I still want a child."

"I know," he said.

"No, you do not. You think I want a child because women want children, because I saw you with Abigail's little girl yesterday, because the diary told you so ten years ago. Maybe those were the reasons then. They are not my reasons now."

He turned his head and looked at her profile.

"I spent seven years on Guernsey," she said. "Seven years with no past, no name, no family of my own. Do you know what I wanted most in those seven years?"

"To remember? To regain your life? Your past, your history? At least those are the things I would want."

"Yes, remembering, of course. But not just for the sake of remembering. I wanted to belong. I wanted a child." Her voice did not rise. It only thickened. "I wanted someone who was mine. Mine by blood. Bone of my bones. And that wanting was so strong that I agreed to marry a man I didn't love because I thought he could give me something that would look enough like a family to fill the hole."

He had known she had almost married the doctor. He had not known why. He had assumed it was loneliness, the reasonable calculation of a woman who had been alone for too long. He had not understood that she had been trying to make out of her own body what had been taken from her.

He understood it now.

"That ache did not go when you brought me to Penrose," she said. "It is still here. And it is not a whim, Val."

"But if I lost you again — " he began.

"I know what I'm asking, and I know what it costs you. But I'm not your mother. And you are not your father. You don't need to save me from myself. I deserve to choose."

He held his silence because there was nothing he could counter. She was right about deserving to choose. But it had never been about that. Not that he thought her undeserving. Never that. The problem was his fear of losing her. He was doing it for her own good.

Hubris, just as she had accused him.

He closed his eyes.

"Everyone knows a man in your position needs an heir to carry on the family name."

"Carrying on the title is not more important than your life and health."

"It is a peer's wife's duty to provide an heir. If I can't do that, I don't deserve to be your wife or a duchess."

"That is not true, and that is not why I married you."

"Why did you marry me, then? You must have known that children could be a natural consequence of marriage. At some point, you must have wanted them."

He turned away, circling the room, fidgeting as he weighed her question.

"Nobody knows this, but when I decided to marry, I made a list of requirements that any potential bride needed to meet."

"A list?"

"That is how I like to approach everything in my life. Establish the desired outcome. Analyze the steps to get there. Calculate the risks and benefits. Trace a course."

He moved to the fireplace. Leaned back against it and crossed his arms. "I needed two things from a wife. An heir, of course. And also someone who could guide my sister in society, as Venus was of an age to make her debut."

"So you admit you need an heir."

"Yes, but my list included very specific requirements in order to meet my goals. I needed a woman who had experience navigating the ton. A widow. One who had already borne children successfully, to minimize that risk. She needed to be young enough to still be of childbearing age, but not too young as to be inexperienced."

"That seems… very calculated. Did you think I met your requirements?"

"Quite the opposite, Vivi. You did not meet a single one of them."

She inhaled.

"You were too young, merely two years older than my sister. Never married, never borne children. Well-born, yes, but from a Scottish family, and with no experience of London society. Instead of poised, vivacious. Instead of well-versed in the rules of polite society, you were well-versed at thumbing them."

Shock. Hurt. He would never forget the wounded expression in her hazel eyes.

"But that is not criticism," he hastened to explain. "More like proof of what you mean to me."

"Why did you choose me, then?" she asked, and her voice wobbled the slightest bit on the last word.

"I chose you because from the moment I met you, I could not even look at another woman, much less contemplate marrying one. You were all I wanted. Everything I thought I needed flew out the window, and I knew I had to have you and no other."

"So you married me against your better judgment," she whispered. "No wonder I have failed so miserably at being your wife. I was never qualified for the position."

"Vivi, no. That is not what I meant. That is, in fact, the opposite of what I meant. I don't regret marrying you. I would choose you every day for the rest of my life. Why do you think I never remarried in all these seven years when I thought I was a widower?"

"I don't understand."

"What I'm saying is, every action has consequences. Whatever we choose, there are trade-offs. I choose you. If that means I must sacrifice having an heir, it is a sacrifice I am willing to make. We cannot have it all."

"You say love is sacrifice, then."

"No. Love is an indulgence. For which we have to sacrifice something else."

"But you are asking me to make that sacrifice as well, and I refuse to make it. I refuse to give up my dream until I am convinced there is no other way."

He had known she would not give up the fight.

"What do you want me to do?" he said.

"I would have a doctor examine me."

"Now you want to see a doctor."

"I heard Abigail recommend her accoucheur to Alice. She said he is one of the best in London. He should be able to tell us whether my body can carry a child. A medical opinion, Val. An answer you cannot control. Not your fear. Not a decision you made in grief ten years ago. I'm not asking for the child tonight. I'm asking for the information. Before we decide anything, we should know what it is we are deciding about."

He opened his eyes.

It was a smaller request than he had braced for. It was, in fact, the smallest request a woman could make of a husband in her position. She was not asking him to risk her. She was asking him to consent to an unbiased conversation about risk.

And still the refusal rose in him. Almost instinctive by now. He didn't let it pass his throat.

"Yes. I will agree to talk to a doctor. I will take you to any physician you choose and hear what he says. I can't promise more than that today, Vivi, and will not lie to you. But that much I do promise."

She reached up and placed her hand flat against his chest, over his heart.

He didn't know what his heart was doing. He knew only that she could feel it, because her fingers moved, as if she wanted to soothe it.

"Thank you," she said.

He covered her hand with his own.

He understood, even as he held her hand against him, that this was not an end. The examination would produce an answer. The answer, whatever it was, would require him to make another decision. That decision would be harder than this one, and he was not yet sure whether he could make it.

He had said yes because she had asked. Not because his fear had diminished.

Or because he expected to change his mind.

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CHAPTER 35

THE ACCOUCHEUR THE HARTFIELDS had recommended visited Vivienne. Dalton had expected a man in his fifties with gray hair and an air of gravity, but Dr. Finlay shattered every preconception by being young, perhaps mid-thirties, blond, and charming. While friendly, he had the quiet competence and understanding that put both patients and their families at ease. Going by his record — and his clientele, which included half the aristocracy and several members of the royal family — the man was deservedly successful.

He came with his nurse-midwife, asked questions of both of them, and listened with genuine interest. He then retreated with the nurse to Vivienne's chambers and performed the examination efficiently. Afterward, Dalton received him in his study.

"The Duchess is in excellent health. I find no physiological impediment to a successful pregnancy."

The words were considered. Delivered with confident expertise.

"And yet she has lost three."

"Her previous losses, while deeply unfortunate, show no pattern of underlying pathology that would suggest recurrence. Sometimes these things happen. I have attended several women who have had successful pregnancies and deliveries after prior losses."

"She almost bled out after the last one."

"Hemorrhages are not uncommon. But I have several methods at my disposal to prevent or stop them. I adhere to the latest standards of sanitization, which have been shown to reduce fevers, and I am trained to perform surgery should the need arise."

Dalton stood where he was.

"Your Grace, there are no guarantees in childbirth." The doctor spoke with empathy. "There never are. But the Duchess's prospects are as favorable as any woman's I have attended."

Dalton thanked the doctor. Shook his hand. Escorted him to the door. Closed it. Returned to his study.

Sat down.

The brandy was still on the desk. He drank it now, and the burning was the only thing he could feel that was not terror.

His mother had been healthy, too. Vivienne had always appeared healthy. That had not prevented her from losing three pregnancies.

He found her in the drawing room, standing by the window with the late-afternoon light in her hair. She turned when he entered, and her face was bright with the hope the news had brought her.

"He said yes," she breathed. "Val, he said there is no reason — "

"I know what he said."

She stopped.

He crossed to her. Took her hands.

"He also said there are no guarantees."

"I know that, Val. There never are. Not in this. Not in anything."

"Maybe we should wait a little. I am not saying not ever. I am saying not yet. When you have recovered your memories. When you are fully yourself again and can make a more informed decision."

What he meant was: *when I am no longer terrified.* But the words that came out of his mouth were *when you recover your memory*, and the words she must have heard were *you are not enough as you are.*

He watched the effect on her. How the light of hope in her eyes dimmed. How her smile became strained until it collapsed. She was probably thinking it was because of her. That he was telling her *when you are no longer defective.*

Her hands slid from his.

"Of course," she said. Her voice was even. Controlled. Somehow that made it worse. He would have preferred her to rage at him. To call him the

coward he was. But she wouldn't.

She left the room.

He retired late that night, avoiding his bed and the decision he would have to make once in it. Sleep was elusive. He lay on his back in the dark, thinking about whether he should go to his wife. He was an idiot. A coward and an idiot. They had already wasted so much time. And here he was, hesitating. Wasting more of it because he still could not make up his mind.

If he went to her, gave in to what they both wanted, they might get their heart's desire. And if things went wrong, as they had three times before, he might get his heart torn out.

She came to him instead. He should have known that was a possibility. Vivienne had never been shy, and of late she was recovering her self-assurance. He loved her for it. But it made resisting her that much harder.

She stood at the foot of his bed in her nightgown. No robe. No pretense.

"Vivienne."

"Don't tell me it is too late." Not angry. Determined. "Don't tell me *when I recover.*"

He sat up.

"I want you," she said. "And I want a baby. Our baby. You want it too. Don’t tell me I should wait. I have been waiting for seven years. Longer than that. I need this, Val."

He said her name. Just her name.

"Vivi."

It was all the invitation she needed.

She came to him. She climbed onto the bed and took his face in her hands, palms cool against his jaw, and looked at him in a way that left him nowhere to hide.

"Don't fight tonight. Don’t strategize, analyze, weigh the possibilities, or try to predict the outcomes. Just feel. Believe. Surrender."

He closed his eyes.

"Vivi," he said again, and his voice broke on the second syllable.

She kissed him. Unhurried. As though she had all the time in the world and intended to spend it here. He made a sound against her lips. Low. Almost wounded.

His hands found her waist. The nightgown was thin; he could feel her skin through the linen, the curve of her hip. The tremor in her body.

He pulled back. "You are trembling."

"I know. It is not fear."

"What is it, then?"

In response, she took his hand and brought it to her breast, pressing herself against his palm. Her heartbeat was a wild rhythm under his fingers.

"You tell me. Can you not feel it, Val?"

He drew the nightgown over her head. She raised her arms. Then she was naked in his bed, lit only by the dim glow of a single candle, and he could not look away from her.

She reached for him. Found the drawstring of his sleeping trousers. Her fingers were sure. He lifted his hips, she pulled them down, and now there was nothing between them. Not silk. Not rope. Nothing he could use to make this into something other than what it was. Naked skin. Naked hearts.

Her bare breasts were a temptation he could not resist. He sat up to take them in his mouth while she straddled him. Her back arched at the first pull of his lips on her sensitive nipple. She was so responsive. She had always been so responsive. Pure fire in his arms.

His hands found the curve of her backside, and he lifted her onto his cock, let her sink onto it slowly. She took him with a sweet moan of need and a roll of her hips. His cock plunged deep inside her, her hands gripping his hair as his mouth explored her breasts.

He kissed her throat. The hollow behind her ear. The place where her pulse beat against her skin. She sighed, and the sound went through him.

"Val."

The way she said his name, with a note of wonder in it, was his undoing.

Without leaving her body, he rolled her onto her back and settled over her, watching her face. Her breath caught. Her lips parted. Then her eyes widened and went soft.

She wrapped her arms around him. Her legs. Her whole body curved to meet his.

He moved in her, holding her gaze. She would not look away, and he forced himself to meet her with the same openness, at least for a few heartbeats. He broke from her gaze only to take her mouth with his, fusing them in a deep kiss.

She moaned his name again. He drank it from her lips. Her fingers traced his jaw. His shoulders. Then her hands glided down his back, settled for a moment on his hips, and molded to his backside. She touched him as though she meant to memorize him, even if she remembered nothing else.

He pressed his face against her neck and matched his rhythm to her pulse. She arched beneath him and whispered, "Stay with me," tightening around him as she spoke.

Her breath shortened. The hands at his back pressed him closer, nails digging into his flesh. Her hips rose to meet his, and it was too much. And exactly right. It was perfection.

He could stay.

She came with a half-choked gasp and a long sound of release, holding on to him as if he were her anchor in a storm.

He was close. He could let go.

He pulled out.

One moment he was inside her, together, united. One. The next he was spilling on her stomach, his forehead against hers, his breath ragged, his hand white-knuckled in the sheet.

The sound she made…

A small intake of breath. As if he had struck her in the most vulnerable spot.

He could not look at her.

He rolled onto his side. His seed was on her skin and not inside her.

She did not move. She lay on her back, her hair across his pillow, her eyes on the canopy. Still as the dead.

He wiped the evidence of his cowardice from her body. Reached for her hand. She let him take it, but did not squeeze back. He lay beside her and scrambled for something to say. Some way to fix what he had broken.

Nothing came. Apologies were insufficient. Explanations redundant. Promises impossible.

After a long time, she was the one who spoke.

"I understand you are frightened." She spoke in a measured voice. "I understand the miscarriages broke something in you that has not healed. I understand that your mother's death taught you that love and loss come joined at the root."

She turned her head to look at him. In the near-dark, her eyes were black, and what he saw in them was not anger.

It was clarity.

"But Val. When you pull away from me at the moment I am most open to you — when you choose your fear over my body — " Her voice wavered.

Once. She steadied it. "It does not feel like protection. It feels like you looked at the whole of me and decided I was not worth the risk."

He opened his mouth. Still, nothing came.

She was right.

She withdrew her hand. Not a punishment. A surrender.

"Good night, Val."

She did not rise. She turned on her side, away from him, drew the sheet over her body, and lay in his bed in silence.

Dalton lay beside her and did not sleep.

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Chapter 36

KNOWING WHAT SHE HAD to do did not make it any easier. She had come to love her husband, and he had become so much a part of her that she didn't know how she had existed without him for seven years. How she would exist again when she let him go.

But let him go she must. Precisely because she loved him too much to condemn him to relive his worst nightmares. She had done that four times. Three times with the miscarriages, and again when she disappeared at sea. When he had thought her dead for seven years.

He had already lost so much when she met him. She should have brought ease and peace to his life. Instead, she had only brought more tragedy.

And now she was asking him to risk it again.

She understood him. By God, she did. She knew what she was asking of him. To risk more loss. More grief. More pain.

The worst part was that she could not offer any guarantees. She couldn’t promise she would not lose another pregnancy. She couldn’t promise she would not die. She could not even promise him she would eventually remember all the memories of love they had forged together. For all she was asking of him, she could offer very little in return.

So she had to let him go. Because he wanted a child. He needed it. And he deserved it. The man who had loved and lost more than anyone she knew deserved to have everything. It would be painful. He would refuse. She

knew he loved her. And she loved him. But she needed to do this for his own good.

She found him in the breakfast room. He was reading the morning papers with a cup of coffee untouched at his elbow. When she entered, his gaze found her before the rest of him moved. Then he stood and smiled, an uncertain, apologetic smile, but it softened the line of his jaw and made something twist in her chest. She was going to hurt him. And he did not deserve more hurt. But if she stayed, she would hurt him more over the years. This would be painful now, but better for him in the long term.

"We need to talk."

The smile drained. His body stiffened, as if bracing for a blow. He folded the paper. Set it aside.

"I know. Sit down, Vivi."

She did not sit down. Neither did he. They stood facing each other across the breakfast table.

"I would rather say what I have to say while standing."

He studied her, frowning.

"Then say it."

"You need an heir. What is more, you yearn for a child of your own. But you don't consider me capable of providing it."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she held up a hand, and he closed it again, pressing his lips together.

"I want to belong. To find a place to call home."

"And you have found it. You belong here. With me."

She huffed a bitter laugh. "Strange. I do not feel like I belong. If anything, I feel more like an impostor now than when I first arrived at Penrose."

"Don't say that. Of course you belong here. You have always belonged with me. Always will. This is your home."

"But I don't deserve it. I have only brought you pain. You said it yourself: I was not the right candidate. I was a deviation from your carefully considered plan. Why would you want to stay married to me? You could divorce me and marry another woman. A woman who can give you the heir you need. A woman who meets your criteria."

"That list was a stupid idea. That is not what I want now. It was not even what I wanted then."

"Sometimes what we want is not what is best for us." He drew a sharp breath as she threw back at him the same words he had said to her before.

"I won't do it."

"You should. It wouldn't be difficult for you to prove I have been unfaithful. Half the island of Guernsey witnessed that I almost married another man. Sue for divorce, Dalton. Free yourself and free me."

The wounded look in his eyes was almost enough to destroy her.

"Vivi…" It was a plea. This proud, powerful man was pleading with her. And it was all she could do not to give in. Run into his arms. Offer comfort. Tell him she loved him. That she would never leave him.

But that would be a greater cruelty.

She would fall apart later. But she needed to hold strong for now. Just long enough to release him.

"I'm going to move to my parents' house." She held up a hand when he opened his mouth and moved toward her.

"Don't try to stop me, please. I agreed to a trial period, remember? Seven weeks to determine if we suit. The seven weeks are over, and I don't think we suit, Val."

"Don't say that. We love each other." Pain, turning to anger. "Why can you not understand that I am only trying to protect you? I am doing it for your own good."

"So am I, Val. I am leaving for your own good."

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CHAPTER 37

THE HOUSE WAS, ONCE again, a tomb.

It had briefly been a home when she was in it. He had not known the difference. He knew it now. It was evident in the silence of rooms that had held her voice. A hairpin on her dressing table. A bottle of her perfume, half full. He had given orders to leave everything as she had left it. Just as before. *In case she comes back.*

She had not come back.

Sue for divorce, Dalton. Free yourself and free me.

He had gone to his study after the carriage left, poured a brandy, and not drunk it. He sat in the chair behind his desk and stared at the small bottle of crème de violette on the sideboard. Something in him had shifted, although he didn't yet know what.

He went to a lonely and cold bed after midnight. Daybreak found him already awake.

He rose at six. Shaved and dressed without his valet. Went to his study to open the dispatch box from the Foreign Office. Three coded messages. A report from Marseille. A surveillance summary on Lord Ashby. He read them all and understood none of them. He tried again. The cipher key for the third was one he had designed himself, and he could not remember the sequence.

At noon, Mrs. Trevena brought a tray. At three, Prowse appeared with a sealed note from the Kilbrannan residence. He recognized Lord Kilbrannan's hand and placed the note unopened in his desk drawer.

At seven, in the dining room, the footman had set two places. Dalton looked at the second setting. "Remove it."

He rose at six the next morning. He went to his study. The dispatch box was still on the desk where he had left it. The note from Lord Kilbrannan was still in the drawer. Mrs. Trevena brought a tray at noon. The footman set one place at seven.

He didn't write to Lord Kilbrannan.He didn't even open the dispatch box.

He sat in the chair behind his desk and watched the light move across the carpet. On the fifth day, when he heard Venus in the entrance hall, he could not remember what day of the week it was.

By the time she burst through the study door, he was standing at the window, pretending he had not been sitting in the dark for the past hour.

"You look dreadful," Venus said.

"Good morning to you as well."

She closed the door and stood with her hands folded.

"Vivienne's mother called on me. She is worried about her daughter. She is also worried about you, though she expressed it as annoyance, which is her custom." Venus paused. "Lady Kilbrannan says Vivienne has not left her room in five days."

He turned back to the window.

"Dalton."

"She told me to divorce her."

"Yes. She told her mother the same thing. Lady Kilbrannan called it the most spectacular display of noble self-destruction she had ever witnessed." Venus paused. "She was not wrong."

He said nothing.

Venus crossed the room and sat in the chair opposite his desk. "I am going to ask you a question, and I would like an honest answer."

"Ask."

"Do you love her?"

He looked at her. She knew the answer. She was asking because she wanted him to say it.

"Of course I do."

"Then what, precisely, are you doing sitting in this room?"

"I won't risk another pregnancy. She is better off — "

"Do not finish that sentence." Her voice could have cut glass. "You are about to tell me she is better off alone. Childless. Unloved. She wants you. Has always wanted you. She wanted you when she had every memory, and she wants you now when she has none. You are what is best for her, and the fact that you cannot see this is the single most infuriating thing about you."

He looked at his sister. The girl he had raised. The woman who had saved his life after the shipwreck by telling him he was mirroring their father.

"I'm afraid," he said.

Venus's expression did not soften. It changed.

"I know. I have always known. But Val, Father was afraid too. And what destroyed him was not the love. It was the loneliness afterward. You are choosing the loneliness in advance. You are building the mausoleum before anyone has died."

She stood and smoothed her skirt. Then walked to the door and paused with her hand on the handle.

"Trust your love. Or lose her. Those are your options. There isn't a third."

She left.

He went to Vivienne's rooms.

The air still smelled of her. Roses, bergamot, lily.

He sat on her bed and put his head in his hands. He was so tired of trying to be strong. The wet on his fingers came before he knew he was crying.

It didn't last long. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. He sat in the stillness.

His father had loved his mother without restraint. When she died in childbirth, he had not survived her by a year. The drinking. Then the silences. The pistol. The lesson had seemed inarguable: love without control destroyed everything.

He had built his life on that lesson. He had loved Vivienne from the first moment he saw her across a crowded ballroom, and he had set about containing the love. Managing the risk.

Three miscarriages. Three times her body had tried to give him a child, and three times it had ended in blood and his hand holding hers while she sobbed. After the third, he had made the decision for both of them. No more.

And then the shipwreck. He had lost her, or so he believed. And the grief had been —

Annihilating.

He had spent the next seven years proving that discipline worked. He had grieved, then he had contained the grief, and he had functioned. Not moved on. Not found happiness or peace. Just functioned.

But now she was back. Alive. It was a miracle he had not dared to hope for. And she wanted him to divorce her. To marry another woman who could give him a child. If only she knew how impossible that was.

He remembered something he had not thought of in years. A year after the wreck, on a night the loneliness would not ease, desperate for relief, he had gone to a house in St. James's. A discreet establishment. He had chosen a woman at random. She had been beautiful and skilled. They had retired together to a room with silk sheets and excellent brandy. When she had begun to undress, he had sat on the edge of the bed and wept.

He had apologized, horrified at his loss of control. Paid double and gone home full of shame and crushing despair. He had sat in this same room and understood that he was ruined for any woman who was not Vivienne.

He had told himself for seven years that what kept him going was discipline.

It had not been discipline.

He had sat on his wife's bed and wept, but he was still here, breathing. He had not killed himself. Whatever had held him together for seven years, it had not been the fortifications.

He looked around the room. The dressing table. Her bottle of perfume. The bed where he was sitting.

It had been her. Even her absence. Even the version of her he had thought was a memory.

She was three miles away at her parents' house. He had driven her there with his fear. And the pain of losing her this time was the same pain as the first, except this time she was alive, and within reach, and he could choose differently.

He loved her. Without qualification. He loved her stubbornness and her courage and her honesty. Loved that she had survived seven years alone and come out braver than he had ever been. He loved that she had left him because she thought it was best for him.

He needed to tell her.

He was going to go to her parents' house and say it, and give her the child she wanted, because a life without her was not a life. It was the mausoleum

Venus had described.

He bathed, shaved, and sent word to Prowse to ready the carriage.

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CHAPTER 38

FIVE DAYS.

She had been gone five days, and Dalton had not come.

She kept expecting him. Every footstep in the hall outside her door, every carriage on the street below, every knock that turned out to be the maid with another tray full of food she would not eat. It was she who had left. She had been the one to tell him to divorce her. And still she listened for him.

It was the right thing. He could be free of her now. He could find a woman capable of giving him a child, and he could have the family he had been denying himself for years on her account. That was what she had given him by leaving. She told herself this in the small hours when the wanting was loudest. She told herself this when she opened her eyes in a room that still felt unfamiliar, despite having been hers in her youth, and when she felt the absence of his warmth at her back like a wound.

It did not help.

She had not eaten properly for five days. Her mother had stopped trying to coax her at meals and had taken to leaving small things in her room: a plate of biscuits, a glass of milk, a slice of toast wrapped in a napkin. Vivienne would find them later, untouched, and feel guilty. She would take a few bites just to please her mother.

She wondered how long this despondency would last. How long before she felt enthusiasm for anything again. Before she could wake in the

mornings without dreading the day ahead, when even dragging herself out of bed felt like too much effort.

And then her mother sent word up that she had a visitor.

She had not had any visitors since she moved to her parents' house.

Alice had written a tactful note that did not press. She had half expected Venus to call, but her sister-in-law had been conspicuously absent.

The name on the card was Dr. Paul Harrison.

She read it twice. She had been corresponding with Paul and Margaret since her return to England, mostly about the epidemic on the island. Paul's last letter had said the worst was over. She had replied from her parents' house. But she had not asked him to come.

He must have seen the change of address on her letter and drawn his own conclusions. The question was which conclusions.

She rose from the chair and went to the mirror.

She didn't recognize the woman who looked back. Smudges under her eyes, blotchy cheeks, messy hair. She rang for her maid, who did what she could in the time available, which was not much.

Paul was in the drawing room with her mother, who was peppering him with questions about Guernsey and about her time there.

"Gr — Your Grace." The correction was small and immediate, but she caught it. He had been about to say *Grace*. The only person in the world who still called her that. "I am relieved beyond measure to find you looking so well."

She was not looking well, and they both knew it. The kindness of the lie steadied her.

"Paul, my dear friend. You must call me Vivienne." She held out both her hands.

He took them and kissed them.

"Walk with me," he said. "Your mother has been generous with her tea, but I think you would benefit from the air."

She accepted because the house had become unbearable, and because she suspected he had asked partly to escape her mother's interrogation. She rang for her hat and umbrella, and they stepped out into the street.

The sun had come out. She lifted her face to it without thinking.

It was warm. It felt nice on her skin.

She smiled for the first time in five days.



DALTON SAW HER LIFT her face to the sun.

His carriage was across the street, half hidden by a delivery cart, and she had not seen him. She was looking at Harrison. Smiling up at him. And what a smile. Full. Radiant. Full of hope and optimism.

Had she smiled like that at him lately?

Harrison offered his arm. She took it.

They walked together toward a waiting hansom. Harrison handed her up with solicitous care. They looked comfortable together. At ease.

She looked happy.

Harrison was steady and kind. He did not have a father who had put a pistol to his head. He would not flinch from giving her a child.

The hansom pulled away from the curb.

Dalton watched it until it turned the corner. Then he sat back against the seat and closed his eyes.

"Home," he called to the coachman.

The carriage moved off in the opposite direction.

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CHAPTER 39

DALTON ARRIVED HOME TO find a report waiting for him. Nathaniel's man had finally found the detective Dalton had hired seven years ago to search for Vivienne. He had retired to a cottage an hour south of London, and Dalton was on the first train the next morning.

Hargreaves met him at the door of a small white house set back from a country lane. Older than Dalton remembered. Still sharp. He invited Dalton in, sat him down, poured tea neither of them touched, and answered Dalton's questions with a recollection that was impressive, given the time that had passed.

"I visited Guernsey three weeks after the wreck," he said. "I called at every parish on the island. The harbormaster. The constable. Two innkeepers. The rector of St. Martin's." He paused, his finger tracking down a page of a little notebook. "And a young country doctor."

Dalton's eyes narrowed.

"The doctor's name."

"The name escapes me at the moment. Give me a moment."

Dalton did not need a moment. He already knew, but he wanted to hear it from the detective.

Hargreaves turned the page and turned it again. He found what he was looking for and read it aloud.

"Dr. Paul Harrison."

Dalton kept his face still. He had suspected for weeks. The confirmation was still a blow.

The rest of the people interviewed could genuinely not have seen her at that point. He could not make the same excuse for the doctor. She had been in Harrison's care, possibly sleeping in a room above the surgery with no memory of her own name, while the detective sat in the man's parlor and was told he had never seen such a woman.

Dalton took his leave of Hargreaves and rushed back to London on the next train.

Harrison had lied. He had looked another man in the face and lied. He had then carried that lie for seven years, becoming Vivienne's doctor and her friend. Almost becoming her husband. And now he was in London again, walking her in the park.

Dalton had spent the carriage ride home from Belgravia yesterday telling himself she had been smiling at a kind man. He had let himself believe Harrison was a country physician who had acted in good faith.

That was no longer the story.

He needed to go to his wife and remove her from Harrison's reach.

Nathaniel was waiting for him when he arrived home. He had also been looking into the wreck and wanted to deliver this report personally.

Dalton read it without sitting. The boiler had exploded. The maritime inquest of November 1860 recorded that much as a settled fact. What Nathaniel's man had found, seven years later, were three surviving sailors who had not testified. Two had emigrated. The third had been located in a boarding house in Rotherhithe, drinking himself to death on a pension he could not account for.

"The Rotherhithe sailor said the boiler had been sound," Nathaniel said. "He had checked it himself on the morning of departure. He said the explosion had come from the wrong place — not the main chamber but the intake valve, which would have required someone to open a fitting that was never opened at sea."

Dalton had wondered, since the night Alfred had sat across from him in the cell beneath this house and blackmailed him, whether Alfred had stumbled on the information by accident or had created the circumstances that led to Vivienne's disappearance. But wondering and having the evidence in his hands were not the same.

"Someone tampered with the boiler," Dalton said.

Nathaniel nodded. "It would appear so, yes."

"I just found out that Dr. Harrison lied to Hargreaves. Seven years ago. The inspector questioned him, and he denied having seen her."

"That is the doctor who — "

"Treated Vivienne when she was brought to Guernsey, yes."

"It is not definitive proof," Nathaniel said.

"But all the evidence points to Alfred engineering the shipwreck and then putting Vivienne on Guernsey to use as a pawn," Dalton finished.

Now the question was whether Harrison had been part of the conspiracy all along, or whether his cousin had lied to him in order to gain his cooperation.

Either way, he was part of it, and he had returned. While Vivienne was at her parents' house in Belgravia with no protection worth a damn.

He had been so consumed by his fear of losing her that he had taken his eye off the threat.

"I need to go to my wife right now."

Nathaniel nodded and followed him out of the study.

He was buttoning his coat in the entrance hall, calling for his coach, when the pounding started at the front door.

He opened it before the footman could get to it.

Harrison stood on the steps. Hatless. White-faced. His cravat undone. He looked like a man who had run for miles without stopping.

Dalton's heart kicked into a gallop as the realization that he might be too late hit him in the chest.

He had Harrison by the throat before the man had finished crossing the threshold.

"Where is Vivienne?"

"She is gone," Harrison rasped, the color drained from his face. "They have taken her."

One hand closed around the doctor's collar, the other fisted in the wool of his coat. Dalton drove him backward into the wall, hard enough to rattle the pictures hanging on it. Harrison's skull hit the plaster. His spectacles slid sideways. His hands came up in surrender.

"Where?" It was not a question. It was a demand ground through locked teeth.

"I don't — " It came out as a croak. Harrison stopped, cleared his throat. "Dalton, I swear to you, I don't know where they have taken her."

His hand loosened. Did not release.

"Tell me what happened."

"We were walking in the park. They attacked us from behind, held ether to our faces until we passed out. When I came to, she was gone. And they had left this letter in my pocket. It is addressed to you."

Harrison held out a folded piece of paper with shaking hands.

Dalton released him and took the note. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nathaniel move closer to Harrison. Ready to intervene should the doctor try anything.

The note was in Alfred's handwriting. He recognized it at once. The ransom demand was brief. The instructions were precise.

"He wants thirty thousand pounds. The docks. Tonight at midnight. Alone. The threat to her is explicit."

Nathaniel pressed his lips together, saying nothing. His sober expression said enough.

Dalton folded the note and put it in his breast pocket.

Vivienne in the hands of his enemy… He forced himself to breathe. In, out. He needed air. He needed to stay calm and think in order to help her.

"My study, now."

Nathaniel led the way, the doctor followed without being dragged, and Dalton brought up the rear.

He closed the door behind them but didn't sit. Harrison stood by the desk and waited.

"Tell me everything," he told Harrison. "Start with the reason you lied to the detective I sent to look for my wife, and tell me who paid you to hide her from me."

Harrison's face went gray. "How did you — "

"Sit down."

Harrison sat.

"I have never taken any payment to hide her. I swear," Harrison said. "I only did it to protect her. A man came three days after the two sailors who had pulled her from the water brought her to me. He found me at the surgery and told me he was related to her. She had regained consciousness by then but was confused. She could not remember her name or anything else about her life, and I told the man so." Harrison's hands were fidgeting in his lap. "He still requested to see her, so I let him."

"Did you witness the meeting?"

"Yes. He asked her questions. About herself, about her life. About him. None of which she could answer. After five minutes, I cut the meeting short. That was all she could tolerate."

"The name of the man."

"Alfred St Aubyn. He asked me questions about her condition. Then he told me she was fleeing a violent marriage. That her amnesia was a mercy because it spared her the memory of the abuse she suffered. That her husband was powerful and dangerous, and would reclaim her if anyone found her." Harrison's voice was very level in a way that suggested effort to keep it so. "He begged me to hide her."

"And you believed him."

"I had my doubts at first. I didn't know what to do, so I decided to keep her presence quiet. Then she started to have nightmares."

Dalton closed his eyes.

"She screamed in her sleep about dark corridors and dungeons. About being tied down. About a man's hands on her in the dark." Harrison's jaw tightened. "What was I supposed to think?"

The bonds were silk. The hands were his, and they had never touched her without her wanting them to. But memories stripped of their context sounded exactly like what Harrison had thought they were.

"When the detective came," Harrison said, "I was certain. Not a worried husband. A detective. Hunting her down. So I lied. I looked him in the eye and told him I knew of no Englishwoman matching that description. Because I believed I was saving her life."

The silence stretched.

"Did Alfred come back?"

"Once. With documents. Forged identification papers. A letter purportedly from a solicitor advising on grounds for separation. Court papers describing incidents of violence. Bruises. A broken wrist."

Dalton's fingers curled into the leather of the armchair.

He had never raised a hand to her. Never even raised his voice.

"Go on."

"She had no memory. She was terrified. And Mr. St. Aubyn was meticulous. He had an answer for every question I raised. When I asked why a husband would search for a wife he abused, he said it was about property. Control. That the duke — " Harrison stopped. Looked at his

hands. "That the duke did not want a wife so much as a possession he had misplaced."

"And after that?"

"He wrote once or twice a year to ask after her health and whether she had remembered anything. But he never came back."

So Alfred had been keeping watch. Of course he had. Whatever he had planned to do if she remembered, Dalton wouldn't let himself think about it now.

"You were going to marry her."

Harrison lifted his head. "I thought she was married to a monster. After seven years, the authorities would have declared her dead in absentia if they had not already done so. She had a new identity. I was not marrying Vivienne, Duchess of Dalton. I was marrying Grace Harper."

Dalton looked at the man who had hidden his wife. Who had tended her injuries and sat by her bedside when the nightmares came, because he believed he was protecting a battered woman from the man who had brutalized her.

He wanted, with a rage that had no useful object, to put his fist through the man's face. But the rage would not help Vivienne now, so he pushed it down.

It was unforgivable. It was also what he himself would have done with the same story and the same screaming woman and the same absence of the truth. That was the most galling part.

He drew a breath. Accepted that he should do no violence to the doctor. He was not the architect of the lie. Merely a useful cog in Alfred's machinery of deceit. Harrison might actually be useful.

"How can I help?"

The quiet inquiry came from Nathaniel, who until now had remained silent, watching the exchange.

"Go find Ardmore and come back here. I may need your help tonight."

Nathaniel gave a single terse nod and left.

His mind was already planning the next move. He needed to withdraw the money. Notify Vivienne's parents. Plan the rescue. Consider every possible variant.

He sat down at his desk, drew a sheet of paper toward him, and began to write. His hands were not quite steady, but he wrangled them under control. First, a note to Vivienne's parents telling them she was with him—a lie he

would make true. Otherwise they would worry and would descend upon him with their frantic concern. He could not have that now. He needed to be focused.

"What can I do to help?" The doctor's voice. Quiet and contrite.

He had almost forgotten about him.

"You shall remain here until I bring her back. Do you have your medical bag?"

"It is in my room at the inn where I have taken lodgings."

"Give me the name and I will send someone to fetch it. When I bring her back, I need you to be ready to help her should she have sustained an injury."

Harrison nodded, and Dalton went back to the task at hand. Only for one breath did he allow himself to think about her face, to feel the terror. Then he ruthlessly shut it down and began to write. He focused only on the docks at midnight and what he needed to do. If he let fear take hold, he would lose effectiveness.

Details became important when failure was not an option.

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CHAPTER 40

THE TERMS: THIRTY THOUSAND pounds in a leather briefcase, delivered by the Duke of Dalton, alone, to Bishopsgate Pier at midnight. Vivienne released upon receipt. *Anyone accompanies him; she dies. He fails to appear; she dies. The money is short; she dies.*

Dalton read the note twice. The instructions were specific enough to suggest real intent and vague enough to allow a dozen variations. Alfred would not be on the pier. He would be in a position of advantage. A warehouse window. Somewhere with a clear view of the pier and a clear shot.

A ransom and an execution.

Alfred didn't need thirty thousand pounds. He had had thirty thousand pounds and his freedom, and he had used both to build the most elaborate act of spite Dalton had ever encountered. No, this was personal. It was about power. He wanted Dalton dead. The one man capable of dismantling his conspiracy buried in the Thames mud.

He tucked the note into his pocket and placed his palm flat over it.

Nathaniel returned less than an hour after he left, rain-soaked and grim. Ardmore was one pace behind him.

Dalton took them to the study. He told Ardmore what he had learned in Kent, and what Nathaniel's man had found in Rotherhithe, and what

Harrison had confessed an hour ago in this room. Then he gave him the note.

Ardmore read it standing. His eyes moving quickly over the page.

"This is an ambush," he said. "Shooter on the warehouse at the end of the pier. You walk into range, you show him the money, you do not walk out."

"I know."

"You intend to comply," Nathaniel said.

"I need to appear to comply." Dalton crossed to the far wall. Behind his father's maritime charts on the third bookcase was a concealed panel, and behind the panel a Whitworth rifle in an oilskin case, a leather belt fitted with a double-action revolver, and a steel breastplate.

He lifted the breastplate out. The steel was cold against his palms. He tested the weight: eleven pounds, give or take. He had had it made in Sheffield by an armorer who supplied the Metropolitan Police with experimental work. A quarter-inch of steel. Cut to his measurements, designed to be worn beneath a shirt and a loose coat. The dent in the center, the size of a shilling, was where a Beaumont-Adams round had hit it at fifteen yards in testing.

He set it down on the desk where Nathaniel and Ardmore could see it.

"I walk the pier at midnight. Alone. Wearing this. I carry the briefcase. Alfred fires when I am within range. The breastplate holds. I go down and stay down."

"And then?" Nathaniel said.

"He will come to check and collect the money. When he is close enough, I act."

"And if he aims for the head?" Ardmore asked.

"Then my evening ends rather differently than planned. Which is why I need you both nearby. Hidden. If I die, someone needs to make certain Vivienne lives."

His friends' faces did not move.

"The old customs warehouse has a gallery window with a clear sightline to the pier," Ardmore said.

"I know the one." Dalton had mapped these docks during the Shanghai affair in sixty-three. He remembered every rooftop and mooring post. "You will have the Whitworth. Sighted to four hundred yards. You won't need half that."

"I won't need a quarter of it."

Dalton looked at him.

Ardmore was not counting on range. He was counting on proximity. On being close enough to make the outcome certain.

"The gallery window faces east," Ardmore added. "If he posts a second shooter on the grain store roof, I will have a three-second window between targets." A pause. "You should know I have never shot anyone."

The room went quiet.

"I have shot a great many things," Ardmore continued, in the same mild tone. "Bottles. Pheasants. A weathervane in Hertfordshire. But I mention the distinction in case it matters to you."

Dalton studied him. Composed face. Steady hands.

"Does it matter to you?"

Ardmore considered the question.

"Ask me tomorrow."

Dalton nodded.

"Nathaniel. You hold the perimeter. Bring two of your own men. Not mine. I do not want anyone from the Office within a mile of those docks tonight. If this goes wrong, it goes wrong without witnesses who answer to the Crown."

"Understood."

They were already moving. Nathaniel checked the chambers of the revolver he had brought in his coat. Ardmore lifted the Whitworth from its case, ran his hand along the barrel, and tested the sight.

Dalton walked them to the door. On the threshold, Nathaniel gripped his arm. Brief. Hard.

"For what it is worth, I would have done the same thing in your place."

Dalton nodded. Once.

"We will bring her home," Nathaniel added.

"I intend to." It was a promise.

Ardmore paused a step behind. He did not offer his hand. He looked at Dalton with those dark, too-sharp eyes.

"I will be in position by eleven."

Then he was gone, the Whitworth case under his arm, his collar turned up against the rain.

The door closed.

Dalton returned to the study. The breastplate lay on the desk where he had left it, dull gray steel catching the lamplight. He picked it up and ran his

thumb across the dent.

A quarter-inch of Sheffield steel between his heart and Alfred's bullet.

He hoped it would be enough.

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CHAPTER 41

THE DARKNESS WAS ABSOLUTE.

She opened her eyes, and it made no difference. This was not the soft darkness of her bedroom, where there were always shadows, the shapes of objects half visible.

She became aware of a hood pressed against her face, coarse and thick. A chemical smell. Cloth in her mouth. Her wrists bound behind her back, the rope cutting into her skin, her shoulders wrenched at an angle that sent a grinding ache through her joints.

Dalton had tied her, but not like this. His restraints were silk. Soft against her wrists, warm from her own skin. When her husband tied her up, she was comfortable. His hands meant pleasure.

These bonds were ropes. They bit. And the man who had brought her here was not Dalton.

She pulled at her wrists. The rope held. She pulled harder, testing the knots. They did not give. She could wrench and twist until she tore herself apart, and they would hold.

She stopped pulling and tried to orient herself.

A cold, hard surface beneath her. Concrete or stone. Damp. The air was a tangy combination of smoke, salt, and fish.

Water, but not the sea. The river. A slapping, irregular rhythm against wood somewhere below her or beside her. The docks. She was in a

warehouse on the docks.

Voices, distant. Male. Indistinct. Beyond the building. Then silence again.

How long had she been here? She could not tell if it was day or night. Her last memory was of walking in the park with Paul, and then… nothing.

She had survived before, when she didn't even know who she was. At least this time, she had her memories of him. She could survive this.

She lay still and breathed.

And in the stillness, with the panic simmering in her chest and the dark pressing close and nothing to do but exist in her own body, she thought of him as the one thing that comforted her in this uncertain reality. Without reaching. Without effort. She was lying in the dark, wanting him. Thinking about him was as natural as breathing.

His hand settling over hers on the ship's rail. The taste of his kiss in the folly with roses in the air. The way he had looked when he stormed the church on Guernsey, ferocious and undone.

A different church.

A cathedral.

Meeting his eyes across the length of the aisle. Light falling through stained glass in shafts of rose and gold. Ivory silk against her skin. Her father's arm beneath her hand, steady and warm.

Him waiting at the altar. Dark-haired. Straight-backed. Stone-still. His eyes never left her from the moment she entered the nave. Not smiling. Too undone for that. He held her gaze with a force that made the cathedral shrink to the space between them.

His voice, low and precise, saying each vow as if he were signing a treaty with his own heart. Her voice, steadier than she had expected. Confident. *I am about to marry the love of my life*, she had thought.

The memory did not fade. It held. It settled over her in the cold of the warehouse like a blanket, and the terror in her chest loosened a fraction, just enough to let her breathe.

Then another.

The first miscarriage. Blood and cramping, and the world narrowing to a single fact: *we are losing our baby.* And his face. The naked pain he had not been able to hide from her. He had held her through the night and into the morning. His arms around her in the dark, his chest against her back, his breath in her hair.

And the second time. And the third. The same arms, the same silence, the same constancy. Each loss had cut something deeper into him. She could see it now, could trace every careful, controlled, withholding thing he had done since her return back to its source.

He had never been cold. He had only learned to keep the heat where no one could feel it. Least of all himself.

The folly at sunset. Roses. His proposal. She had said yes before he had finished speaking.

The memories did not stop coming. Not in fragments now. In long currents, one feeding the next, seven years of silence breaking open at once. Each one was a lamp held up against the darkness of the warehouse.

For weeks she had been trying to remember the old Vivienne. To become the new one. To force a door that opened from the inside, as Hartfield had said.

She had stopped trying, and the door had opened.

Her body had always known what her mind had temporarily forgotten: that his hands were safety, his voice was home, and his arms were the only place she had ever felt whole.

He was coming for her. He would stop at nothing. She trusted him the way she trusted the ground beneath her feet or the sun rising every morning. Without question.

She had only to hold on.

The tears came then. Hot and silent, soaking into the rough fabric of the hood.

She loved him.

She had loved him before the shipwreck. Through the amnesia, when she could not remember his name. When she had looked at him across the vestry and felt terror instead of recognition. When she had kissed him in the folly and her body had known. She had loved him when she left.

She had always loved him.

The light came without warning.

A scrape of metal. A door opening somewhere to her left, hinges groaning. Unhurried footsteps crossing the stone floor. A hand gripped the hood and yanked it off her head.

She blinked. The light was a single oil lamp held low, and after hours of absolute darkness it seared her eyes. She squinted against it, tears streaming, until the shape behind the lamp resolved into a face.

She knew him.

From Guernsey? Yes, but even before that… The memory was there now. Their drawing room in Penrose, a family dinner, a man with a ready smile and quick, clever eyes. He was family. Valentine's cousin, who had sat at their table and drunk their wine and had laughed and joked. She had liked him.

"Alfred," she said.

The gag was gone. She did not remember when. Her voice cracked, hoarse, barely a whisper. But the name was clear.

He went still. The lamp paused in its arc. For one moment she saw surprise on his face. Real surprise, not performed. He had not expected her to know him.

Then the smile came. The one she remembered from those long-ago dinners, except stripped of warmth. The same shape of mouth, the same tilt of head, with nothing behind it but calculation.

"So you have recovered your memory," he said. He set the lamp on a crate and crouched before her, studying her the way a man studies a curiosity. "Took you long enough." A pause. "Tell me. Was it my face that did it? Would that not be a delicious thing to hold over my cousin? That my face made you remember when his could not."

It had not been his face. She wouldn't give him that.

She said nothing.

Alfred tilted his head.

"What do you want, Alfred?" Her voice scraped in her throat. "Why am I here?"

He stood. Brushed the dust from his trousers with a fastidious hand.

"You are here because you are the only vulnerability my cousin has ever possessed. You are going to help me destroy him."

"He will know it is a trap."

"Of course he will. He is not stupid. Neither am I." Alfred crossed to the boarded window, the gaps between the slats wide enough to see through. Wide enough to shoot through. "He will come anyway. That is the beauty of it. He can't help himself when it comes to you."

"I am not his weakness."

Alfred turned from the window.

"No? Then why is he going to walk a pier alone tonight with a briefcase of money, knowing I have a gun?"

She could feel her pulse hammering in her bound wrists. The rope cutting with each beat.

"You plan to kill him."

"I am going to collect what I am owed." Alfred's voice was conversational. As though they were discussing dinner. "And then, yes. He is going to die on these docks tonight. I have spent years planning this. While he played at being a duke and a spymaster, I was building the thing that would bring him down. The only thing I had not planned for was that you would have your memory back."

He crossed back to her. Crouched again. Close enough that she could smell the pomade in his hair and the sour tang of sweat beneath it.

"On reflection, I rather like the idea. I want you to watch. I want you to see it happen and know that I was the better man." His eyes held hers. "When it is done. When he is dead on the pier and the money is mine and the people I work for have what they need, you will die here too. In this warehouse. On these docks."

She held his gaze.

Her heart was hammering. Her throat was raw and her shoulders ached. The cold had settled so deep into her bones that she could not remember what warmth felt like.

But the memories were there. The wedding. His voice saying each vow as though he meant to keep every one of them for the rest of his life. His arms around her in the dark after each loss.

He had always pulled them through.

She looked at the face of the man who thought love was a weakness because he had never been capable of it.

"You don't know him the way you think you do."

Alfred smiled. Stood. Picked up the lamp.

"We will see."

He left her in the dark. The cold floor beneath her, the rope around her wrists.

But the darkness was not empty now. It was full of him. His face, his voice, his hands, the weight of years of marriage and three losses and a hundred arguments and a thousand moments of tenderness she had not known she carried.

I remember you, Val.

He would come, and he would prevail.

Because love was not a weakness. It was his strength.

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CHAPTER 42

FOG AND RIVER MIST clung thick around the warehouses when Dalton arrived just before midnight. His boots made no sound on the wet boards of the long pier, but he knew he was being watched. Every instinct in him said *trap*.

Warehouse Seven loomed ahead at the end of Bishopsgate Pier. Dark. Hulking. The perfect place to set up an ambush. He had come alone, as demanded. No advantage in numbers, no visible weapons. He carried the briefcase in his right hand and let the left hang at his side.

"Stop."

Alfred's voice from the dark. He could not see his cousin. He stopped a good twenty paces short of the door.

"Open the briefcase."

Slowly, keeping his hands visible, he worked the latches. He kept his head bent over the case.

Inside, the money was real and counted twice.

He angled the lid toward the dark.

The shot came from the warehouse roof, not from the window. He registered the angle at the same instant the round took him in the chest.

The impact was not what he had braced for. He had been punched in fights, and a horse had once kicked him. This was nothing like it. It was ten times worse. He staggered backward, the breath going out of him. He

looked down, half expecting a hole in the breastplate, and saw red spreading across his white shirt.

He let his knees go. He fell and lay where he had fallen. Eyes half open, his right hand still on the briefcase.

His only thought, with absurd clarity: *I hope to God Vivienne is not watching this.*



SHE COULD SEE EVERYTHING from the loft.

Alfred had come back an hour ago, gagged her again, dragged her onto a chair, and positioned her next to the boarded window so she would have an unobstructed view. He had not bothered to explain, nor had he needed to. The intention was clear: he wanted her to witness her husband's assassination.

She had watched Dalton walk down the pier alone with a briefcase, and she had been screaming since the moment his boots touched the boards. The gag turned her screams into nothing. Her throat was raw. Her chest hurt from forcing breath through cloth.

She watched him stop where Alfred told him to stop, open the briefcase, and angle it to show the money inside. All with a preternatural calm so at odds with the danger she knew he was in.

The shot came from above her. She felt it vibrate through the structure before she heard it. She saw the way his body shook with the impact, and he staggered back. The way he looked, almost surprised, at his chest. And then her husband was falling.

"Noooo!" The word was a desperate roar torn from her chest, but it became only a muffled wail that could barely escape her gagged mouth.

He fell on his back on the wet planks, a red stain on his white shirt, and he was not moving. But he was not dead. He could not be dead on a pier with his eyes open and his blood on his shirt.

She fought the rope harder, pulling against her bonds with all her might. She had worked one knot loose earlier, in the dark, before Alfred had come back. Now she tore at the rest of it. The rope cut into her wrists. She barely registered it. She pulled with her whole body, throwing her shoulders into it, and her hand slipped free just as she felt something in her shoulder go.

The pain was white-hot. Searing. For a moment her vision went dark at the edges, and she thought she would be sick. She gritted her teeth and fought the dizziness until she was sure she would not pass out. Then she pulled her other arm out of the rope while her bad arm hung at her side like a thing that did not belong to her.

Below her, Alfred was walking out onto the pier. Drawing closer to the prone body of her husband. Unhurried. With the confidence of a man who believed he had won.

She watched, holding her breath, her good hand fumbling at the rope around her ankles, working the knots she could not see because she wouldn't look away from Dalton's body.

Alfred picked up the briefcase first. Inspected the contents. Then he crouched down, and his hand extended toward Dalton's neck.

She forgot her shoulder, the ropes, the pain. Her entire body stilled, focused on that single point of contact. Holding her breath.

And then Dalton moved.

She could not parse all of it. He moved too fast. The gun went into the water. She saw a fist land. She saw him roll Alfred over and put cuffs on him, calm and methodical, like a man finishing a piece of business.

He was alive. Her husband was alive, and he was on top of Alfred, and Alfred was the one face down on the planks now, and Dalton was —

A laugh came out of her. Cracked and wet and pressed against the gag, but a laugh.

Then Alfred's head jerked, and his body went limp.

Another shooter.

Dalton was already moving. Rolling clear of the body. Getting his feet under him. Another shot took a piece out of the boards an inch from his hip.

He ran toward the warehouse door as the shooter walked his fire across the planks behind him.

"Vivienne!"

His voice, ragged.

He had made it inside. Alive. And he was looking for her.

"Here!" she screamed back, but of course it came out muted. He would not be able to hear it. And then… was that smoke she smelled?

She screamed harder, still fighting to untie the ropes that bound her ankles with her one working hand. Hoping and praying Dalton would find

her in time. She was in a loft, toward the front of the warehouse. Hard to spot from the inside.

There was definitely smoke in the air, and an ominous orange glare painting the back corners of the warehouse.

Then he looked up and saw her. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second before he looked around, found the stairs, and went up them three at a time.

He was real. Here. Running toward her. He was not dead.

She tried to say his name and could not, because of the gag. He saw, and his hands went to the cloth, taking it off her in one motion. Then he untied the rope around her ankles. His face was white. There was a small dark hole in the front of his shirt with red around it.

She fell into his arms, hugging him with all her might with her one good arm, while uncontrollable sobs racked her body. His arms squeezed her against him, and she hissed, the pain in her shoulder making her lightheaded.

"Are you injured?" It was more demand than question. His voice was urgent, strained. He was worried about *her*? He was the one with a hole in his chest.

"You are wounded…" How could he be alive with a wound like that? How could he move, run, fight…

"I'm fine."

"But the blood — "

"It is fake. Let us go. We have to get out of here. The warehouse is on fire."

Then he looked at her more carefully, in the increasing illumination provided by the fire, and his eyes widened. "Jesus Christ. Your shoulder is dislocated. If that bastard were not already dead, I would kill him with my bare hands for doing this to you."

He was already tugging his neckcloth off as he spoke.

"He did not. I did it to myself. I dislocated it trying to break free."

"Damn." With a gentle but swift motion, he positioned her arm across her chest and tied it securely with his neckcloth.

He got her upright. She leaned into his side, hard, because her legs were numb from being tied for hours, she could not yet manage her shoulder, and the pain in her wrists was only beginning to register. He took most of her weight, and they made the stairs.

They were at the warehouse door when a shot came again, impacting the door frame by Dalton's head.

He stopped them short and pushed her behind him with his body. Backed her into the doorway.

"Someone is still out there," she whispered.

"I know."

She looked around. The roof was on fire now. A rafter cracked somewhere overhead, a piece of burning wood fell into the open floor of the warehouse and lay there, hissing in the wet of the planks.

"There," he said. "Side door."

He took her toward it. The side door had a padlock. He kicked it once, twice, threw his shoulder at it, and the wood splintered, but the lock held. He kicked it again. The smoke was thicker now. Her eyes stung and her throat burned. They didn't have much time.

A voice came from the pier-side door, muffled by the noise of burning wood.

"Dalton. Are you in there?"

Dalton stopped with his shoulder against the wood. He let out a breath.

"That is John."

"In here," he called. "Do not come in. The roof is going."

"You can come out. I have dealt with the shooter."

"Come," he said, placing his arm around her torso and leading her out.

She breathed in deep lungfuls of air scented with the varied smells of the docks as they exited the dark warehouse. Not the cleanest, but after the suffocating smoke inside, it felt like heaven. She took uneven steps, Dalton's arm around her waist the only thing keeping her upright now that the rush of danger had passed.

A dark-haired man who looked to be in his early thirties materialized out of the shadows to join them by the door.

"John," Dalton addressed the younger man, still moving forward. "Thank goodness. My wife is injured. I need to take her home right away."

John looked at her, and seeing her injury, winced. "I left my carriage right at the mouth of that alley." He gave a piercing whistle, and a carriage rolled forward with a clatter of hooves. "Take it. I will deal with the cleanup here."

"Thank you," Dalton said, continuing to support her as they made their way up the pier to the waiting carriage.

Her steps faltered, and Dalton stopped and lifted her into his arms.

"Don't argue," he said preemptively, although she had no plans to do so. "You look ready to faint."

She was. Still cradling her injured arm to her torso, she rested her head on Dalton's shoulder. The red stain was just an inch away from her nose, but she now knew it was not his blood. He was not injured. But how…?

Then she realized his chest was hard. Harder than usual. He was wearing armor under his shirt. He had known his cousin was likely to shoot him. And had come anyway.

"What happened? Who fired the shots?" Dalton was asking John, who kept pace next to them.

"Unidentified men. Sorry it took me so long. I dealt with the first shooter as soon as he killed St Aubyn, but there was another one who was trickier to locate. He was shooting from a window in the next warehouse. It was a matter of spotting which window he was in and then — " He shrugged, patting the rifle he had slung over one shoulder.

"So you were not the one who shot Alfred. I thought so."

"Of course not. I had him in my sights the entire time and was ready to shoot should the need arise. But you had him under control, and I know he is more valuable alive than dead."

Dalton gave him a single nod. "I'm thankful you acted when you did. Are both shooters dead?"

"Yes."

"I would bet they were Alfred's accomplices," Dalton mused. "When they realized he was going to be arrested and could inform against them, they eliminated him."

John nodded. "That sounds likely, yes. Stanley will not be pleased. He was hoping to catch St Aubyn alive. He wanted what information he could provide."

"So did I, but what else could we have done under the circumstances?"

"He will still blame you."

"Stanley can go to hell for all I care."

They had reached the carriage, and Dalton deposited her inside with extreme care.

"I must go with my wife, John. Can you handle affairs here by yourself?" Dalton asked over the din of the rain.

"Of course. Nathaniel will be here any moment to help."

John shut the carriage door.

The skies opened as they pulled away. A downpour. At least it would put out the fire and wash the pier of what had happened on it.

Dalton moved close to her, held her with extreme care, mindful of her injury. She lifted her head.

"You wore armor," she said.

"Yes."

"He could have shot you in the head."

"I counted on him aiming for the larger target of my chest. Alfred was never that good a shot."

Her good hand closed in the wet front of his coat.

"That is still… Do not ever… " She stopped. The words were not in her. She pressed her face against his collar.

He kissed the top of her head.

"I will not," he said.

It was a lie, and they both knew it. He would always come for her.

Even if it cost him his life.

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CHAPTER 43

DESPITE THE LATE HOUR, light poured from every window of his house. Harrison came out before the carriage had fully stopped.

"Thank God," he said. "You got her."

"Paul." Vivienne tried to sit up, and gasped, curling in on herself. "You are all right."

"He is the one who brought the ransom note," Dalton said, getting down. "I will tell you everything after we set your shoulder."

"Her shoulder?"

"Dislocated," Dalton said as he lifted her out of the carriage.

"I can walk," she protested.

He ignored her. She was pale with pain. Could barely move. There was no chance he was going to let her collapse on his front steps. He carried her through the door, and Mrs. Hewitt held the drawing room open for them without being asked.

He sat down on the sofa with her in his lap and did not let go.

"Your Grace," Paul said. He was already at her arm, assessing the injury with a practiced eye, his hands gentle and professional. "I'm going to need to set this. The longer we wait, the more the muscles will fight us."

"How bad will it be?" she asked in a small voice.

"Briefly, very bad. Then much better."

She turned her face into Dalton's shoulder.

"Lie to me," she whispered. "Tell me it will not hurt."

"It will not hurt," Dalton said.

She huffed something that was almost a laugh.

With Dalton's help, Harrison undid her bodice and carefully peeled it off her. Then he loosened her corset and positioned her arm. Dalton's hand found the back of her head and stayed there.

"Look at me," he said.

She did.

"I have you," he said.

"Hold her tightly, Your Grace."

Dalton's arm tightened instinctively across her ribs. Paul's hands moved with the smooth precision of a man who had done this many times. There was a pull, a rotation, and a sickening, audible pop.

The cry that came out of her tore something in him. Her body jerked once, hard, and then went limp against him, breath breaking in small, shocked sobs against his collarbone.

"There," Paul said. He was already exhaling. "It is back."

Dalton did not loosen his hold. He could not. He pressed his face to the top of her head and breathed in the smell of soot and rain and whatever was underneath it that was hers.

Harrison began to wrap the sling.

"It must remain immobile for several weeks. No strain. No sudden movement. Rest."

"I will see to it."

"I will need to teach your maid how to wrap the bandage."

"You will teach me."

The doctor looked at him.

"I will see to it personally," Dalton said.

Harrison didn't argue.

Dalton watched every motion, committing it to memory. He was already rehearsing the wrapping in his hands, learning the angles.

"She will need to be careful with this shoulder in the future. This is the second time she has dislocated it."

"The second?" she asked.

"When you were first brought to me, you had a dislocated shoulder. Of course, you were unconscious when I set it the first time, which is probably why you don't remember it."

The doctor worked in silence after that, fashioning the sling, securing her arm against her body, his fingers careful and impersonal.

She had pulled herself out of joint trying to get free of the rope.

And he had bound her wrists a dozen times for pleasure. Each binding had been an act of trust. Each time, he had inquired if she was comfortable. He had checked the knots. He had never once let the silk cut.

But he could have hurt her all the same. And neither of them had known it.

He could not look at the bandage. He could not look away from it either.

"How do you feel, Vivi?" His voice came out lower than he meant.

"Better." Her good hand rested against his chest. He could feel where her fingers found the small dark hole in his shirt, and the place beneath it where the steel had stopped Alfred's bullet. "It still aches. But not the way it did."

"I will give you laudanum for the pain," Paul said. "Take it only if the pain worsens. Five drops on a teaspoon. No more."

"I don't think I will need it."

"Take it if you need it," Dalton said, unable to bear the thought of her in even the slightest pain.

She did not argue, but her head nestled against his shoulder.

She was safe and secure in his arms. And they were alive.

It was enough.

PAUL FINISHED THE LAST loop of the bandage. His fingers lingered for a heartbeat too long. She felt him take a breath and brace himself for something, and then he spoke.

"You should know," he said quietly. "I lied to you. I knew who you were. Almost from the beginning."

She had been bracing for him to say goodbye. She had not been bracing for this.

"Oh," she said.

"I did not do it out of malice. I believed I was protecting you. That is not an excuse. Your husband can tell you the rest of the story when you are stronger." He met her eyes. "I only wanted to ask your forgiveness before I left."

She looked at him. She looked at the hands that had set her shoulder. The hands that had pulled her through fevers and nightmares for seven years. She didn't yet know the whole of what he had done. But she knew he was a decent man and that he cared for her.

She reached out with her good hand and took his.

"You saved my life when I came to Guernsey half drowned. You cared for me for seven years when I had nothing and no one." Her voice steadied. "Of course I forgive you."

He bowed his head. When he lifted it, there was a small, sad smile on his mouth.

"Thank you, Vivienne."

Her real name. It said everything.

"I will leave for Guernsey in the morning. If you ever need anything, you have only to send word."

"Likewise," Dalton said.

Paul nodded. He looked at Dalton across the width of the sofa. Whatever passed between them, she could not quite read, but it was not adversarial. It was almost like an accord.

"She should rest," Paul said.

"I know."

He picked up his bag. At the door, he paused.

"I'm sorry," he said. "For all of it."

"I know that, too."

The door closed. The fire crackled in the grate.

They were alone.



DALTON SAT WITH HIS wife on his lap and listened to the sound of her breathing change as the worst of the pain receded, and he did not move. He had spent five days in an empty house pretending he was not breaking, and then Alfred had kidnapped her, and the terror he had not allowed himself to feel until now was crashing down on him. He could not bear to be separated from her by so much as the breadth of a coat.

Eventually, he shifted her in his arms and stood.

"Come," he said. "Let me carry you to bed."

Not to her room. Not to his. Just to bed.
Their bed.

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CHAPTER 44

HE CARRIED HER UPSTAIRS and laid her in the enormous bed in his room.

"I hope you don't mind sleeping here tonight," he said. "I can't bear to let you out of my arms even for a minute."

He did not look at her when he said it. He had crossed to the other side of the room and was discarding his jacket. The firelight caught the silver in his hair. Underneath was the shirt he had worn to the docks, bloodied and torn where the bullet had punched through.

"I would not want to sleep anywhere else."

He turned.

His face was raw. Exhausted. Nothing held in reserve. For the first time, she saw what the last few hours had cost him.

"Come here," she said.

He crossed the room and knelt beside the bed and took her good hand in both of his. His fingers were trembling.

"I have to tell you something."

She waited.

"I went to your parents' house yesterday. I was going to ask you to come home." He stopped. Pressed her hand to his forehead. "But I saw you on the steps with Harrison, and I thought — I thought he was what you wanted. So I turned around."

"Val."

"But when he came to the door today and told me you had been taken, I was already putting on my coat to come and tell you — " His voice broke. "I love you. I have always loved you. These five days without you were in some ways worse than the seven years, because during the seven years I believed you were dead. I had no choice but to bear it. But to know you were alive across London and that I had been too much of a coward to keep you…"

She was crying. She had not noticed until the tears reached her jaw.

"I would have come back," she said.

He looked up.

"I could never return to Paul. Whatever I felt for him was nothing like what I feel for you. My love for you never disappeared, Val. My mind just locked it away. Forgot it for a while." She lifted her good hand to his jaw. The muscle worked under her palm. "I chose you before the warehouse. Before I remembered. I chose you all those years ago, and I choose you again as the woman I am now. There is no version of me that would not choose you."

He pressed his face into her skirt.

His shoulders did not shake. He did not sob. He simply held her, both arms around her hips, his face buried against the muslin of her gown, and just once a long shudder passed through him.

She put her good hand into his hair.

She said nothing. Simply rested her hand against his head and let her palm be a weight he could lean against. She felt the heat of him through her skirts. The dampness of his breath. The single shudder, and then his stillness.

She gave him the time.

The fire crackled in the grate. The rain still poured outside. Somewhere in the house a door closed.

When he raised his head, his face was bare. The mask of the duke, the spymaster, the man who had spent twenty-three years making certain no one ever saw what was underneath — gone. It was a face he never showed the world. Only her. She felt the honor of it.

She held his gaze, acknowledging his gift.

"You should rest," he said. His voice was low and a little rough, but steady. "Let me undress you."

"Yes."

He helped her stand beside the bed and went to work on her skirt. The hooks at her waist were small, and his fingers were not patient with them, but he managed. He eased the skirt and the petticoats over her hips and let the fabric pool at her feet.

They had already loosened her corset when Paul reduced her shoulder; the laces hung slack at her back. Now he worked them the rest of the way open and let the corset fall at her feet as well. Then he lifted her off it entirely and sat her on the bed.

She was in her chemise, drawers and stockings.

He looked at her now. Not with lust or possession, but with the remnants of fear and the yearning of a man who had almost lost what he loved most.

Then he knelt at her feet again, took her ankle, and placed her foot over his thigh. He unfastened her garter. Rolled the stocking down her calf with care. Off her foot. Then the other leg. He threw them on the pile with the rest of her clothes.

He left on the chemise and drawers.

"I think you should sleep in these," he said.

"Yes."

He helped her settle comfortably against the pillows, taking great care with her bad arm. Then he turned his attention to himself.

He pulled his shirt out of his trousers. The buttons at the throat were stiff. His fingers fumbled with them. She wanted to help, but could not, so she watched instead. He worked them open, one by one, and pulled the shirt over his head.

Underneath, he was still wearing the breastplate. She had not realized. All this time… he must have been so uncomfortable.

Leather buckles at the shoulders and ribs strapped the dull gray steel against his torso. There was a dent in the center of the plate where the bullet had struck. The shirt over it was creased, torn, and stained. The plate beneath it was unmarked except for that single dent.

He undid the buckles with steady hands. The plate came away from his body, and he set it on the floor at the foot of the bed.

There was a great purple and black bruise in the center of his chest, where the bullet had hit, and a line spreading from his sternum across his ribs in the shape of the breastplate's edge. The breastplate had stopped the bullet,

but not without a cost. The impact looked tremendous, like something that should still be hurting him.

Her good hand lifted to her mouth.

He saw.

"I'm fine. It looks worse than it is."

Then, still wearing his trousers, he walked to the bed and turned down the coverlet, blew out the candle on the nightstand, and came back.

He lay down beside her, careful not to jostle the bed. For a moment he did not touch her. He was on his back with his eyes closed.

She turned her head toward him.

"Val."

He opened his eyes.

"Come here."

He came slowly. As though he were not yet certain he should. He fitted himself to her good side, slid one arm under her neck and the other across her ribs below the sling, then laid his head against her temple and exhaled as if he had been holding his breath for a long time.

She turned her face toward him.

"Sleep," she said.

He shook his head slightly. "Not yet. I want to enjoy this a little longer."

"There will be more of it."

He did not answer. But after a time his breathing changed. The hand across her ribs went slack. The arm under her neck grew softer.

She lay awake a little longer, listening to him.

The weight of his arm across her body. How many times in the last seven years had she woken in a small room in Guernsey and felt her body reaching for something that was not there?

It was here now.

At last.

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CHAPTER 45

SHE WOKE SLOWLY.

For a moment she didn't know what time it was, or what room. Then she felt his weight beside her on the bed and remembered everything. The kidnapping, his rescue, him falling on that pier, blood staining his shirt… The despair. The blind, frantic despair that had made her wrench her own shoulder out of place in her need to go to him.

She had believed he was dead for a few horrible seconds, and it had been unbearable. Dalton had lived with the belief that she was dead for seven years.

She had not fully comprehended the magnitude of his suffering until now.

He was asleep. His rhythmic breaths deep and steady beside her.

She turned her head on the pillow, careful of her shoulder, and looked at him.

It was the first time she had woken to find him beside her since her return. Not in the room next door. Not in the study downstairs. Beside her. Close enough to feel the heat of his body through the sheet, close enough to count his breaths.

In the other life she had recovered yesterday, this had been an ordinary occurrence. He had slept with her every night. She had woken to him every morning. Another memory surfaced. A winter morning at Penrose, dawn light through the curtains, his arm heavy across her waist, his breath in her

hair. She had lain there for a quarter of an hour, trying not to wake him. She had failed. He had opened one eye and said, *go back to sleep,* in a voice rough with it. She had laughed. He had pulled her closer, wrapped himself around her, and neither had gone back to sleep until they had had their fill of each other.

That morning was twelve years old. It was such a small moment, yet she held it now without effort. An open door, indeed. Any memory could walk through at any moment.

Sleep had stripped his face of its composure. The crease between his brows had smoothed. The set of his jaw had loosened. He looked younger. He looked like a man, not a duke.

She looked at his bruises again. A sheet of steel. That was all that had stood between a bullet and his heart.

She lifted her good hand and rested it, very lightly, over the bruise.

He woke.

His eyes opened and did a quick sweep of the room — startled, searching. Then he found her, and he exhaled, his whole body relaxing. His hand came up and covered hers where it rested on his chest, and his eyes settled on her face.

"Good morning," she said.

"It is afternoon."

"Is it?"

"Past noon, judging by the light." His voice was rough. He turned his hand under hers and laced their fingers together against his sternum. "How is the shoulder?"

"Sore. But manageable."

He searched her face for confirmation. She smiled to ease his concern.

"Val."

"Mm."

"Waking up next to you used to be my favorite part of the day."

His face became very still.

"You remember," he said.

"Yes."

He did not move.

"In the warehouse. When I was bound and afraid. I thought of you because it was the only thing that brought me comfort. And the more I

thought of you, the more the memories came. The wedding. Our first night. So many other moments…"

His thumb moved once across her knuckles.

"I remember you wore the wrong waistcoat to our wedding," she continued. "It was a dove gray, and you hated it. You told me afterward that your valet had pressed the wrong one and there had not been time to change. I teased you about it for a week."

He closed his eyes. His throat worked, but his lips curved in an almost smile.

"I also remember the first time we lost a baby." Her voice softened because the memory was a tender one, even though it was made of grief. "You held me through the night, and did not say anything. I think you were afraid that anything you said would be the wrong thing."

He opened his eyes. They were wet.

"I remembered the second and third times as well."

"Vivienne — "

"It is not the same as reading about it or being told. I feel it now." She squeezed his hand. "I feel the pain, but also the tenderness, the closeness that bound us through those difficult times. I remember waking up next to you almost every morning and thinking, every time, that this was the best part of being married and no one had ever told me about it. The quiet, intimate moments. Not memorable in the grand scheme of things, but precious."

A tear slid from the corner of his eye. It ran down his temple and disappeared into the pillow. He didn't turn his head away.

"We have to reinstate that custom," she said.

He laughed. It was a wrecked sound. But it was a laugh.

"Yes," he said. "We have to."

He brought their joined hands to his mouth and pressed his lips to her knuckles. He held them there. She felt him breathe against her skin. When he lowered their hands again to his chest, he covered hers with his own and did not let go.

For a time neither of them spoke. The rain kept coming down. A clock chimed the half-hour somewhere in the house. She could feel his heart under her palm, slow and steady and alive.

His eyes moved down to her wrists, and his face changed.

"Your wrists — "

"They will be fine," she said.

"Yes, they will be, because we are going to clean them."

She thought about arguing, then stopped.

"Only if you promise me a bath. I'm dying for a hot bath."

"Then you shall have one."

He rose. She watched him cross the room to the bell, then stop and turn back.

"I'm not ringing for a servant," he said. "I don't want anyone in this room but me. Unless you would prefer — "

"No. Just you."

He nodded and went into the dressing room.

She heard him through the open door. Running water into the tub. Opening and closing drawers in the manner of a man who didn't know quite where everything was kept and was determined to find out without help. The small domestic clatter made her smile.

He came back. He had taken off his trousers and stood only in his drawers, riding low on his hips. She tried not to ogle, but was not entirely successful.

"It is ready. Are you cold?"

"A little."

"I'm going to take you out of this chemise now. I will be careful of the shoulder."

"I know."

He sat on the edge of the bed and worked.

He undid the medical sling first. He had watched Paul bind it last night and was reversing the wrappings now with the same exactness, supporting her arm at the elbow and the upper arm so the joint did not move. When the sling was free, he cradled her bad arm against her body with one hand and unlaced her chemise with the other. When the chemise was loose enough, he eased it down her body, taking her drawers with it. All the while supporting her bad arm.

She was naked.

She had been naked in front of him many times, but never like this. Battered, bruised, and bandaged. There was no eroticism in his hands. Only solicitude.

He had a long strip of linen laid out on the bed, and he used it to fashion a lighter sling. Looser than the medical one, less restrictive, but enough to

hold her arm against her ribs while she bathed. He had clearly thought this through.

"You are better than a lady's maid."

He huffed, and one corner of his lips curled up in a half smile.

He lifted her off the bed.

She did not protest as he carried her into the bathing room and lowered her into the tub, supporting her bad arm against her torso the whole way down, his hand spread across her ribs over the linen until the moment she was settled and the water held her.

She made a sound when the heat met her body. A low, wordless sound of relief. He smiled fully now. She loved that smile.

"That bad?"

"That good."

She let her head rest against the back of the tub. The heat eased into her bones. She had been cold for a day and a night, and the cold had got into places she had not known existed. The heat now was finding them all and undoing them one by one.

He knelt beside the tub, took her good wrist in his hands, and started washing it.

She did not look. He made a small sound she could not quite identify and brought her wrist to his mouth, pressing his lips to the unbroken skin just above the abrasions. He held them there for a moment, then lowered her hand into the warm water and let it soak.

He did the bad wrist next. Without lifting it. He worked where her arm rested against her body, his fingers patient, his other hand never leaving the support of her elbow. The skin underneath was worse on this hand. He was very quiet while he cleaned it. He soaked a cloth in the bathwater and laid it across the abrasions and held it there with his palm.

"I'm sorry."

"It was not you who did it."

"I'm sorry anyway."

She closed her eyes and let him tend to her.

He washed her hair next. He did this with one hand under her neck for support, the other working the soap through her hair with an awkwardness that touched her. He had never done it before. Now that she had her memories back, she was sure of it. She kept her eyes closed and let him fumble, just happy to have his hands on her. He rinsed by pouring a small

jug of warm water over her head. Some of it ran into her ear. She did not mind it one bit.

When he was finished, he wrapped her hair in a towel and lifted her out of the water with her bad arm cradled against her body, his hand at her ribs, and set her on the bench. The air in the bathing room was full of steam. He dried her with a softness she wouldn't have thought his hands capable of.

He patted her wrists without touching the broken skin.

"Lift your good arm."

She did, and he slid a clean nightgown over her head. Soft and almost weightless. She found the armhole on the good side and worked her hand through. He did not try to put her bad arm in the sleeve. He gathered the empty sleeve and tucked it gently against her body.

He applied salve and bandaged her wrists with new linen — clean, thin, just enough to cover the scrapes. He worked slowly. He was not as fast as Paul. But his hands did not falter, and when he was done, the bandages were neat and the linen was not too tight.

He refashioned the medical sling last. From memory.

When her arm was bound back into its proper support, he sat back on his heels and looked at her.

"Better?"

"Better." She meant it. The pain had not gone, but the rest of her felt clean and warm and whole in a way she had not felt since before the kidnapping. Maybe even longer than that. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me. Looking after you is a pleasure and a privilege."

"I'm thanking you anyway."

He smiled. She loved that he was full of smiles this morning — or afternoon. He stood, lifted her, and carried her back to the bed.

After setting her down against the pillows, he pulled the coverlet up over her legs, then bent and pressed his lips to her forehead and stayed there a long moment, his breath warm against her hairline.

When he straightened, she opened her eyes and looked at him.

He looked back.

"Will you be all right for a moment?" he asked.

"Yes, but I would rather you stayed by my side."

His hand cradled her cheek, and he gave her a soft kiss.

"I shall not be long. Just long enough to wash myself and order us some food."

He walked back to the dressing room, and she heard the splashing of water as he washed. When he came back a few minutes later, his hair was wet, he was wearing a burgundy velvet robe, and he had a tray with tea and sandwiches in his hands.

The food was tempting, but not nearly as tempting as her husband.

"I thought you would want something to eat. You must be hungry."

"Ravenous," she said, and he must have read something in her tone, for he gave her a quick look before depositing the tray on the bed.

He prepared her tea exactly the way she liked it and arranged a few finger sandwiches on a plate for her, placing everything within her reach. Once the smell of the food reached her, her stomach made a very impolite sound, and she put her hand to her belly, her eyes wide.

Valentine didn't miss the sound or the gesture. "Did you eat at all yesterday?"

"Not after breakfast."

"Bastard."

He meant Alfred, and he said it with such ferocity that she was sure if his cousin were not already dead, Dalton would have killed him. She placed her hand over his.

"It does not really matter. A few missed meals. What Alfred did to you was so much worse. He shot at you. The betrayal of your own family…"

"It is worse than that. He didn't just shoot at me. He conspired against his own country. Everything — the shipwreck, my not being able to find you afterward — it was all engineered by him. I will tell you the full story later, but for now, I just want you to know that you are safe. That nobody, either from my family or from my work, will ever harm you again. I won't allow it."

She smiled at him because she thought he needed the reassurance much more than she did.

"I know. I have always felt safe with you."

The room fell silent. Only the sounds of clinking china as they ate and the crackling of the fire. Even the rain had eased to a soft patter.

When they had finished their sandwiches and washed them down with several cups of tea, and he had removed the tray from the bed, she reached out with her good arm and grabbed the lapels of his robe.

"I want to try again, Valentine."

He froze. The words filled the room. Yes, it was a bold demand, but she knew what she wanted, had always known what she wanted, and refused to wait for it any longer.

To his credit, he did not flinch or argue. He did not reach for the old deflections. He looked at her, and she watched the resistance leave him.

"Yes," he said.

One word. No qualification.

She kissed him.

The kiss was different from any they had shared.

Every other time — at the folly, in the dungeons, in the candlelit world they had built together beneath the castle — there had been a layer between them. His control. Her uncertainty. The structure he imposed on their desire, the boundaries he drew, the roles he assigned. She had not minded. She had found pleasure in them, and trust, and the thrill of surrendering to a man whose restraint was its own kind of devotion.

She was not asking for restraint today.

She pulled back and looked at him. His pupils wide, his breath unsteady, one hand at her waist, the other bracing him on the bed.

"Take me," she said, kissing him again, sucking his lower lip into her mouth. "Give me a baby."

"Your shoulder — "

"Is in a sling and will be fine if you are careful. And you are always careful." She held his gaze. "But I'm not asking for careful today. I'm asking for everything."

He hovered over her, and she felt the tightening of his hand on her waist.

"No withdrawal," she clarified.

His breath caught. She could see it in the muscle jumping at his jaw. He stood still and let her name the terms.

"No withdrawal," he repeated. And the word sounded different in his mouth. Not a concession. A vow.

She patted the bed next to her. "Lie down," she said. "Let me see you."

He obeyed. The man who gave commands, who set the terms, who ran every encounter they had ever had, discarded his robe and lay down on his back, arms crossed behind his head, completely naked, and let his wife look at him.

She looked. The lean, hard body she had come to know in fragments — by touch in the dark, by stolen glances, by the feel of him against her. Now she saw it in the gray afternoon light: the flat planes of his stomach, the dark hair on his chest that narrowed to a thin line over his stomach that arrowed down to join with the nest of curls at the apex of his thighs. His member, thick and hard, jutting out to lie against his stomach. She took it in her hand, felt the full, hot weight of him against her palm, and heard the sound he made — a low, bitten off groan, almost pained.

She bent and kissed his stomach. The tip of his member. Licked her way up to his flat nipple and flicked it with her tongue.

"Vivienne." Her name in his mouth, and nothing else.

"Come here."

He did. Placing a hand behind her back to support her, he rolled them over so that he was on top. Face to face. The weight of his lower body on hers, his torso braced on his arms, careful of her shoulder.

Her good arm wound around his neck, bringing his head down for a kiss. He gave her his mouth, possessing hers with tongue and teeth and lips. Until she was gasping and arching toward him.

"Shhh. Careful. Don’t be impatient, my little spitfire. I will give you everything you want. I am yours."

His mouth slid from her lips, only to paint a trail of kisses down her neck, lower still, opening the buttons of her nightgown to expose her breasts. One was covered by the bandages, but the other one was free, and it received his full attention.

He licked and sucked and lapped at her nipple until she was screaming, her hand pulling at his hair, unable to withstand a moment more of pleasure so acute it bordered on pain.

"Val, I can't…"

"You can. And you will."

Another swirl of his tongue, and his finger entered her, his thumb playing with her clitoris until she was tightening around him, winding higher and higher and then unraveling in a climax that went on and on, in seemingly infinite waves.

When she opened her eyes, his forehead was against hers. So close she could count the flecks of darker gray in his eyes.

She reached down and guided him with her hand to her entrance. He paused there and shuddered. The old reflex, the instinct to calculate, to plan

the exit before the first stroke. She felt it rise in him and fall away.

"Stay," she said, running her hand down his flank to press down on his rock-hard bottom.

He entered her. Slow. So slow she felt every inch of him, the stretch and the fullness, and his eyes on hers while he moved inside her. Not performing. Not commanding.

Just a man inside the woman he loved. Terrified. Doing it anyway.

She wrapped her legs around his hips. Held him there. Felt the muscles of his back tremble under her calf.

He moved slow at first. She watched his face. The concentration. His arms braced on either side of her head. His breath coming in uneven bursts against her mouth.

"Val." She ran her fingers through his hair. Drew his mouth to hers. Kissing him, matching the rhythm of his body with her own. He groaned into her mouth. A sound from somewhere deeper than thought.

The pace changed. She felt the moment his body stopped obeying his mind and obeyed something older. His hips found their own rhythm. Deeper. Harder. His hand slid beneath the small of her back and tilted her hips, and the new angle sent a shock through her that made her gasp against his throat.

"Yes," she breathed. "Like that. Don't stop. Don't — "

He buried his face against her neck. His skin damp against hers. His breath hot. He was shaking all over with the effort of not retreating.

Her own pleasure was building again. Tangled up in the feeling beneath it so that she could not separate one from the other. When it came, her climax was not as sharp, as blinding as before. This was messier. Slower. It started in her center and moved outward through her limbs, tightening around him. She pressed her mouth to his shoulder and held on, pulling him closer.

His whole body answered with a shudder, his hips stuttering, his arms locking around her. And then, the gathering. The preparation to leave her body the way he had every time before.

She tightened her legs around him.

"Stay."

A sound tore from his throat. Not a word.

She locked her ankles behind his back. "Stay."

He stayed.

The resistance left him all at once, like something snapping. His hips drove forward and his body went rigid, and the sound he made was nothing she had heard from him before. Not the bitten-off groan of the dungeons. Not the silence of their other encounters. A cry, a roar, from somewhere that had been closed off and abandoned for years. From the boy who had buried both parents before he was eighteen, from the man who had pulled away from her every time because staying was the thing that could destroy him.

She felt him come inside her. The heat. The pulse. His face pressed into the curve of her neck. His breath wrecked. His body shaking with something that went beyond the physical. She held him. Her good arm around his shoulders. Her legs locked. Her mouth against his hair, whispering his name.

He lifted his head. Looked at her. His eyes were wrecked — red-rimmed, wet, nothing left guarding them. He looked as though he had been taken apart and was not certain the pieces went back together.

"Hello," she said.

The sound he made was almost a laugh. Broken. Amazed. He rested his forehead against hers and held her. Still inside. Still together.

She reached up and wiped the tears from his face. Traced the crease between his brows with her thumb. Kissed his mouth.

"I love you," he said, when his breathing had almost returned to normal.

"I love you, too."

And she knew this time it was without barriers. Without conditions.

They had conquered fear.

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EPILOGUE

HE WOKE TO THE sound of her humming and found Vivienne at the window. The curtains were open, and the morning light poured in. She stood in his shirt with her hair falling down her back and her bare feet sinking on the carpet, humming to no one.

Six months since the warehouse and the fire. Six months of this: of waking in a bed that was not empty, of hearing her move through rooms that had been silent for seven years.

He lay still and watched her. Not the way he had watched her in those first weeks — cataloging, calculating, reading her face for signs of recognition or retreat. Now he looked without strategy. Without fear that it would stop.

The wonder of having her by his side had not faded one bit.

She turned and caught him looking.

"You are awake."

"I have been awake for some time."

She laughed. Six months, and the sound still spread warmth across his chest. It was one of his favorite sounds in the world — competing for first place with her sigh of pleasure when he was deep in her, or the way she moaned his name in the throes of passion.

She came back to bed, climbed in, and settled against him with the absolute entitlement of a cat in the sun. Her cold feet found his calves, and

he flinched.

"Your feet are like ice."

"Your problem now."

"They have always been my problem. It would be easier to put some wool stockings on them, but I love the brush of your bare feet against my legs."

He pulled her closer. Her cold feet pressed against his shins, and he let them. "Clearly I am a man of poor judgment and excellent taste."

She propped herself on his chest and looked down at him. The laughter was still on her face, in the softness around her eyes, the curve of her mouth. The ease.

He reached up and tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear. She had gained weight in the last few months — not much, but he had noticed. He noticed everything. Her face had filled out. The hollows at her collarbones had softened. There was a warmth to her skin that had not been there before, a flush beneath the surface that made her look like a woman lit from within.

He knew why. He had known for weeks.

He kissed her. Slow, unhurried, as though they had nowhere to be. They did not. And even if they had, there was no place on earth better than here, in their bed, in each other's arms. His hand found the hem of his shirt where it rode up her thigh, and he tugged it higher, and she made a low sound against his mouth — that little sigh of pleasure that undid something in his chest — and the morning tipped from tender into intent.

He rolled to bring her under him, holding his weight on his arms, careful not to crush her. She pulled his shirt over her head, and he looked at her. Her shoulder had healed months ago, and she said it did not bother her in the least. Her body had healed itself, and what remained was simply her — the freckles across her shoulders, the small white scar on her collarbone, the curve of her waist into her hip that his hands had relearned so thoroughly he could have drawn it blind.

He kissed the scar. He kissed her collarbone, her throat, the place beneath her ear where the right pressure made her breath catch. She arched into him. He moved down her body with his mouth. Over her ribs. Her belly.

He paused there.

Her belly was different. Not dramatically — not yet. But where she had been soft, there was now a firmness. A low, gentle swell that was only

visible when she lay on her back, and only noticeable if you were a man who had been paying very close attention for a very long time.

He pressed his lips to the skin just below her navel and closed his eyes.

"How do you feel?"

She went still beneath him.

"Wonderful." The brightness in her voice was too bright. "Why do you ask?"

He lifted his head. Her eyes were on his — wide, searching, a little guarded.

"It has lasted longer than the previous times." He kept his voice even, but his hand tightened where it rested on her hip. "Do you think it will hold?"

She caught her breath. The guard dropped. What replaced it was raw hope mixed with terror. The ghosts of three lost pregnancies that still haunted her.

"You knew?"

"Your last monthly was four months ago. Of course I noticed." He swallowed. "I have been watching. Praying. Afraid to say anything. Afraid to hope. Waiting, perhaps, for you to tell me."

She put her hand over his where it rested on her belly. "I did not want to tell you until I was sure it had a real chance. The other times — " She stopped. Drew a breath. "I could not watch you go through that again. Losing them nearly destroyed you before."

"I understand. I was equally reluctant to speak of it." He turned his hand beneath hers and laced their fingers together. "We have been conducting parallel campaigns of silence. It is, I suppose, a marital tradition."

She gave a wet laugh. "I should have known you would notice. You don't miss a thing. Once a spymaster — "

"That is not spying. That is paying attention to my wife. It is called being a husband."

She pulled him up, and he went, settling his weight beside her, and she pressed her forehead to his. Their breathing aligned. For a long time neither of them spoke. His hand stayed on her belly — over the small, firm curve of the thing he had wanted so badly he had amputated the want in order to survive.

Almost four months. Past the point where they had lost the others. Still fragile. Still uncertain. But still here.

"Is that why you have been so careful?" she asked. Her voice had shifted. Lighter. The corner of her mouth did something he recognized as trouble.

"When you make love to me?"

"Careful." He raised an eyebrow.

"So very conventional. No ropes. No games." She paused. "Not even a little spank."

He gave a surprised huff of laughter, startled out of him before he could catch it. "Do I detect a complaint? Because I don't recall you complaining during the orgasms. And there have been several. I have been keeping count."

"No complaints." Her eyes were bright. "But there is no need to limit ourselves. I am pregnant, Val. Not made of glass."

"The only reason I'm still daring to make love to you at all is because I asked Finlay, and he assured me it was entirely safe." He kissed the bridge of her nose. "That, and the fact that I am mad about you, and my self-restraint, as you may have noticed over the past year, has its limits."

"I had noticed."

He moved back down her body. Kissed her belly again — deliberately, with his eyes open, pressing his mouth to the place where their child was growing. The word sat in his chest like a coal. *Child.*

"If I thought it was dangerous," he said against her skin, "for you or for the baby, I would have stopped."

"And deprived yourself."

"And you. Yes." He looked up at her. "But I would have done it. You know that."

"I do." She touched his hair. "But Finlay says I am well, Val. I saw him last week. He says the pregnancy is progressing as it should. He says there is no medical reason to fear this time will be like the others."

He closed his eyes. The relief moved through him like something physical — not dramatic, like a wave or a flood, but a slow unclenching of muscles he had not known were locked.

"Say it again."

"He says I am well. The pregnancy is going well."

He breathed out. Then he continued down her body, past her belly, to the inside of her thigh, and she gasped and her fingers tightened in his hair. This. This was what happiness was made of. A wonderful, ordinary morning. This woman. His wife. His love. The life they had clawed back from the wreckage.

He proceeded with unhurried caresses. Because they had nowhere else to be. Morning light and bare skin and the knowledge that they had time. That no one was going to take this away. He explored her body, tasted her skin. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He kissed the small red birthmark on the inside of her knee — the one he had used to prove his intimate knowledge of her body that day in the vestry almost a year ago. That moment seemed to belong to another lifetime.

They had come a long way in these past months. Physically. Emotionally. Mentally. If they had loved before, now they loved more fully. Without barriers. Without fears. Life had made them confront the worst of themselves, and they had come out stronger and more together than ever.

He kissed his way up the inside of her thigh, working his way to his favorite place in the world. She made a sound of contentment. A woman who knew she was going to be loved well and did not need to hurry toward it.

Some devilish instinct made him want to tease her. To make her wait, so that her pleasure would be all the more intense when it arrived. Instead of going straight to the place where she was already sleek and molten, he detoured to the curve of her hip where she was softest. He gave it a little nip, and she squealed, laughing.

"That tickles."

"I know."

"So you admit you are doing it on purpose."

"I'm a strategist. Everything I do is on purpose."

"Liar." She pulled him up by his hair and kissed him, still laughing.

"Come in," she breathed, taking hold of his cock and positioning it at her entrance.

"I wanted to worship you properly. To kiss your sweet pussy until you came on my tongue."

She moaned at his words, arching upward and into his possession. The tip of his cock entered her, and they both held their breath.

She opened for him and he slid all the way in without performance. Then they both went still — the recognition of something so right that stillness was the only answer.

She held his face in her hands.

"Stay." Her favorite word. And his. She said it every time he entered her — like a plea or a blessing — even though he had not left her once since the

day after the docks.

When he had surrendered, he had surrendered completely. Irrevocably.

He moved in her — slow, deep. She wrapped her legs around him, and he felt her everywhere. When her breathing turned shallow and her eyes unfocused, when her lips parted and her body milked him with rhythmic spasms, he stayed with her, stroking deep and slow, prolonging her pleasure.

When his own orgasm built, he didn't fight it. He looked at her. She looked at him. He came inside her by choice. No panic. No terror. Only her face, her hands, the warmth of her body holding what he gave.

His breath shuddered out. She gathered him close. He pressed his forehead to her shoulder, and for a long time neither of them spoke.

Afterward, they lay tangled in the sheets, in the pale Cornish light that made everything look scrubbed clean. Her head was on his chest. His hand moved in slow circles on her belly — a new habit he seemed to have acquired without decision, as natural as breathing.

"We will need to prepare the nursery," she said.

He went still. He had been waiting for this moment for weeks. Months. Since he first suspected.

"Let us turn the yellow room adjacent to ours into the nursery."

She lifted her head. "You have already thought about it."

"I have thought about it from the moment I married you. We simply never reached the point where we got to discuss it. But I always thought that room would be ideal. I imagined the cradle. The color of the walls." He paused. Some of the old fear crept in. "Do you think it is too soon? If something were to — "

"No." She said it without hesitation. "We are not going to do that, Valentine. We are not going to hold our breath for five more months and refuse to hope because hoping might hurt. I have spent enough of my life being afraid. So have you."

He looked at her. The morning light was in her hair, turning the auburn to copper. Her hand was on his chest. Their child was between them — four months old and alive.

"We are going to believe this is real," she said. "We are going to set up the nursery and choose the cradle and argue about names and let Venus buy every absurd gift she can find, and we are going to do all of it without

apology. And if fear shows up at the door, we will meet it together. But we will not invite it in. Not anymore."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He released the fear with the air he expelled. Then he smiled at what she had said about his sister.

"Venus will be insufferable."

"Venus will be a magnificent aunt, and you know it."

"She will arrive with a carriage full of lace and opinions, and she will not leave for six months."

"At least seven. She will want to be here for the birth."

"God help us all."

Vivienne laughed. He loved watching her laugh fully, with her head tipped back, her hand still on his chest, the sound filling the room the way her humming had filled it an hour ago.

"I will speak to Mrs. Trevena," he said. "We shall begin preparing the room today."

"Today?"

"You just told me we are not waiting. I'm taking you at your word."

She took his face in her hands. He recognized the feeling shining from her eyes. A fierce tenderness. Something that had survived pain, separation, loss, and had emerged stronger than ever. After a year of learning each other again, it didn't need to be handled with care.

"I will also scale down my involvement with the Foreign Office."

"But you are in the middle of hunting down and dismantling this conspiracy Alfred was part of."

"John can take the lead. He's more than capable and is well appraised of everything. I shall write to him and Stanley immediately, informing them of my decision. I will still oversee things, and advise as needed, but I want to focus on you. On our child."

"I love you so much." The words were softly spoken. Clear.

She said them often. So did he. But their frequency did not rob them of their power. He never took them for granted. They were a vow to keep loving, with courage, with strength.

Together.

No matter what came.

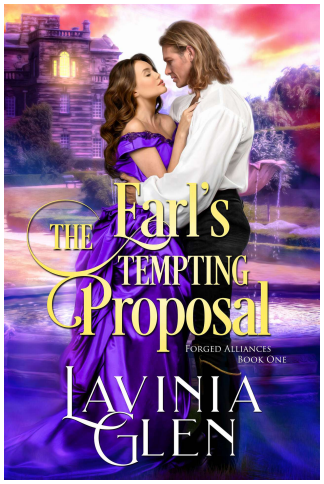
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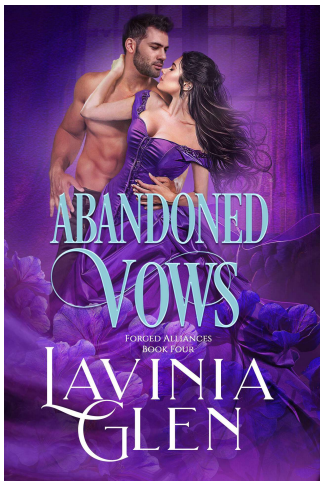
Some of you may already have guessed who the heroine is. She has been quietly present since Book One, watching events unfold from the edges of the story. I cannot wait for you to finally see the world through her eyes.

If you didn't start the series in order and haven't read previous books, here are some of the characters that appear in this book and their respective stories:

Abigail and Colin, Lord and Lady Hartfield (Book 1) – The Earl's Tempting Proposal



Alice and Nathaniel, Lord and Lady Greystone (Book 4) – Abandoned Vows



Thank you so much for reading *Forgotten Vows*. Spending time with these characters has meant the world to me, and I hope their journey touched your heart as deeply as it touched mine.

I would be incredibly grateful if you considered leaving a review. Even a simple rating or a few words about a favorite moment, character, or scene helps more than you know. Reviews help other readers discover the book, and they truly make a tremendous difference to authors.

If you are new to the series, the *Forged Alliances* books are all available in Kindle Unlimited. Each novel can be read as a standalone and has its own happily ever after, but readers who enjoy recurring characters and interconnected stories may enjoy reading the series in order.

Thank you again for taking this journey with me. Your support, enthusiasm, and kindness make these stories possible.

With love,
Lavinia Glen

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