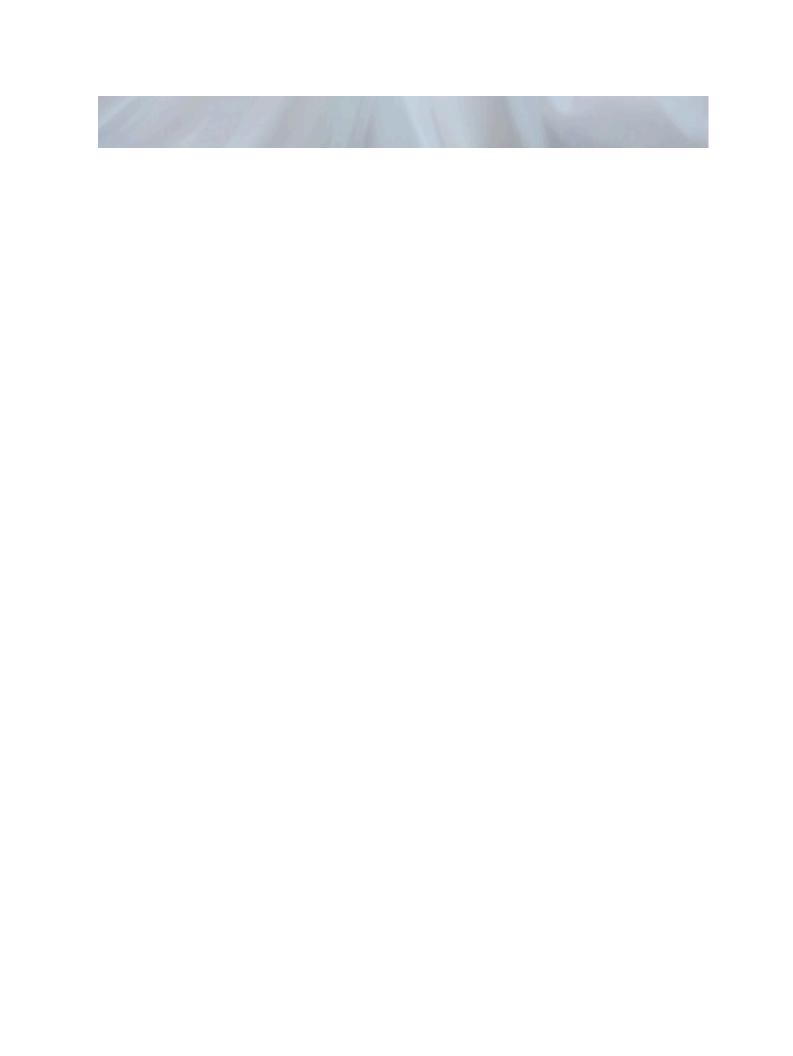
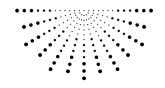
A Victorian Marriage of Convenience Romance sabelle Virtue & Vice 5 CARRIE LOMAX

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# ISABELLE A VICTORIAN MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE ROMANCE

VIRTUE & VICE
BOOK FIVE



CARRIE LOMAX

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#### LONDON, MAY 1882

"I am not marrying your sister." Silas stated this flatly, ignoring the way his companion sat back in the leather club chair with one eyebrow cocked in consternation.

"I will ruin you if you don't," the Earl de Lucey, a man Silas had once considered a friend, answered easily. Almost as if he was as amused as he was irritated with this situation.

"You can try," Silas said. "I outrank you."

"Barely," shot back de Lucey.

Silas did not often flash his lineage about like a protective badge. Frankly, apart from the immense wealth that came with the title of Earl of Huntley, he had little use for high society. But that was *before* de Lucey's half-sister, Lady Isabelle Kingston, had cornered him on a balcony and kissed him.

Ever since that wretched afternoon almost two weeks ago, his surname had become a shockingly apt description for his predicament. He was being hunted through London's ballrooms. Hounded to *do the right thing* and marry her already.

He refused to be cornered into a marriage he didn't want.

Yes, Miss Kingston was pretty. Beautiful, even, with flaxen hair, wide blue eyes and a perpetual air of innocent confusion. On the handful of occasions where they had exchanged conversation, she seemed reasonably intelligent. But there had been nary a flicker of interest between them that could possibly have led her to take such rash actions as to entrap him.

Isabelle Kingston was nothing but a rapacious social climber.

The earl smiled wolfishly. "Rank aside, you have placed yourself in a precarious position, haven't you? Withdrawing all that money before the holidays to invest in your factory." He tsked. "Nearly took down Wilder's bank in the process."

This was, unfortunately, true. Silas had inadvertently set off a bank run, thus forcing Wilder into the predatory arms of Gideon Wentworth, London's other prominent, significantly more reputable financier, a few months ago.

"There is always a financier willing to gamble on a good business plan." Despite his brave words, damp discomfort collected at the small of his back. No one would call his business plan a good one. "I don't need Wilder or anyone else."

De Lucey scoffed, then pinned him with a hard glare.

"That's what you think, Huntley." He drank deeply from his whiskey glass. "If you do not make this right, I will crush you. Your precious invention will never see the light of day. Society will turn on you. You have my word." He sat back in his leather chair and cocked one eyebrow thoughtfully. "Explain to me, Huntley, what is so off-putting about my dear half-sister. You could have the most coveted debutante in London for your wife."

"I'd rather take a damned dollar princess to wife." Silas took a deep breath and tried to remember that this man was the woman in question's half-brother. Through a peculiar confluence of events last year, de Lucey had found himself betrothed to his own sibling.

No wonder he was desperate to see Isabelle married off as quickly as possible. Notoriety clung to the de Lucey family like a bad smell. Perhaps it wasn't her fault, but it was fact.

"I barely know her," Silas complained.

"A situation easily remedied if you would come to dinner a few times. She is young and impressionable. She can become the perfect wife for you."

The perfect wife did not exist, for Silas did not wish to be married. Not now. Perhaps not ever. He certainly had no interest in ushering a naïve young virgin into the pleasures of the flesh. He had important work to do.

Nor did he have time for children. The getting of heirs could come later, after he had proved his mettle as the greatest inventor of the nineteenth century. This was an era of innovation and international competition. Bringing his electromagnetic engine to market was nothing less than his patriotic duty.

Besides, he just plain didn't want to marry a predator.

That's what Isabelle Kingston was: a fortune-seeker with guileless blue eyes. Silas's gut churned with self-loathing. He'd spent his entire adult life successfully avoiding women with marital ambitions. How had he missed this one's diabolical intentions?

He despised her on a visceral level that was difficult to articulate. Her cunning. Her false innocence. He could not tie himself to a woman he loathed.

"If you continue to refuse, Huntley, make no mistake. You will be ostracized from society," de Lucey said quietly. He extracted a thick packet from his inner jacket pocket. All around them, crystal clinked and the dull roar of conversation was punctuated by peals of male laughter. "I will personally ensure that you are banished from this club for publicly defiling and then abandoning my sister. Not a man here would blame me."

Silas swallowed. He motioned for more whiskey, his preferred liquor. It burned like hellfire. Right now, he wanted that.

Needed it.

Deep down, Silas knew he was about to do something he had never before done in his life: bow to social pressure.

"This is the contract I had my solicitor prepare." De Lucey slapped it onto the table placed between their knees. The envelope was remarkably thin for a marriage contract—not that Silas had experience with such things.

"I can summarize the contents for you. Marry my sister with proper haste and I'll double her dowry. Refuse, and you'll live to regret it." De Lucey stood up and tugged his jacket straight. "Have your solicitor look it over. If you accept my terms, come to dinner at Glenmore tomorrow evening and let us finally all move on from this debacle."

Silas stared at the contract as if the devil himself had deposited it there and asked him to sign away his soul. After a minute of blank nonresponse, the earl sighed and strode away.

Reluctantly, Silas opened the package and scanned its contents. The letters swam before his eyes. He'd had far too much to drink to make a reasonable decision. Yet there was no mistaking de Lucey's threat.

A shadow fell over him. Blearily, Silas glanced up.

"Your Highness," he slurred. A tall, handsome man with blond hair macassared into submission folded himself into the chair de Lucey had just vacated.

"I understand you're in pickle, Lord Huntley, as you English say." The faintest German accent clipped his consonants. He tented his fingers thoughtfully. "Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

Tiny hairs on the back of Silas' neck prickled with alarm. Prince Leopold, nephew to the late Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort. Prince of a now-defunct Prussian province.

"How ssso?" The room tilted wildly, then abruptly righted itself. Leopold raised one finger to signal for a bottle, and poured three fingers into Silas's glass.

"I have heard that you are planning to bring a new product to market. I wish to invest in your production, in exchange for a cut of the profits."

Silas had already secured a warehouse and he was setting up the equipment he needed to produce his prototypes in quantity. Bringing on a partner at this stage made little sense—but one did not brush off Queen Victoria's nephew lightly.

"What kind of cut?" he asked. He was going to get so drunk he forgot Isabelle Kingston existed. Then he was going to protect the work he had dedicated years of blood, sweat, and tears to bringing to market and marry the damned chit who had hoodwinked him so thoroughly.

"Fifty percent," answered Leopold.

Silas chuckled. "How much are you offering? A million quid?" He tossed off this number without thinking. Dimly, he was aware that getting drunk and falling into bed with a business partner was just as bad an idea as marrying a woman he despised. He would make one bad decision at a time.

Leopold blanched at the figure Silas quoted.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a quarter of that amount," he said.

Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds was not nothing. But it wasn't enough to tempt Silas, either. The truth was, he had no market for his invention yet. His hand had been forced by a man named Nikola Tesla who was working on a similar concept. He'd needed to act now unless he wanted to lose out to a competitor before he'd even established a market.

Perhaps it would take years, but he was determined to create a market for his products.

Silas was puzzled why the prince was suddenly showing such keen interest in his invention—yet also, a curious lack of it. He hadn't asked a single question about how the device worked, or who would buy it.

But Silas was far too sauced to suss out the reason for Leopold's sudden interest.

"I'll give you twenty percent of the profits if you take Isabelle Kingston off my hands." An embarrassing hiccup took him off guard. "Marry her, and you'll have income for life."

A bold promise for a man who had thrown everything he possessed at an unproven invention.

He was certain that once his engine found a practical application, he would be rolling in riches beyond imagining. This was his moment. He was not going to let one conniving fortune hunter of a woman stand in his way. If he had to marry the chit to appease society, fine. But he wasn't above bribing another man to take her off his hands.

Silas was not so fortunate.

The prince threw back his head and laughed. "I am not of a matrimonial mindset at present. You should count your good fortune. Lady Kingston is fair of face, quiet, and chaste. You could have been ensnared by worse."

Chaste. What a peculiar thing to say. Of course she was. All debutantes were wide-eyed innocents. That was, supposedly, their appeal. Not that debutantes had ever appealed to him, personally. When Silas fancied a goat's jig, he liked lusty brunettes with nice tits who knew exactly how to provide a night or two of no-strings fun. On the rare occasions when he'd contemplated his eventual marriage—a necessity required of any lord, for the getting of heirs—he'd imagined marrying a wealthy widow who matched his preferences.

Not a pallid, doe-eyed blonde.

Besides, the problem was that Silas resented being ensnared at all. He was thirty years old and had been fending off fortune hunters for as long as he'd been perfecting his product, yet a girl barely out of the schoolroom had caught him unaware. He couldn't decide which of them he despised most: himself, for his blind stupidity, or her, for her avarice.

They had spoken on a handful of occasions. He'd even liked Lady Kingston, in an abstract, distant way. She was intelligent, if awkward. She had hung on his every word when he talked about his device. She'd asked questions about how it worked. What its purpose was. She had been impressed with his ingenuity. His ego had been flattered.

Now he knew it was all an act. That stung. Bitterness flooded his heart.

The prince uttered a few more pleasantries and left.

Silas abandoned his nearly-full whiskey and stumbled over to the escritoire where White's kept stationery and writing implements. He smoothed the contract over the gleaming lacquered wood.

There weren't supposed to be two contracts. He forced himself to focus.

Rashly, he skimmed to the bottom and scrawled his name.

Damn the lawyers.

Damn him.

Damn Isabelle Kingston most of all.

He re-folded the papers and included one more. A note, written on thick cream rag printed with the club's insignia at the top, scrawled with his nearly-illegible handwriting.

Forget dinner at Glenmore. Meet me at St. George's on Sunday morning a week hence. I shall procure the special license.

Anything to get this travesty of a wedding over with.

Silas reclaimed his drink, downed the rest of it, and summoned a messenger. His fate was sealed.

Onward.



### Meanwhile, across London...

Belladonna rolled the dice in her palms. She blew on them for luck, pursing her lips in an exaggerated kiss before tossing them onto the worn green baize.

Ivory cubes tumbled, then stilled. Four black eyes stared up from one. Two from the other. Raucous cheers rang out.

"You lost, Countess."

The man who bent to collect her pile of banknotes and coins wore a crooked smile to go with his crooked nose.

"I challenge you to one more round, Mr. Jennings." She braced her hands on the scuffed wood and smiled. "Winner takes all."

He chuckled. "I already took all."

Bella calculated her odds. A win was not in her favor. She was bleeding money, her empire of sin slipping away the more she grasped for it. Yet tonight, money was immaterial.

"I'll sweeten the pot," she said. "Double or nothing."

The onlookers chortled. A sly half-smile touched the gaming hell owner's lips. Those dice were weighted, and half the people in this room knew it. The other half were suckers.

Jennings's Joint was an unsavory place in a part of London where only the intrepid stepped foot. The gaming hell was crowded with men. A few whores draped themselves over laps, their tits hanging out for all the world to see. Bella was unbothered by this display. Though rougher, it was tame compared to the sights she might stumble across in her own home.

The House of Virtue was anything but. Or had been, until her untimely absence, orchestrated by her nemesis, Bridget Ross, the notorious procuress of St. Giles.

Now, the House of Virtue was like a butterfly in the midst of a metamorphosis. Transformation was underway, and what would become of it—or of Bella—once it was finished, remained to be seen.

Tonight, she wanted something more than money. She placed five gold coins in a stack on the table and waited. Money was simply the bait.

Jennings laughed. "That's all you have to offer?"

She smiled and stacked another five. This was more that most of these men saw in a week. Casually, she added another stack. Then another.

When twenty-five gold coins sat stacked temptingly upon the worn green baize, she again braced her arms on the wood and waited.

"Can't match that," said Jennings, suddenly suspicious.

"I propose a trade," she said. The men crowded around the table hushed. "I will give you all of these coins, if you answer three questions truthfully."

"She could've just bribed 'im outright," one man grumbled. But he was wrong. That wouldn't have worked. No one in the slums would risk crossing the Witch of St. Giles.

"Or we can roll once more, and if I win, I'll take all of your earnings for the night as my prize." Either outcome suited Bella. Money and information were both currency. Now she had Jennings in a spot. The point of playing this game publicly was to put him in a position where pride would force him to accept her bargain.

She'd offered him a rich, guaranteed payday, or the chance of losing a Saturday night's income. Bella could all but see the scales in his eyes as he weighed the choice.

"Roll," Jennings said curtly, shoving the dice to her.

Chance it would be, then.

Bella scooped up the dice and rolled them between her hands. She closed her eyes.

"Call your number," said Jennings. "Ladies first."

"Seven," she said. Lucky number seven. Jennings scowled. It had not escaped her notice how often that figure had appeared this evening. Apart from the number two, even numbers were far less likely to turn up, thanks to the dice being weighted to come up with a single black dot painted on its side.

"I call five."

Two odd numbers.

She tossed her dice carefully, praying she wouldn't lose everything in one fell swoop. The almighty was rarely on her side, blasphemer and unbeliever that she was, but tonight, the dice fell at three and four. With a smile, she said, "Your turn, Jennings."

His expression turned sour.

"She cheated," one malcontent muttered. A lie. Bella sighed. Jennings had been cheating all evening. Now she was the one accused.

He chucked the dice across the table, apparently confident that his suspect dice would deliver the number he needed.

They did not.

A four and a five turned up. Nine. A loss. Bella exhaled. The crowd jeered.

"Fair's fair," Jennings said, quieting the onlookers. "A lady has no reason to cheat, now does she?"

"I don't, and I didn't," she said neutrally. "In fact, I'll forfeit my prize if you answer my questions."

Jennings lifted one brow. Now her true aim came into focus. "Depends upon what you want to ask about."

"I need to know where to find the Witch of St. Giles."

The hush deepened. Several men edged away from the table.

"I know her son used to gamble here," Bella said. Jennings spat into a dented brass container on the floor.

"Ain't seen 'im in months," one man said.

"That is because he's dead," she said neutrally. Killed by Hawke, Bella's...what? Hardly a protector—right before her eyes. The queen's personal spy was the one who'd gotten her kidnapped in the first place.

Nor was he her lover, despite one shared kiss. Remembering it now sent a shiver coursing through her. An uncomfortable reminder that she could not control her reaction to the queen's spy. Hawke did not belong to her. He belonged to Victoria. He was going to be knighted. He would become her peer, though she would still outrank him.

All of the men backed away from the table.

"Get out of here, Countess. I don't know nothing. Nobody's seen Brody Ross in months."

Her gamble had not paid off the way she needed it to. Reluctantly, Bella scooped coins and crumpled bank notes into her purse and tucked it under her arm. An imposing, unsmiling man fell into step behind her as she ventured out onto the sidewalk. The light spring air caressed her cheek, though it was tainted with the stench of the roadway.

"Shall I hail a cab, my lady?"

"Thank you, Starke." Her longtime manservant raised one arm. Immediately a cabbie began to pick his way over to them across the crowded street. She would not have enjoyed such immediate success had she attempted to hail one.

"Countess," a woman's voice came from behind her.

Bella whirled on the balls of her feet, as agile as a dancer despite her thirty-eight years. A weatherbeaten woman with missing teeth edged out of the shadows.

"The Witch has my son. I can help you find her." She fingered the hem of her ragged shawl nervously despite the determination that shone in her eyes. "I know where she keeps the boys she sells to the gents. I want my son back."

"I will find him for you," Bella promised. "Starke, call off the cab. We're going to find a bite to eat."

She would find this woman's child. She had to. Perhaps no one else cared about the safety of poor boy, but Countess Oreste did. She would exhaust her entire fortune, call in every favor she was owed, if it meant taking down the Witch of St. Giles.

She would bring that woman to justice if it was the last thing she ever did.

I sabelle peered out the window of Lord Silas Huntley's luxurious coach with interest as they approached Bascombe Hall, her husband's country estate. Grand leafy oaks marched along the road, their spring leaves not yet thick enough to obscure the rolling countryside beyond.

This is where I belong.

The thought sprang into her mind fully-formed, like Athena from Zeus's head. A seed of satisfaction took root in her belly. The jangly anxiousness that had tied her tongue during most of the train trip from London to the East Midlands eased.

Her gamble had been worth it.

She dared to cast a glance at the man sitting opposite. Her husband. She rolled the word around on her tongue, testing it. Huzz-band. The velvety buzz of the s leading into the soft b, ending with a firm d. Isabelle liked this word. It tasted delicious.

"What are you mumbling about?" asked the esteemed bearer of this title. His brow remained lightly furrowed beneath a thick sweep of brown hair. A feverish thrill coursed down Isabelle's spine, looking at him. Her husband was so handsome. So intelligent. Wealthy as a robber baron, too, but that didn't matter much to Isabelle. She was not an extravagant woman

by nature or habit. If anything, she was intimidated by Lord Huntley's immense wealth.

One of the richest men in England. How he'd become that way was a story of brilliance usually spoken in hushed, awed tones. Isabelle had heard rumors during her abbreviated Season. It was said that Huntley had the instincts of a predator. Unlike his contemporaries, he sought out business opportunities and invested heavily in them. Despite his eccentricities, he had a mind like a steel trap and everything he touched turned to gold.

Perhaps when he touched her tonight, she would turn to gold, too. Not literally, of course. He wasn't King Midas.

But perhaps he could transform her into someone she was not. A woman who was confident and refined, like he was. Her mother had spent months attempting to craft her into a perfect lady, but all Esther de Lucey had achieved was to undermine Isabelle's already shaky self-assurance.

Everything she said came out wrong. People looked at her oddly whenever she tried to bring up a seemingly innocuous topic, such as locomotive travel, or the Fibonacci sequence's elegance and how its pattern was replicated in nature. She meant to be interesting and intelligent, but as the Season had gone into full swing, she had gone quiet. Then, silent.

Only one person had spoken to her like she had a brain in her head: Lord Silas Huntley. He indulged her whimsical musings and shared his own. On the few occasions they had conversed, she felt she had finally found a friend amongst the *ton*. Someone who understood her and enjoyed her company.

For the first time ever, she'd felt the unfamiliar stirring of passion. Who knew that the novelists were sincere when they wrote about butterflies in your stomach whenever your beloved was nearby?

After her father's death, Isabelle had numbly accepted whatever fate was handed to her. When the handsome earl appeared at her door when she'd been left orphaned a few months shy of her eighteenth birthday, and

said they should marry, she had agreed without protest. She missed the carefree country life she'd led with her father, Tulliver "Tully" Kingston, full of books and long, aimless walks and looking at stars. She hadn't been able to envision any future for herself, and an earl was an unexpected catch for a peasant like herself. She therefore ignored the twinge of misgivings that managed to break through her numb grief, only to discover that she had accidentally accepted a marriage proposal from her own half-brother.

When they'd met, Huntley reminded her so much of her father so much it made her heart ache. There was no physical resemblance, only an air of jaunty insouciance and an openness to living that inspired her to action.

But that was before she lured Huntley out onto a balcony and surprised him with a kiss.

This version of Huntley was a stranger.

She dropped her gaze to her hands, folded demurely in her lap. "I was saying that Cheveny Hall is impressive."

Huntley stared at her crossly. Everything she did seemed to make him cross. The anxious, fluttery feeling that had plagued her in London resurged with a vengeance.

"You shall find Cheveny quite comfortable. No need to add the 'Hall,'" he said, shifting his gaze away from hers and adjusting his position in the seat. "We will remain here a week. Then I shall return to the city while you remain here."

"Only a week?" She swallowed.

"I have affairs to attend to in the city."

"But the Season will be over by then." As she understood matters, the aristocracy fled to the countryside in June when the city's stench became unbearable.

"Not everything revolves around your social calendar, Isabelle."

She stiffened. She didn't even have a social calendar to speak of. Esther, her mother, had taken care of everything. *Just look pretty and make* 

pleasant conversation with the gentlemen. I will tell you if anyone is unsuitable. Lord Huntley had been deemed suitable but unlikely to make an offer. According to Esther, he was a confirmed bachelor with obscure interests. The dowager countess was on a mission to find Isabelle a husband and put that embarrassing incident with Alexander behind the family once and for all

Imagine becoming accidentally betrothed to one's own half-brother. Absurd. A farce straight out of a Shakespeare play.

Hopefully, now that she was married, everyone could forget about that little oversight. Except for the part where her husband didn't seem to like her very much, Isabelle thought she'd done rather well for herself. Her *huzz-band* was distracted by his business affairs. Once those were settled, he would return to Cheveny where they could talk like old friends again.

"I had hoped we could spend the summer together," she said softly. "We are newlyweds. I promise I will be an obedient wife."

He will expect you to be still during lovemaking, no matter how much it hurts, Esther had told her during their cursory, embarrassing conversation after the wedding and before their departure. Do not disappoint him. Isabelle was curious about the act, and she had been matter-of-fact about the subject of sex, to her mother's consternation. Theirs was still a relatively new relationship. They had met for the first time since Isabelle was a baby when Esther rushed back from the Continent to stop her wedding to her own half-brother.

Then, the truth of her own parentage came out. All these years, Tully had told her that her mother had died in childbirth. He loved her too much to ever look for another wife.

Except that Esther had never been his wife. Not only was she very much alive, she was married to the previous Earl de Lucey.

Huntley acknowledged Isabelle's promise with a cocked eyebrow. Frustration flared within her. What was she doing wrong? She hadn't had any difficulty attracting that wretched Prince Leopold. He'd pursued her with too much enthusiasm, in ways that made Isabelle deeply uncomfortable. The more she tried to avoid him, the more he tried to corner her privately. He had touched her inappropriately several times when they were alone, brushing off her protests and telling her she was too tempting to resist. During those weeks of misery, Isabelle felt like a mouse being chased by a lion. Never quite able to escape. Her inevitable doom looming.

Until Huntley.

He glided easily among different in-groups, greeting them all as friends. Where the other noblemen looked at her like she was a prize mare at auction, Huntley offered crumbs of empathy. Moreover, he'd offered to dance with her at a key moment when she was desperate to escape Prince Leopold's pursuit. Isabelle had managed the steps but being near him tied her tongue in knots. She had never before experienced that heady rush of aching awareness. From that moment forth, he was her savior.

Now she was his, body and soul, yet she had the distinct impression that he didn't want her around.

"Isabelle, may I ask you one question? Answer honestly."

Her pulse leapt, blood racing through her veins. She had the insane urge to throw herself out of the moving coach and run away into the countryside.

"Yes?" she said, her voice catching.

"Why did do it?"

"Do what?" She blinked.

"Entrap me."

Isabelle swallowed hard. "Entrap is such a charged word," she muttered, avoiding his eye and watching that rolling countryside pass by. Ahead, barely visible from one corner of the window, Cheveny Hall grew larger with each turn of the spoked wheels. "I thought you liked me well enough. I was told I could have any man I wanted—" She stopped. That hadn't come out right. She was flummoxed and words never worked the way they were

supposed to when she was nervous. "I mean, I had been led to believe you were amenable to a match..."

... and I was running out of time.

But saying that would invite more questions. Ones she did not always have an answer for. Accusing a prince who was connected to the Queen of England's late husband of inappropriate behavior was an excellent way to become an outcast, and while Isabelle didn't enjoy Society very much, she hated feeling unwanted. Besides, she already had a massive black mark against her.

"You wanted me, and so you kissed me on a balcony at a ball." His brow furrowed further. "Do I understand that right?"

Isabelle wanted to shake her head no, that it wasn't as simple as catching him off guard and making sure they'd be caught publicly. But wasn't that also the truth? She *had* followed him onto that balcony. She *had* engaged in polite conversation until she saw the French doors push outward. She'd then risen on tiptoe and kissed Huntley, knowing full well that social rules compelled him to marry her or be shunned as a ruiner of innocents.

She had known all of this. She had done it deliberately. She had told herself it would work out in the end because she loved him and he at least liked her well enough to dance with her, converse with her instead of talking over her, and because she would be the most obedient and grateful wife in the entire history of wives.

Clearly, that was not going to be enough to earn his forgiveness.

Words stuck in her throat. She gaped at him in mute horror as his scowl deepened. Lord Huntley leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and tented his fingers thoughtfully. Were it not for the anger simmering in his deep brown eyes.

"I am a reasonable man," he stated. Isabelle flinched. "You shall have a reasonable allowance. You shall provide me with the heirs I require, and

you shall not embarrass me the way your mother did to her husband."

Isabelle's fingers tightened into a knot of anxiety. "You know about that?" she squeaked.

"Your brother was completely honest about the reasons for your existence. He said I had a right to know."

She nodded, feeling lightheaded. Outside, a fluffy cloud drifted across the sun, casting a long shadow over the countryside. The bright day that had seemed so full of promise now mocked her. There was no safety here at Cheveny. No safe place for her anywhere.

"Apart from that, you may conduct your life in any way you see fit, provided it does not shame me or the Huntley name. If I hear one whisper of indiscretion, I will have you confined to an institution. Or I will petition for a divorce. Do I make myself clear?"

Her jaw dropped. Every lofty, fervid imagining she had entertained about this man since the day they had met popped like a soap bubble on a thorn. Had she guessed him capable of imprisoning her against her will, she would never have kissed him in the first place.

She'd been such a fool. Entertaining a girlish fantasy in which he saved her from a predatory prince. Fell in love with her. There would be no happy ending. She saw that now.

"Answer me, Isabelle."

"I understand, Lord Huntley. I will be an obedient wife," she repeated. If she said it often enough, perhaps he would understand. "In all ways."

He leaned back against the squabs. "Good enough. For now."

Isabelle stared morosely out the window. She'd never heard such despondence. One thing was certain. She did not understand her husband at all—and he had no interest in understanding her, either.



C hrist, she was young. Eighteen years old was technically old enough to be married, but Isabelle could have used several more years in a schoolroom before making her debut. She looked younger than her years, too, with her fine blond hair, huge blue eyes and willowy figure.

Silas pinched his temples. She looked like a child. He couldn't take her to bed. Yes, she was objectively beautiful, but she did not stir his blood. She stirred his pity and resentment. Nothing more.

He, the man renowned for his ability to see five steps ahead of his opponent, to sift through myriad possibilities and find the most profitable option, had been ensnared by a mere girl.

Ordinarily, he could see the fortune hunters coming from miles away. They were flirts. They wore their desperation on their sleeves. They would abandon one target the instant they discovered he was worth ten times any other man in the room, and at thirty, he was still young enough to have all his teeth and hair. He took considerable pride in his hair. It shone without the application of too much macassar oil, generally obeyed whatever direction he'd put it in, and bore not a single streak of gray. He was young, prosperous, and had no desire for a wife. Marriage was for men who had settled into lives of staid futility.

He could not fathom men like his old friend Maxwell Tremaine, the Duke of Ardennes, who had married his own ward. Granted, Emma was smart as a whip and gave her husband all kinds of trouble. He could see that kind of feminine spark being appealing, if he squinted into the distance.

Isabelle Kingston displayed no such spark.

She was...odd.

The only people she seemed to open up with were her half-brother, Darius, and her sister-in-law, Rosalyn, both of whom were amiable and indulgent conversationalists. Silas was neither. He'd been taken aback by Isabelle's curious choice of parlor talk on the few occasions they'd spoken. They had danced once. She'd hung on his every word when he described his inventions.

But so did every young lady he danced with when he couldn't otherwise avoid doing so. They feigned interest, but none of them possessed the kind of education that would allow even a shallow understanding of the physics behind his invention. They had no context for understanding how it could change the world. No vision. No insight.

They were ornaments. Isabelle had been a bit more rapt than the others, but she was also the most coveted diamond of the Season.

Perhaps that's why Silas hadn't seen her coming. Isabelle's beauty had turned the heads of most of London's eligible bachelors, along with plenty of ineligible ones, too. There was no rational reason for her to throw herself at him when she could have her pick of men. They barely knew one another. He hadn't detected any particular interest from the chit.

Why?

Why him?

Why had she forced this marriage upon him in such a scandalous fashion?

Money. That had to be the root of it. She'd gotten wind of his fortune and decided she would do anything to have it.

Well, she was quite mistaken on that score. If his electric engines failed to pan out, he would be ruined financially. Now, he didn't even have the prospect of marrying an American dollar princess to prop up his fortunes, should it come to that. Isabelle had foreclosed that option.

He didn't believe one word of Isabelle's explanation. She was obviously lying, and badly, too. She was nothing but a greedy opportunist and now he was tied to her forever.

If he kept obsessing about this, he was going to go mad.

There was only one solution for them. He would do his marital duty, give her an appropriate allowance, and otherwise ignore her. She would have what she wanted. He'd never have to worry about the pressure to produce an heir again, and while he expressly forbade Isabelle from seeking another man's bed, he had no intention of adhering to the same rule himself.

Silas would bury himself in his work and endure his marriage.

He scrubbed his face. The arrangement was awful, no matter which way he looked at it.

The carriage pulled into the circular drive, where his staff awaited in an orderly line to greet their new mistress. Isabelle's brows knitted. Her lips pulled into a tight smile. She placed her gloved hand in his and stepped down from the carriage.

"Winters, this is Lady Isabelle Huntley." That felt strange to say. His hand curled into a fist, the one that had made physical contact with her. She didn't deserve his name. She didn't deserve his money or his home or his attention. But there was one thing that could get a man ostracized by his peers, it was compromising a fellow lord's female relation and then refusing to marry her. It didn't matter what Isabelle deserved: she had everything now.

No matter how bitter that word was on his tongue, she was his wife by law.

"See that she is properly settled," he ordered in clipped syllables.

His manservant's bushy gray brows pulled into nearly a straight line bridging his brow. "Do you wish to give the lady a tour of the grounds, Sir?"

Silas was already in motion, headed for his laboratory. "I trust you to handle it," he said without looking back. "I have something I need to work on. I shall see you at dinner, Miss—erm. Lady Huntley."

Her new name burned his tongue like hellfire.



Isabelle blinked at her husband's retreating back.

Heaviness settled into her stomach. She had made a terrible mistake, and now there was no undoing it.

"My lady, I presume you would like to rest and freshen up after your journey?"

She indicated yes with a bob of her chin. Words once again stuck in her throat.

"Shall we find lodgings for your maid?"

"I don't have one," she blurted. "My mother's maid served as mine, too."

Winters barely reacted, other than to signal to a stern-looking housekeeper. "See who can be assigned to Lady Huntley."

Isabelle ought to commit these people's names to her memory, but right now, all she wanted was a measure of solitude to process her deepening heartbreak.

She adored Huntley. His intelligence. His fearsome instincts. His interest in mathematics. She had found in him a kindred soul—or so she thought.

When the housekeeper showed her to the palatial suite adjoining the master's rooms, Isabelle's spine firmed. Huntley couldn't hate her. He

didn't know her. Once he understood why she'd forced his hand, he would see that they were a good match.

Not that she could imagine revealing the way Prince Leopold had hunted her through ballrooms for weeks to Huntley in his present mood. She simply had to find a way to make him see that they had shared interests. Surely, they could find a reasonably amicable solution.

Then, Cheveny would be paradise. She went to the window and stared out at the landscape with a sigh. She already loved it. Sunset painted teal across the rolling hills of spring green. Rocky outcroppings cast purple shadows over deep blue lakes beneath fiery orange and pink clouds. Golden sunlight shafted angelically across this remarkable, stunning place.

The house was elegant and timeless, but it was the land she loved best.

As a child, she'd spend hours walking the moors with her father, Tulliver Kingston, known to all as Tully. He had taught her to appreciate the geometry of stars and planets and the beauty of photosynthesis in every blade of grass. Crickets chirping in a field were his orchestra. He detested cities, calling them abnormal cesspools of sickness and sin.

To her surprise, Isabelle hadn't minded London as much as she expected to. The streets were smelly, true, and the way poverty sat cheek-by-jowl with immense wealth should offend everyone's sensibilities, not only hers. Yet London was also full of fascinating people doing interesting things. She hadn't hated it at all—except for the ballrooms.

The scrutiny. The gossip. She shuddered, remembering the weight of all those eyes upon her.

Guilt prodded her heart. Tully hated the city and since she loved him, she ought to hate it too. Although he'd been gone for nearly a year, the hole her father's passing had left in her heart would never fully close. Most of all, she missed the way he understood her better than anyone else. Her reticence had never bothered him. He understood she didn't need endless,

empty chatter. She was happiest contemplating the logical magic of numbers and formulas, and Tully had encouraged her curiosity.

"May I assist you with your dress?"

Isabelle whirled. A young woman, perhaps in her mid-twenties, with clear gray eyes and fine brown hair braided away from her face, stood just inside the door.

"Winters sent me to act as your lady's maid. I'm good at mimicking hair styles from magazines. I'll do a fine job," she said reassuringly.

"Yes, thank you." That was one problem sorted. She allowed the maid to help her remove her traveling clothes. Isabelle washed and rested for a bit. When she awoke, the sky outside was dark and the mantel clock read a quarter to seven. The maid buttoned her into a fresh gown.

After shoring up her waning confidence, Isabelle made her way down to dinner.



S ilas thought he had managed to leave his seething frustration with his too-young, deceptive wife by drinking three brandies in quick succession in his study, but seeing her come to dinner in an innocent white gown suitable for a debutante than a married woman made him see red.

She'd had weeks to assemble a wardrobe suitable for an earl's wife, yet she'd chosen a breezy silk-cotton frock that made her look years younger than her actual age.

Bile rose in the back of his throat. He couldn't do this.

"Are you settled in?" he asked. At least she was all the way down the table. He had to strain to hear her reply.

"Yes, my rooms are beautiful, thank you."

They had been his mother's rooms, hastily redecorated with new curtains, rugs, and bedding. Apart from that, nothing much had changed. He hadn't wanted to put in any effort. He also hadn't wanted her enjoying his mother's personal luxuries. Were it up to him, he would have ripped out the wallpaper and given Isabelle a burlap sack for a blanket.

Winters had made him see reason. In fact, he rather thought he'd lost a measure of his longtime servant's respect by making such demands in the first place. He had not considered how such a poor welcome would reflect upon his staff.

"Lord Huntley."

Silas barely glanced up at her before continuing to saw his roast beef with a knife. It was on the tender side, the way he liked it. Isabelle's portion sat on her plate, untouched. He was vaguely aware that she seemed troubled, but decided not to care. Instead, he poured himself a generous serving of wine.

"I apologize for the way I entrapped you," she said softly.

High color stained her cheeks. Her slender throat worked. Silas followed the movement, mesmerized. A vision of kissing that perfect ivory skin, of putting his teeth there and sucking purple marks onto her tender flesh, sent a bolt of heat down his spine and into his loins. He shifted uncomfortably. "What's done is done. We're stuck with one another now."

"Was there another woman?" she asked with a regretful note.

"Another what?" Silas snapped. No, there hadn't been another woman. He hadn't wanted a wife at all. He didn't even have time for a mistress. He was entirely devoted to his work. He wanted to transform the world. Make it better for laborers and land owners alike. There was no reason, in his mind, why poverty should persist in a land of plenty. He was not an altruist. Silas believed there was a great deal of profit to be made by enabling others to live with dignity and prosperity. He did not believe that prosperity had to be a zero-sum game.

"If I have denied you the opportunity to wed the woman you love, I will agree to an annulment. Should you wish to request it," she said in a small voice.

Silas' vision hazed to black. After tonight, there would be no going back. He would have to part her creamy thighs and—

A shudder rocked him at the thought of what must happen tonight. She was a virgin. There might be blood. He couldn't think of anything less appetizing than deflowering a woman. Barely a woman, at that. He seized

his wine goblet and downed the contents in three swallows. A fine claret, guzzled like rotgut. This was what his wife had reduced him to.

"There is no one else," he snapped. The footman hastened to refill his wine. Silas drained that, too. "But I cannot promise there won't be."

Hurt pinched her pretty features.

"If you want to annul the marriage, say so now, Isabelle."

"I don't want to do that," she said softly.

He wanted to ask why, but he already knew the answer. Money. Fine. He would give her money. But first, he had to get through this evening. Before he knew it, he was staring at the bottom of his empty cup again. Silas shoved his half-finished plate away and stormed out before the pudding course, saying, "Come to my chamber when you are ready."



#### Isabelle

SHE WAS NEVER GOING to be ready. Isabelle had dismissed her maid and was picking her long blond braid into loose strands. Men liked long hair, supposedly. So she was told.

They liked virgins, too—so she was told.

Men liked virgins who didn't cry and protest, who laid there and accepted a man's touch willingly, no matter how much it hurt.

Isabelle swallowed. How much pain should she expect? Esther had been rather unspecific on that score.

The clock struck nine. She couldn't put it off any longer. She went to the door connecting their rooms and pushed it open. Her heart galloped at the sight of Silas in a wingback chair wearing a satin banyan of burgundy red. She had seen naked statues but never a naked man. She would like to see him nude, but the foreboding scowl on his face had Isabelle clutching the placket of her dressing gown.

"Get on the bed," he instructed.

Isabelle went to the large four-poster and lay down. It smelled different. There was a hint of spiciness she couldn't place, though she associated it instantly with Silas. The time they had danced together, she'd detected this scent. She'd thought of it in the hours, days, and weeks that followed. Now, it was overwhelming.

Her pulse stuttered when he turned off the lights. She squeezed her eyes closed against the onslaught of darkness. When the mattress dipped, she almost screamed.

"Take this off." He tugged on the hem of her dressing gown. Obediently, Isabelle worked the knot free and let it fall open. Despite her high-necked nightgown, she felt totally exposed. A dark shape separated from the gloom. Huntley's head. His shoulders moved as he slid the dressing gown off, and suddenly, Isabelle yearned for light. She wanted to see him so badly. She needed to see that he didn't despise her.

She was afraid of what she would see if she asked him to turn on the lights again, so instead, she lay as still as a statue while he fisted her nightgown and pushed it up.

There was a tense moment of indistinct shuffling sounds. Then came a shocking, searing heat on her inner thighs. He parted her, and without ceremony, touched her most secret place. Isabelle stiffened.

"Just...I don't know. Hold still, I suppose." He sounded so cranky about having to do this, which confused her. Supposedly, men always wanted sex. They thought about it all the time. How to get it, how to evade the consequences, every conceivable perversion occupying their minds at every hour of the day. Her experience with the prince had confirmed as much.

Isabelle was beginning to think that much of what she had been told about sexual relations was wrong.

Then there was no room for thought, for a blunt, hard part of him was prodding at the soft, yielding part of her, and then—

She winced, hissing through her teeth as pain spiked up her core. He withdrew, a momentary relief, then drove forward again. Isabelle gritted her teeth. Silas held himself braced over her with one fist planted on either side of her arms, touching her as little as possible while he pounded mercilessly into her.

This was awful.

It felt like he wanted to hurt her and he wanted this to be over with as quickly as possible. Any hope that her marriage was salvageable died a little more with each rough thrust. And now, her decision was irreversible.

Isabelle clenched her jaw and fisted the bedcovers to keep from moving. *Hold still, no matter how much it hurts*. She screwed her eyes closed and bit her lower lip. After a few minutes of this treatment, the pain eased, to be replaced with a sensation she wouldn't quite call pleasure, but adjacent to it. Her body had adjusted to the onslaught.

Silas stopped. He withdrew from her with a disgusting wet sound. Again came the rustling of clothes. Isabelle yanked her nightgown down. Humiliation crashed over her in waves. The worst thing was that she would have welcomed his touch, had he offered it. She'd dreamed of his hands and his lips on her body. Yet Lord Huntley acted as if he was disgusted by her.

"We're finished," he said roughly. "You can leave now."

Tears burned Isabelle's eyes as she rolled off the bed onto shaking legs. The stickiness at her center felt strange and dirty, causing her to stumble awkwardly toward the door.

It was official. She was a married woman. There was no going back.

# SILAS

W hen she was gone, Silas exhaled for the first time in what felt like hours.

That had to be the worst sex in the history of lovemaking. He hadn't even come. He'd felt himself fading and withdrawn, unable to maintain the erection he'd spent half an hour building with the help of nude photographs hastily purchased from a street vendor in London, nearly thwarted by his overconsumption of wine. Already, his head throbbed.

One thing was certain: Isabelle was not made for carnal relations. The final straw had been her near-inaudible whimper of pain.

If she'd displayed the slightest interest in him, he would have tried to pleasure her before diving straight into the main event. Silas took pride in his ability to give women orgasms. They were endlessly fascinating puzzles. Similar, but each one unique in her preferences and desires.

Except for Isabelle, his wife, who displayed the carnality of a dead fish.

He flipped the switch. Light flooded the room. Except for a pathetically small indentation in the center of his bed, there was no sign that Isabelle had ever been there.

Good. The sooner they could both forget this had ever happened, the sooner they could both move on with their lives.

The next morning, Silas was in his coach and on his way to catch the first train back to London. He hadn't even bothered to unpack his trunk.



## Isabelle

"GONE?" Isabelle echoed hollowly. "Gone where, Mr. Winters?"

"Back to London, I'm afraid. He said he had business to attend to."

Any new sprouts of hope that had grown during the long night instantly withered. It would have been easier if Huntley hated her openly. Instead, he'd just left. Abandoned her here in the countryside.

This was all her fault.

She cast her gaze out the window, thinking about how soothing it would be to explore the grounds, but no amount of natural beauty could ease her soul until she found a way to make this right.

"For how long?" she asked weakly.

"He does not inform the staff of his comings and goings, beyond sending a letter to announce his imminent return. As soon as we know, we shall tell you."

Her resolve strengthened. Isabelle's stubborn streak had kept her engaged to her own half-brother despite her lack of desire for him. She was a practical woman at heart. Women had no leverage in the world. They needed marriage to survive.

Yet that was not why she had chosen Lord Silas Huntley to be her husband. The moment he'd taken her into his arms at that dance it felt like fate.

She owed him an apology. Yes, she had attempted to offer one last night, but it hadn't been heartfelt enough. They were stuck together now. She must make him see how abjectly regretful she was for what she'd done.

"Mr. Winters," she said, tugging her shawl around her arms like a shield. "Tell the maid to pack my trunk. I am going to London in search of my husband."

Was that approval on the manservant's face? Isabelle prayed so. She would grovel if she had to. She would do anything to win Silas Huntley's forgiveness—and she couldn't do that while mooning after him here in the countryside.



# Silas

SILAS EXAMINED THE SMALL SWIVEL, about as long as his thumb and half as wide. Six years he'd spent making different versions of it. He needed this to change the position of his coils inside his electromagnetic engine prototype. He spun the faulty device, listening to it rattle. He should work on an improved design—again—yet he didn't have the heart for it right now.

His head ached. His stomach was a hollow pit, but at least he'd emptied it twice on the drive back to London. He would feel better in day or two.

Then he would forget his unwanted wife.

"A visitor, sir."

His manservant's interruption didn't cause Silas to flinch or even acknowledge the other man's presence. "Who?"

"Lord Pindell."

He sighed. "Let him in." Apparently, his secret was out. He had returned to the city scandalously soon after his own wedding. The gossip pages would have a field day.

Silas cast a faulty swivel onto his desk with a sigh of frustration. It bounced crazily and rolled off into one corner of the room, where it lay like a dying insect.

"What are you doing back in London already?" asked Pindell brightly as he strode into the room. "I didn't think we would see hide nor hair of you until next autumn at least."

"Business," Silas grunted. A reliable excuse, one he could always hide behind.

"Does married life not suit you?"

"No," he answered curtly.

Undaunted, Pindell draped himself over a battered wingback chair. None of the furniture in Silas's workshop was of any quality. Greek revival mixed with worn leather castoffs sat willy nilly, all of it battered within an inch of its life. Bits and bobs lay on every surface. A haphazard attempt to organize his tools on a peg board had been mostly abandoned. Piles of papers listed dangerously off crooked shelves. Apart from the maid he allowed in to dust periodically, this room was untouched. The rest of his townhouse was appropriately furnished to impress outsiders. In his workshop, he could be himself.

But he had outgrown the space. At the end of last year, he had withdrawn an enormous sum of money to lease a warehouse and make it into a production factory. His electromagnetic engines could be used in all kinds of manufacturing applications. But first, he needed to produce usable prototypes. The new space would allow him to ramp up significantly.

Then, he would need to court investors.

A frown pinched his brow. Like Prince Leopold. He still didn't know what to make of the way the prince had approached him. The prince ran with a fast set. Their paths had crossed on occasion, simply due to the nature of the clubby aristocracy, but they weren't exactly close acquaintances.

"You hardly gave it a chance." Pindell clucked his tongue. "I don't understand. She's as comely as a man could want. Every man in London is in half in love with her. Except you."

Silas shoved aside a three-month-old newspaper. No pliers. Nor were they sitting atop the old clock casing he'd ravaged for parts. He finally spotted the tool he wanted right where it belonged, on the pegboard. He shifted to reach it and inadvertently dislodged a pile of bits onto the carpet. He swore. It took him days to disassemble the clock and carefully collect those miniature gears. Now he was going to have to pick them out of the rug.

"Pindell, I mean this with affection. I'm busy. Kindly bugger off. We can catch up later over a game at White's."

"Do you really want to discuss your married life at the club?" Pindell asked idly. It was difficult to tell sometimes whether the man was pretending to be obtuse or he actually was as thick as a fencepost. He was such a genial companion that Silas didn't usually mind having him around, but he'd come to London to forget his wife, not be pestered with questions about why he'd left Cheveny.

"No," he grunted, shuffling around on hands and knees. Silas blindly hunted tiny metal parts by running his hand lightly over the rug. One of the spokes stabbed the meat at the base of his thumb. He flinched and tried to sit up, smacking his already-aching head on the underside of the table. He cursed and extracted himself from the predicament he'd gotten himself into.

He managed to find his feet, rubbing his skull and inspecting the pinprick of blood on his hand. At least he'd found one gear...

Absently, he continued, "No matter how pretty she is, Isabelle is an empty-headed, mercenary fortune hunter. I'd rather be wedded to a bog witch."

Glancing up, he caught sight of Pindell's stricken expression. His friend grimaced. Silas followed the direction of his gaze to the doorway, which hadn't been ajar a few minutes ago. A flutter of white and a retreating woman's shadow made his temples throb.

Isabelle. Here?

Pindell slowly collected his limbs under him and backed away, hands held out as if holding off an attack. Silas realized he was glowering furiously, and no wonder. How many things could go wrong in the span of a three minutes?

A multitude, apparently.

"Harsh," was all Pindell said. "Sorry to hear it's not working out. Perhaps an annulment is in order?"

Wordlessly, Silas shook his head. If he hadn't slept with her, there might have been a way to obtain one, but the mere thought was a burning rope tightening around his ribs. Isabelle certainly hadn't trapped him in that sense. His own cock had the same opinion of Isabelle that every other man in London apparently did. He'd had to drown his physical response in wine to control it. Those photographs of naked women he'd bought hadn't worked because they weren't her, and at the time, he'd despised that fact with every fiber of his being.

She was a desirable woman. All it took was scaring her off to force him to acknowledge it.

"Catch you at the club," Pindell said, his habitual jauntiness returning despite wary creases at the corners of his eyes, and exited expeditiously.

Silas hauled a filament bulb lamp over to his desk and knelt to pick up the rest of the tiny gears. When he'd found them all, he poured them carefully into a glass ramekin for safekeeping and went to retrieve his swivel from where it had fallen earlier, but the blasted thing was gone. He couldn't find it under the chairs. He clearly heard its dying buzz from the corner of his workshop closest to the door, but even when he pulled up the rug, it wasn't there.

Irritated to the very edge of his frayed nerves, Silas stormed off to find his butler. "Was Lady Huntley here?" he demanded.

"Yes, my lord. The lady arrived shortly before Lord Pindell. I was coming to alert you when he rang. I had intended to offer her a tour of the

premises and an introduction to the staff, but when I returned from announcing your visitor, she was gone."

This day had gone from rubbish to complete shambles in seconds.

Guilt gnawed his bones. Yes, Isabelle had done him dirty, but there was no denying that he'd been an arse. Nor was there any point in letting the situation fester. He was going to have to track down his wife.

Worse, he owed her an apology.



# ... A n empty-headed, mercenary fortune hunter.

Isabelle dug into her pocket and spun the small device she'd found on the floor of Lord Huntley's...laboratory or study or whatever one wanted to call that pigsty. She'd left her gloves draped over the newel post. It felt strange to be striding down a public sidewalk with bare hands. Alone. A jangling sensation raced through her body. Ants crawled along her skin.

*I'd rather be wedded to a bog witch.* 

Her husband didn't dislike her. He despised her.

He could barely bring himself to touch her. He spoke badly about her to his friends. He'd done the bare minimum of duty before abandoning her in the countryside.

Silas Huntley was not at all the man she'd thought he was. Forget winning his forgiveness.

She hadn't trapped him at all. She'd trapped herself—in a loveless, hopeless marriage.

Her legs churned aimlessly. She didn't know how far she'd walked before she realized there was a man following her. He dodged to her left, lifting his hat, and when she ignored him, he scowled and called her a bitch.

"Excuse you?" she gasped. She'd never heard such coarse language before. Never been menaced on the street like this. A woman alone wasn't safe. She had very little idea of where she was. She'd managed to travel all the way from Cheveny to London with her maid, who was where she'd left her, at Huntley's townhouse. Probably. Isabelle had been so rattled by what she overheard that she fled without thinking.

The man, having secured her attention once, was now trying to get her to go somewhere with him. He dared to grab her elbow. She yanked away. Isabelle's skin crawled when she realized he was trying to proposition her. Shocked into self-preservation, she ducked into a storefront, panting.

"May I help you, miss?" A bespectacled man peered at her. She looked around. A tobacconist's. She'd bumbled blindly into a tobacco shop. The odor reminded her of her father, Tully Kingston. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Are you quite all right, miss?" The man looked concerned.

"Yes. I mean no, I was being followed and I'm a bit lost, so I came in here to..." She swallowed. "To escape."

That was what she needed to do. Escape from Huntley.

You shall provide me with the heirs I require, and you shall not embarrass me the way your mother did to her husband.

Wild laughter forced its way into her throat. She suppressed it with a full-body shudder. She would never embarrass Huntley because she would never allow a man to touch her that way again. There was no pleasure to be gained from sex. Only agonizing pain.

"Where were you trying to go?" the shopkeeper asked. "I can help you find your way."

"Thank you." A surge of gratitude overwhelmed her. Tears sprang to her eyes. She didn't know what to do with all these emotions. She was, ordinarily, as calm as the sea after a storm. Her sister-in-law, Rosalyn, was a tempestuous sort, but Isabelle preferred to be placid and non-confrontational. This toxic stew of emotions made her skin crawl. She needed to get to safety and then figure out a way to escape her marriage.

She needed to go somewhere that Huntley couldn't reach her. She needed a plan. She needed money. She needed...

Countess Oreste.

The only person she knew in London whose doors were open at any time of day or night, where acceptance was the rule, was Countess Oreste, known to her friends as Belladonna. The countess might not appreciate finding her on her doorstep, but before her wedding, Isabelle had heard that Belladonna had recently returned from abroad. If there were rumors about her House of Virtue being less than wholly charitable, well, Isabelle couldn't afford to be picky under these circumstances.

"I am trying to get to Number 9 Dove Street," she said. The infamous Mayfair residence that some whispered was a club for debauchery.

The shopkeeper's brows formed twin arches. "Posh."

"I have money." Should she tell him that? She didn't want to get robbed.

"Good. I trust it's enough for a cab." He cut a quick glance at her bare hands.

"I lost my gloves," she lied. "At the...a museum."

"I see. I can hail a cab for you, but going from here to Mayfair is liable to be an expensive ride."

"How expensive?"

He wrote a figure on a piece of scrap paper and showed it to her. "Could be more, or less, but it's best to be prepared."

Gradually, her pulse stopped fluttering like a desperate butterfly. She could pay the fare. It would leave her with little leftover, but Countess Oreste would help her decide what to do.

A faint buzzing sound prompted her to glance down. The trinket she'd found spun and spun. The buzzing meant that something inside it wasn't quite true. The ball bearings weren't moving as smoothly as they needed to. The friction would wear them down over time. She spun it again, listening,

then tucked it into her pocket. She pointed at the jars behind the counter. "What is your best tobacco?"

As long as she was upending her entire life, she might as well indulge in an unladylike vice. This nice man deserved to make a sale for helping her.



# Meanwhile, in Mayfair

"You must rest, my lady." Starke, Belladonna's manservant insisted. "You had a late night yesterday evening."

Her determination to track down the Witch of St. Giles had led her out into the worst parts of London night after night.

"I hate resting." Bella did not pout. She was a grown woman, not a petulant child. Besides, two weeks of forced recovery in Cavalier Cove had fractured what little patience she still possessed. After spending four months as a captive in a root cellar in Provence, she was back home in Mayfair where she belonged—only she had returned to a house in chaos.

"I'll give you a prize for being the best rester."

His wheedling tone should have made Bella crankier than she already was. Instead, a smile cracked across her lips. She was turning soft.

"What sort of prize?" she asked coyly.

"I will bring you those petit fours you like so much, but only if you eat them in bed, after a nap."

Bella tapped her chin. "The ones with the whipped strawberry frosting and chocolate?"

Starke's chin dipped. "You can review Archie's notes in bed just as easily as you can in this study."

But there was one problem: Bella had developed a severe allergy to being confined. She rubbed the faded scars on her wrists. The doctor had told her it was a miracle she still had full use of her hands after months of restraint. Physically, she would recover. Emotionally, however, she felt like a vase that had shattered and been painstakingly glued back together. The cracks would always be there. A few shards might never be found. She was intact, but she would never be the same.

"I don't have time to nap," she said gently. "Tea cakes or no tea cakes."

Starke's crestfallen expression almost changed her mind. He was a good man. Loyal. Devoted. He wanted her to take care of herself. But Bella was preoccupied with piecing back together the dynasty she had painstakingly constructed.

Four months was all it took for Daisy to wreak havoc with the House of Virtue. A ball of ire behind Bella's sternum burned. "We don't have the clientele we did in December. I can maintain the house for a time from my own funds, but I have to make changes."

"The gentlemen will come back," he said.

"But their wives are no longer willing to overlook my considerable indiscretions." Before her captivity, Bella would have been inundated with concerned visitors from across the aristocracy. One gutter-dwelling bitch named Bridget Ross had done more to ruin her than all of London's upper society combined.

She had underestimated her foe once. She would not do so again.

Her nemesis had managed to hobble her operations and destroy her socially in just a few short months. Betsey Ross, the true name of the feared procuress known as The Witch of St. Giles, had tried to coerce Bella's son, Archie, into signing away her entire fortune.

She would pay for that.

All her life, Bella had tried to protect her son from the brutal realties of the world. The knowledge of how badly she had failed weighed heavily upon her. "Starke," she said. "I mean this sincerely. Never allow Hawke onto the premises of this house again. Understand?"

After a beat of hesitation, her manservant nodded. "He saved your life." "He is also the one who got me captured in the first place."

An accident, as Hawke had explained during the journey back to England. He had been trying to protect Her Majesty's interests and keep Bella safe at the same time. A crucial piece of information had slipped by him. He spent months searching for her over the queen's objections. Queen Victoria wanted the Ross affair to be forgotten, and she wanted Bella gone.

Her death would have been awfully convenient for Her Majesty.

Queen Victoria had bigger concerns to worry about than the whereabouts of a countess with one foot planted in high society and the other in London's criminal underbelly. Bella paced her study. This room, with its leather and dark wood furnishings offset with feminine touches like silk wallpaper, fresh-cut flowers in a vase above the mantel, and tasseled lampshades, was her domain. Her throne room, where she reigned as the unofficial queen of London.

She tented her fingers, thinking.

The late Opposition Leader, John Erskine, had been up to his neck in unseemly ties with Biddy Ross. Having withdrawn from society for years after her husband's death, Victoria's attempt to revive her leadership depended upon public perception of her as the standard-bearer for tradition and morality. Never mind the Queen of England's hypocrisy in wanting to keep women in the house and out of public life; her association with Erskine, had his predilections for young boys become public, would have been ruinous.

But now, the dreadful man was dead. Bella was an inconvenience to her sovereign. Hawke was too much of a devoted patriot to betray his queen—especially with a knighthood dangled before him. Men were callow and greedy. Even the ones who professed not to care about wealth and status.

Especially the ones who claimed not to care.

Bella would never forgive, and she definitely wouldn't forget.

"Hawke never intended to harm you, Bella. Anyone with eyes can see how much he cares about you," said Starke.

"He has a strange way of showing it."

Her manservant was mistaken. Hawke did not care about her. He was curious about her, yes, but he was beholden to Queen Victoria. Their admittedly mutual attraction could only ruin them both.

Non lasciare mai che ti umilino. Her long-dead benefactress' mantra: never let them humiliate you. La Bella Donna had been a renowned soprano in her day. By the time a lost, pregnant young woman named Jane Bristow met her, the opera singer was on the down slope of her career. She made her income by sleeping with men and taught Jane to do the same.

She also taught Jane how to hold her head high whenever others tried to tear her down. As a young, single mother with a son born out of wedlock to a much older, married man, she had been drowning in shame until her benefactress reminded her that she was not the one who had made promises she failed to keep.

After her death, Jane became Belladonna, a sought-after courtesan on the Continent. Only after she had married a French count and been widowed not long thereafter had she dared to return to London, the site of her original fall from grace.

Not that it had been a very long drop. The Bristows were a family of tailors.

Her usually stoic servant smiled tightly and tapped a parchment letter on a silver salver. "Your sister wrote you a letter. Don't ignore her, my lady."

Bella shuddered. Her sister Polly was a bitter woman who blamed Jane Bristow for every problem that had ever befallen the family. But Jane was a phantom. Belladonna had become her true name. Her chosen moniker struck fear and admiration in the hearts of London's aristocracy. All they

needed was a reminder that their queen had returned, and this time, she would rule with vengeance.



T hat afternoon, Isabelle blew into the foyer at Number 9 Dove Street like a moth on a strong wind. Only to wonder if she had yet again chosen wrong.

"May I help you, Miss?" asked the liveried manservant who admitted her across the threshold. She drew herself up to her full height, which was nothing beside the tall, broad-shouldered, thoroughly imposing man.

In a tremulous voice that she wished sounded stronger, she said, "I am Lady Huntley, and I seek refuge at The House of Virtue."

The man's eyes widened fractionally.

"Isn't that what the Countess does? Help women who wish to escape from bad situations?" Like Rosalyn, who had run away from Alexander when he refused to abandon Isabelle. A foolishly noble commitment to keep, in hindsight. Neither of them should have gone forward with the engagement once it was clear that they were incompatible. Yet marriage contracts were enforceable and society took a dim view of men who broke with one woman to pursue another.

"I don't know what you've heard about us, my lady, but the charity is not accepting new Flowers at this time," said the manservant.

Isabelle deflated. If this didn't work, she was going to have to turn to one of her acquaintances for help. Mrs. Cora Wentworth might let her stay

for a while, but it would be humiliating to have to ask for refuge from a woman she barely knew, and besides, Cora was recently married to a wealthy banker. By all accounts, they were madly in love. Isabelle had a viscerally negative response to the thought of being around happy newlyweds.

What was this feeling called? Envy? Impossible. If the dreamy, gauzy, floaty feeling that had prompted her to kiss Huntley was love, Isabelle wanted nothing to do with it ever again.

The only other person in London she could turn to was her other halfbrother, Darius. He, too, was recently married to a widow.

"Please, sir," she begged. "May I at least come inside for a few minutes? I have nowhere else to go."

Reluctantly, he admitted her past the threshold. Isabelle stumbled into the elegant foyer of the infamous House of Virtue. A footman took her mantle, a light cream silk with pale pink accents. A streak of dirt marred one sleeve. She winced seeing it. The hem of her skirt was flecked with street filth and the hairstyle her new lady's maid had carefully pinned this morning was coming undone beneath her fashionable hat. She handed that to him, too.

The liveried man showed her to a tastefully appointed sitting room, where Isabelle perched nervously on a blue settee. She felt dirty and unworthy of this glamorous place.

A woman with limpid brown eyes and glossy chestnut curls draped artfully over one shoulder entered, carrying a tray. Isabelle did a double-take at the second woman, who appeared identical in every way. They had the same sloped noses and plump lips. The only differences she could spot was a tiny mole beneath one lady's eye that the other didn't possess and the necklaces nestled at their throats. One charm was a sprig of ivy; the other, a delicately crafted enamel iris.

"Welcome," said the one carrying the tea tray. "I am Ivy. This is my twin sister, Iris. Do you take sugar?"

"Please," Isabelle answered belatedly, jerking her gaze away. The situation was nothing like she had expected. They arranged themselves as mirror images in the matching wingback chairs across from hers. She sipped her tea, which was excellent quality, yet she could not shake the uncanny weirdness of the situation.

"Starke says you came here seeking refuge," the one with the iris necklace said. The other sister tipped her head curiously.

Isabelle set her tea down and composed herself, hands in her lap. "I need a place to stay. I don't know for how long."

The twins exchanged a glance.

"We don't accept married women. The House of Virtue is a refuge for former fallen angels who seek to reform their lives."

Isabelle almost believed her.

"Does your husband beat you?" asked Ivy. Isabelle shook her head.

"Has he forced you to bed him?" asked her sister. Again, Isabelle shook her head. She had gone willingly to her brutal deflowering.

"I don't think Bella will take you in if there's not an immediate threat to your physical safety," the first sister said gently. "Ladies who come here usually sponsor us in leaving our wicked ways behind. They don't ask for help themselves. Bella doesn't like to interfere with other people's marital affairs."

Isabelle's heart sank. She hadn't considered that her new title might make others hesitant to aid her. "May I speak with the countess?"

The twins exchanged a glance and shrugged. "We can ask. Wait here."

Isabelle found Silas' trinket in her pocket and spun it idly while waiting. She set it on the table. What was it? What purpose did it serve? Huntley couldn't have cared much about it if he'd left it laying on the floor in the

corner of that appallingly messy room. Whatever he was doing in there, it didn't involve cleaning.

None of her business. Not anymore.

A shadow flitting across the hallway prompted her to snatch up her prize and tuck it into her pocket.

"Belladonna will see you," said Ivy, beckoning. Even without her eerily similar twin nearby, Isabelle realized the girl was beautiful in a haunted way.

"Why do you call her Belladonna instead of Countess Oreste?"

"Everyone does, here."

That wasn't an answer, but Isabelle didn't press the point. She found herself inspecting each room they passed through on the way to wherever they were going. The mansion was larger on the inside than it looked from outside. The exterior blended perfectly into the row of Bath stone Mayfair townhouses. The interior, however, was more opulent than any palace.

Sculptures of nude figures were tucked into alcoves that seemed to have been created especially for their proportions. She knew the French countess had cosmopolitan tastes, but seeing sculptures of naked bodies was rather shocking. Even more scandalous was the large painting that dominated the far wall of what appeared to be a formal dining room. A woman reclined on a green velvet sofa with three men in masks touching her...

Isabelle blinked and almost walked into a chair.

"Are you all right?" asked her guide through this strange underworld.

"I was distracted by the art," Isabelle said ruefully.

"That was a custom commission from Bella's time as a courtesan, before she married Comte Oreste." Ivy smiled, cat-like, over her shoulder. "She was even more scandalous then than she is now. As a widowed countess, she is a veritable paragon of virtue."

Isabelle was starting to think that her concept of what qualified as scandalous was as shallow and ill-formed as her ideas about love and

marriage.

"I must warn you. Bella has been through an ordeal recently," continued the twin. Without being able to see their necklaces, she couldn't tell the women apart.

"I heard she was missing for most of the Season." Which was why Isabelle mostly knew the countess by reputation, despite her sister-in-law's friendship with her.

"Bella was recently ill," Ivy said flatly. "She is still recovering. Not that she has let her infirmity prevent her from renovating the main ballroom into a theatre."

"She's doing what?" The sound of hammers reached Isabelle's ears seconds before Ivy led her into a huge, brightly-lit room with a thick canvas curtain at one end, ladders and buckets placed near the center. Workmen in rough clothing sawed wood. Another was hammering pieces together into what appeared to be a frame. In the center of the chaos stood a woman in a deep blue gown with black trim. Her black hair shone in the light, but when even from the back, Isabelle could tell the countess was much thinner than the last time she'd seen her. Despite the shocking way her clavicles jutted out, she moved with energy and purpose.

"We're creating a private theatre," Ivy said proudly. "Before she was a courtesan, Bella was an assistant to an opera singer. She has an actor's love for performance."

Isabelle's eye was already skimming along the framing that would, presumably, create the stage. "The dimensions are off," she blurted.

"What do you mean?" The countess strode over to them.

"I...My lady, I do not wish to insult your project or your workers," Isabelle stammered.

"Lady Huntley, isn't it? The new mistress of Cheveny?" Isabelle's chin dipped shyly. "Yes."

"We are equals. Address me as Bella, please. Everyone does." She tipped her head. "What brings you to my House of Virtue? I assume it's not to provide design advice."

Was she imagining the wink in Bella's tone? Isabelle hated feeling like everyone else understood a joke that made no sense to her. This had been part of what made her Season so miserable. She had a tendency to focus on details over the big picture. She missed cues that everyone else seemed to understand. This felt like one more such a moment in a long, painful string of them. Tears welled in her eyes, but she swallowed and refused to let them fall.

"I'm sorry, Lady—I mean, Bella. I enjoy architecture and mathematics. The stage you are building right now would be more harmonious with the room's overall proportions if you made it two or three feet narrower on either side, and extended the front into a bow shape. You would have room for an orchestra pit to either side without blocking anyone's view."

The countess turned to examine the frame. "Interesting idea. I wouldn't expect a young lady to be educated in the subject, but I see your point. I shall stop the work for today and consult with my architect on how to improve the design."

Just like that? Isabelle gaped. The tight feeling in her chest eased. She no longer felt like bursting into tears. "I had an unusual upbringing," she mumbled.

"I think you'll find that most people under my roof come from less-than-ordinary circumstances." Bella tucked her hand into Isabelle's elbow and led her into a room set up with gaming tables covered in green baize. They slid into a settee, knee to knee. The countess rested her bony hands on the gleaming wood edge. "Tell me why a newly-married countess is asking for my help."

"I have made a terrible error of judgment. A few weeks ago I..." She had to stop and take a breath before pushing the damning words past her

teeth. "I coerced Lord Silas into marrying me. We were wed last Sunday. Today, I overheard him calling me vile names. There is no hope for our union." She gave a shuddery sigh. This was humiliating to admit. "An annulment is not an option. We finalized our union, if you understand my meaning."

Bella laughed. "There is no need to be coy here. You may speak plainly. Your husband, took you to bed as soon as he got you alone, and yet you believe he despises you?"

"His direct words were that I am 'an empty-headed, mercenary fortune hunter.' He said he'd rather be married to a bog witch. So yes, I know for a fact he despises me."

"That is rather vicious of him." Bella clucked her tongue. "Men can be such idiots. Lord Huntley has a beautiful young bride who wishes to please him, with a talent for design. He ought to be praising his good fortune, not calling you names. You have a better eye than trained professionals."

"It's just math." Heat crept into her cheeks. "I used to draw elaborate fantasy buildings. Castles. Mansions. I loved to draw homes."

Growing up, she'd fantasized about living in an opulent house like Cheveny. But in her imagination, it was filled with laughter. The cottage where she'd lived with her father was small, but she liked the idea of having enough space for family and friends. The people in her fantasy would never make her feel anxious or stupid for failing to understand a joke.

The House of Virtue seemed as close to her dream as she would ever get. The residents were welcomed despite their eccentricities. The staff appeared to be well-treated. Not one person here had made her feel small for not understanding something right away. They'd simply informed her and moved on from the subject, no matter how awkward. She appreciated this more than she could express.

"Please, Bella. I have nowhere else to go except my half-brother's."

"The one you were engaged to?"

Isabelle wrung her hands. "He and Rosalyn are so happy together, now that they're expecting their first child. It would be a hardship for me to be there, under the circumstances. I beg of you, let me stay here. I promise I'll leave as soon as I figure out what to do next. I need time."

"Very well." Bella sighed. "I'm turning in to such a soft touch. I must warn you that the House is in a state of upheaval at the moment. I shall introduce you to Tulip. She can help you get settled in."



G one. Not a full week into their marriage, and his wife had left him.

Silas couldn't blame her. He'd been resentful and hard-hearted. But no matter how rightfully angry he'd been, he couldn't simply lose his wife. It was not done. Yet no one had seen Isabelle since she'd run out into the streets of London, alone, hours ago.

Now, nearly twenty-four hours after her disappearance, he'd moved past frantic and into despondent guilt. He had tried to assuage his deepening remorse by dropping a small fortune on private detectives who promised to keep the matter private. Thanks to that gossipy ginger Pindell, however, Silas could practically hear the news of their rocky beginning spreading like wildfire.

This was not a distraction he needed at this particular juncture.

Damn Isabelle for being so damned sensitive. Double damn her for entrapping him. Tripple damn her for running off.

He spiked his fingers through his hair and tugged at the roots. He hadn't been able to work on his project, either. The swivel still hadn't turned up. He needed that piece to make his engine work. He could make another one, but given the state of his workshop, he wasn't sure where he'd put the notebook with the original idea. He'd have to recreate it from scratch.

Right now, he didn't have the heart.

Nor did he have the patience to deal with Pindell.

"Still hiding here?" his visitor asked brightly. "I missed you at White's yesterday evening."

"Something came up," Silas gritted out.

"You don't look well." Pindell bent closer. "Did you sleep at all last night?"

"I was up late working." He flicked a broken gear across the table. "Not going well." He owed his friend no explanation about why his work was stalled. All his friend would say is, *no wonder you can't find your silly trinket, look at this sty*. Pindell might be right, but now was not the time Silas wanted to hear it.

"Good thing there's a woman in your life now." The viscount sauntered over to a table and picked up a prototype model of a pen that never ran out of ink. Silas had never figured out how to control the flow properly. After several messy failures, he'd moved on to a different project.

"How so?" he asked crankily.

"Look at this place. Needs a feminine touch."

Why did that phrase send a shiver up his spine? Worse, Silas' cock twitched against his thigh at the memory of Isabelle's legs parting. Why hadn't he been gentler with her? He hadn't been rough, precisely, but... He couldn't lie to himself. The sex hadn't been bad because of her. He was the one who'd been careless, sloppy, and rushed. He had tried to stifle his genuine attraction with enough wine to fell an ox, but it was Isabelle's whimper of pain that had killed his desire that night.

"Speaking of feminine touches, you'll never believe what I heard," Pindell said, idly picking up a discarded copper coil and toying with it.

Ire scorched up the back of Silas's neck.

"That your tongue wags like a dog's?" he snapped, then scrubbed his face. God, he was in a foul mood.

Pindell, however, took no notice. His disposition was as habitually sunny and unflappable, which made Silas feel even worse.

"Max was talking to his friend Darius. You know Max Tremaine, the Duke of Ardennes?"

"I know every damned duke in England. There aren't that many of them."

"Rhetorical question, Huntley. Everyone knows everyone in the aristocracy, and half of us are distant relations. Makes the marriage mart tricky. Anyway, I was at White's, waiting for you to join me, when Tremaine shows up. Apparently Emma, his wife, had a ladies' event that evening—"

"Get to the point, Pinhead."

"I am. I need to properly convey the source of my information or you won't believe me." He smirked and crossed his arms over his chest. Silas slumped deeper into his battered leather chair. "Max tells me that he heard from a chap named Betancourt that a girl matching Isabelle's description is staying at The House of Virtue."

"Bullshit." Silas sat up with a creak of ancient leather.

"Betancourt was quite put out that you scooped up the prettiest debutante of the Season. Imagine his surprise when he saw her at the notorious House of Virtue."

Silas had visited Countess Oreste's pleasure house on a couple of occasions. He didn't run with a fast set and didn't particularly care to share women with people he interacted with socially. He'd gone out of curiosity, and because the sex was said to be spectacular. It had been well worth the considerable money he spent, but he didn't pay the membership fee to become a regular visitor. Like most of London, he was well aware that the House of Virtue was a sham charity providing cover for the extravagant pleasure house called the House of Vice. He simply didn't care. Or hadn't, until now.

"That is impossible." Silas was already on his feet and headed for the door.

Pindell trailed after him with a smug expression that Silas wanted to smash off the man's face with his bare fist. He wasn't given to fighting, but the thought of any other man in England touching a single hair on his wife's head hazed his vision red with bloodlust. He would kill any man who laid a finger on Isabelle. She was his wife. She had promised herself to him. What was a countess doing posing as a courtesan?



# Isabelle

ISABELLE BENT TO take precise measurements with her tape, jotting them in a tiny notebook with an equally diminutive pencil that was starting to get dull, then stretching out her tape measure a second time to check her work. She hummed contentedly, occasionally glancing at the cluster of scantily-clad women in the center of the room, taking turns climbing a length of silk attached to the ceiling overhead.

The past twenty-four hours had been an exhilarating blur. She'd hardly slept in her comfortable room, instead choosing to chat with the other residents of the House of Virtue until the wee hours of the night. Tulip, a brash blonde, acted as Bella's second-in-command. She had shown Isabelle to her quarters and introduced her to Azalea, a buxom redhead; Violet, a statuesque Black woman who wore a turban and insisted she could communicate with the dead; and Chrys, short for Chrysanthemum. Everyone took a flower name, symbolizing a fresh start and transition. Isabelle, after some consideration had chosen Poppy.

She was tired of bland, pallid innocence. She wanted a bold name. One that was fun. The opposite of everything she was.

Part of her couldn't blame Huntley for speaking so cruelly about her. What she had done to him was awful; she saw that now. Regardless of her reasons, he had every right to resent her. She needed a fresh start and a chance to figure out how she was going to take control of her life.

Fix the mess she'd gotten herself into.

In the meantime, making herself useful to her benefactress at least let her feel like she was earning her keep.

One of the twins climbed the lengths of silk high into the air. She wrapped one end around her arm and stretched out her leg. The effect was as beautiful as it was, well, erotic. The Flowers did seem to have a preference for clothing that revealed a considerable amount of skin. Isabelle was having trouble getting used to that aspect of the House of Virtue. Everyone had been so kind and accepting. She didn't want to upset the ladies by criticizing the way they dressed.

Especially when she was dressed like one of them. The red silk gown Iris had given her, saying the color didn't suit and she didn't want it back, was cut so low that Isabelle kept pressing her hand to her breasts fearing they would fall out every time she bent to take a measurement. The dress hugged her waist and hips before flaring into a slightly wider skirt that kept tangling around her ankles. She was a few inches taller than the twins, and the hem hit just above her ankle. Despite the close fit, the gown was easy to move around in, and showing a little leg around other women didn't seem too scandalous. She wouldn't leave the house wearing it, however.

She added a few lines to her sketch of the new stage. Now that she understood the kind of performances Bella wanted to put on, she had changed the design a half-dozen times. The architects grumbled about all her requests. The countess had left the project in Isabelle's hands while she attended to "other business."

Mysterious. Isabelle wasn't inclined to pry, though. She had her own project to work on.

A commotion outside caused her to glance up, but when nothing came of it, she continued making adjustments to her sketch. There was an awkward angle she would have to re-measure... She set aside her sketchbook and bent to apply her tape to the wall.

"Where is she?" a man's voice demanded, his fury echoing through the nearly-empty room. "I know my wife is here. Show yourself, Isabelle."

Ivy twisted in the silk ribbons, twirling to get a better view of Lord Silas Huntley as he stormed across the ballroom like a human thundercloud. Isabelle rose slowly and depressed the button on her tape measure. The fabric snaked into its case, which she concealed in her palm as if her work was a shameful secret. Her heart hammered in her throat.

Huntley halted, staring. His gaze drifted down her body, taking in the crimson gown, her exposed bosom, past her waist and down her hips until he stared at the jeweled velvet slippers Bella insisted the women wear indoors. Her lips parted to *say I can explain*, but his furious gaze shot up and rooted her to the spot.

"What the hell are you wearing?" he growled.

Isabelle stiffened. He had some nerve, talking to her like a wayward child. She was a woman. She was his wife, and he didn't even want her around. What did it matter?

"A dress," she informed him. "Seeing as my trunk is still at your townhouse."

He closed the distance between them in three strides and grabbed her by the arm. "You are being ridiculous. Come with me. Right now."

"I'm not going anywhere," she protested. "I want to stay here." God, her voice came out like a pathetic little girl's. She tried again. "I am staying here, Huntley. Unhand me."

She dug in her heels, but the velvet slippers were useless on a polished wood floor. She skidded forward and nearly fell to her knees. He righted

her, shifting his grip while she was too off-balance to run. The tape measure clattered to the floor and rolled away.

"Huntley." Tulip approached, trailed by the other Flowers. "Leave her be. You have no right."

"She is my wife. I have every right."

"But she doesn't want to leave with you. She stays." Tulip stood her ground.

Huntley turned to Isabelle. "You promised. To honor and obey, but most of all, not to embarrass me the way your mother did the Earl de Lucey."

"I haven't. I won't." Confusion flickered through her like a candle guttering.

"You don't know, do you?" He gave her a tiny shake. "Dressed like one of them, but you have no idea what they are."

"They're ladies who've fallen on hard times," Isabelle said, but her eyes darted to Tulip uncertainly. What was he talking about? Tulip opened her mouth to speak, but Huntley beat her to the punch.

"They're whores, Isabelle. All of them. Is that what you want to be? A prostitute?"

S ilas couldn't stop staring at his wife.

She was *stunning*. Good lord, how had he failed to see it before? The gentle swell of Isabelle's breasts cupped by crimson silk made his mouth water and the front of his trousers feel like a prison. Her shape wasn't as curvaceous as most of the other Flowers' but where they prompted mild interest at most, looking at her caused an inferno to heat his blood.

He'd been a fool. He was still being a fool. He wanted to drag her out of this place and take her back to Cheveny and do what he should have done the first time around: make love to his wife as often as humanly possible until he was drunk on her touch.

Instead, she was straining against his hold, her blue eyes flared wide and her lips parted.

Afraid—of him? Or shocked by what he'd told her?

"Corroborate me, Tulip."

She sighed. "The House of Virtue is a sham, Poppy. Lord Huntley speaks the truth. We playact fallen angels and fuck like devils." With a narrow glare at him, she added, "But it isn't entirely an act. When women have saved enough money and have a plan, some leave. Bella gives us a way out on our own terms."

Silas hadn't known that piece of it. "Name one Flower who left."

"Jasmine. She bought an old inn in Cornwall to renovate." Tulip crossed her arms over her chest. "The Rose of London left, too. She was one of the founding Flowers, and we choose our names in her honor."

Isabelle's brow furrowed. She didn't like that name, for some reason. Silas had no time to wonder why before a man said in a threatening tone, "Unhand Miss Poppy or have your hand removed for you."

Poppy?

Poppy wasn't a seductive name. It was childish and coquettish. It didn't suit Isabelle at all, and yet it was oddly perfect for her within this very specific context. She even smelled different. Less innocent. A spritz of perfume clung to her skin, mixing with her natural feminine scent.

He desired her. Badly. Yet that did not change what she had done to secure him.

She twisted free of his grasp. Silas instantly regretted letting her go. "I'd like a moment to speak with you. Privately."

"Fine." Isabelle snatched up a circular metal case about the size of a man's palm and set it on a notebook. Had she drawn that sketch? There was real talent in her work, if so. He knew far less about his wife than he ought to.

"We can use the game parlor," she said. "But I want you to know, Huntley, that I will not leave with you today."

"You promised to provide me with an heir. You can't do that from inside a whorehouse unless you're trying to sneak a cuckoo's egg into my nest."

She shook her head vehemently. Her blond hair was styled differently from usual, in a sophisticated upsweep that left tendrils dangling down her elegant neck. He had the insane desire to taste her tender flesh.

"I cannot imagine ever wanting to experience that again." She gave a delicate shudder. "I will lie with you if I absolutely must, but I would like to consult with the Flowers first. If there is any way to avoid an experience I

found painful, humiliating, and frankly unpleasant, I would like time to explore alternative options."

Ouch. Not exactly a rave review of his performance.

He'd done that to her. Hurt her, humiliated her, and made her singular experience with the act of lovemaking an unpleasant one. What an indictment of his skills in the bedroom. He'd wanted to do those things to her. He'd been so angry with himself at finding his cunning, duplicitous wife desirable that in his anger, he had deliberately made it a punishment. He was worse than a cad. He was a fool of the highest order.

He knew a man alone on a balcony was a target for any debutante. He'd gone out there anyway, for part of him was curious about the extremely pretty but rather awkward debutante that everyone kept talking about. They had danced twice on prior occasions. He'd spoken with her briefly earlier that evening and found her charming, if a bit fawning. In retrospect, it should have been obvious to him then that she was taken with him, but he'd taken her easily given affection for granted. Now, he was going to have a devil of a time winning it back.

"What would they know about getting an heir?" Silas said crossly. Suddenly, the prospect of Isabelle pregnant with his baby held immense appeal. Her belly round with his seed. Holding their son to her breast. His throat tightened.

"If the Flowers know how to prevent getting with child, they should be able to tell me how to do the opposite."

Silas's temple throbbed. "What are you talking about?"

Scarlet stained the apples of her cheeks. Isabelle couldn't quite meet his eye. "I mean that there should be a way to get your heir without having to endure intercourse again."

It wasn't that bad, he almost blurted. But then he thought about the angry, distant way he'd thrust between her thighs and how he'd been so disgusted with himself that he'd stopped before reaching his own climax,

never mind attempting to give her pleasure. He winced. Their wedding night really *had* been that bad.

"I don't want a workaround, Isabelle. I want you. The natural way."

She gaped at him. "You most certainly do not. I heard what you said about me, Silas. That I-I'm a fortune hunter. You'd rather be married to a bog witch."

Silence fell between them, freighted with all the mistakes that had brought them to this juncture.

"I want you to know that I didn't choose you for your money. I wanted you for yourself," she said softly. "You were the only man who seemed to take pleasure in my company. In hindsight, I read too much into what was nothing more than politeness. Mine was a genuine error. I naively believed you were attracted to me and that I could make you happy. I am sorry I kissed you on that balcony. I would do anything to go back in time and undo my rash and impulsive action."

God, she meant it. He was still angry about the way she'd tricked him, but remorse was written in the slump of her shoulders, the slight downward curve to her lips, and her slim fingers that wouldn't stay still. They twisted in her lap or darted to her hair, toying with a strand, while she tried and failed to meet his gaze.

He couldn't say he forgave her. He didn't. But he was not going to let his wife walk out on him after only a few days of marriage. Wounded pride had gotten him into this situation, and pride meant he must repair it.

"I want a chance to woo you properly," he said.

"What?" Her chin jerked up and her eyes flew wide. Again, she shook her head. "No. You don't like me enough to woo me. Go find yourself a bog witch!"

He laughed. "The only bog witch I want is my own wife, Isabelle." He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tipping her face to his.

Her breath came in quick pants, faint waves of heat ghosting across his cheek. "Let me try to win you. If I can't, I'll petition for a divorce."

Silas felt reasonably certain he could obtain one. It would be a scandal, but if there truly was no hope for them, then it was better than trying to muddle through the rest of their natural lives hating one another. How fitting that they were having this conversation in a gaming room, for he was taking an enormous gamble betting that he could win her forgiveness after the hash he'd made of his marriage so far. He didn't need her heart, but he wanted her respect, and he wanted a chance to touch her the right way. Make her forget the pain he'd caused. He owed her that much. If he didn't succeed, he could release her knowing that he'd tried his best to make amends.

"A divorce," she echoed.

"An annulment would be virtually impossible to obtain at this point."

Hinges creaked open. Isabelle jerked away as if his touch burned. Silas reacted slowly, turning to glare at the intruder.

"If you want to seduce your wife, you must pay the subscription fee, Lord Huntley."

"Bella," he said warily, as one might greet a poisonous snake one encountered in the garden. "I don't want access to all your Flowers. Only this one." He dragged his knuckle down Isabelle's bare arm. She glowered, but it was half-hearted.

"One or all, the fee is the same. I don't offer an a la carte option."

"I understood you were getting out of the whoring business. Good lord, what happened to you? You look awful."

"I was ill," she answered briskly, and propped her bottom on the edge of a gaming table. "I shall recover. In the meantime, I have decided to shift the House of Virtue's operations. Discerning men need more than scandalous sex to appease their appetites. We're expanding into theatrical performances. Instead of being open at all hours, we will host weekly themed events. It's been an open secret that the House of Virtue is not what it purports to be. Now, I intend to move away from being an outright brothel into something closer to social acceptability." She cut a sharp look at Isabelle. "I did warn you about this."

Isabelle blushed furiously.

"But I still have to pay to court my own wife," Silas protested.

"Townhouses in Mayfair don't run themselves, Huntley." She winked. What a flirt. In the right light, she could still pass for a woman in her midtwenties, though he knew she was closer to forty. Not a single strand of gray touched her gleaming black locks. Her complexion was almost unlined as Isabelle's, though not as pale. A dusting of face powder couldn't quite conceal the sallow tinge to her skin, either. There was a brittleness about her that he hadn't noticed before. Bella's flirtations felt slightly forced—but her spine was nothing less than steel.

"Do you accept my bargain?" she asked.

He glanced at Isabelle. Her wide blue eyes were filled with fear and... dare he say it, hope?

Turning to the countess, he said, "I accept."



"H untley, I want a word with you in private."

Being summoned by the countess brought to mind every instance where he'd been sent before the headmaster at Eton. He was never overtly unruly. No, his misdeeds tended to be spectacular blowouts in between long stretches of generally good behavior. He once organized a test of a silk-and-steel contraption called "Icarus wings." He was too cowardly to jump from the tallest church spire at the school, but Pindell hadn't been.

The earl gamely strapped himself into that harness, took hold of the bar, and leaped off...only to have one wing to collapse and send him toppling onto the roof below. There was no soaring across the quadrangle as thirteen-year-old Silas had envisioned. Instead, his failed experiment left Pindell in a cast with a broken arm and leg for the next eight weeks.

He smiled at the memory. The fact that they were still friends all these years later had to be some kind of miracle.

"What's so amusing?" Bella asked as she shut the door to her study. She produced a cut glass decanter and poured him three fingers of brandy without asking what he wanted. After one sniff, Silas didn't want anything else anyway. A single sip was like drinking liquid gold with a hint of caramel. Even he didn't keep such fine liquor around. Besides, he'd sworn off alcohol after his miserable excess of the past few weeks.

"You're the most brazen woman I have ever met." He clinked her glass. "You steal my wife, dress her up like one of your whores, and try to keep her from me. I can't decide whether to complain to the police or commend you."

"You'll thank me in the end," she said smugly. "How old is your wife, Silas?"

Her use of his given name was part of the manipulation. He knew how Bella operated. The countess' mind worked like an intricate machine. She flattered and cajoled a man until she had him right where she wanted him, and then she took him for everything he was worth. His best chance of winning a game of wits with her was to play along.

"Eighteen years and five months old."

Belladonna instantly picked up on his grimace of distaste. "She's a bit underripe to your taste, isn't she? Her youth is sour to your palate."

Damn the countess for phrasing it so well. He raised his snifter to his lips and let the brandy linger. If Isabelle was a grape, she'd be fresh on the vine. He liked them aged in oak and complex on the tongue.

"Many men would covet the opportunity to deflower a beautiful virgin," Bella said slyly. "I should know. I've sold a few."

Silas almost spat out his drink. She settled into the chair opposite him and crossed her legs beneath her skirt. A woman wearing the kind of tightly corseted, bustled, draped gown that was currently in fashion wouldn't have been able to curl up so casually. An act, but hell if she wasn't effective at winning a man's trust.

"How did the virgins feel about being sold?"

"It was their idea. One married her buyer. They're very happy together. Expecting a baby in the summer."

Suddenly, he was burning with curiosity to know which high society wife had met her husband in a virginity auction. The sheer scandal would keep the scandal rags busy for weeks. Months. The ladies of more delicate constitutions might never recover from the vapors. His mind whirled through months of newspaper announcements for any plausible names. Not the new Countess de Lucey. Nor Wentworth's new wife, either. Cora Wilder, as she'd been called before her marriage, had a short season and then disappeared from high society for the better part of a decade. No one else came to mind, except for Cora's brother, Eryx Wilder, the founder of Wilder & Co., the bank that bore his name. He'd married a few months ago, rather...unexpectedly.

"Wilder?" Silas blurted out. Bella's lips curved up into a smile.

"I'll never tell." She winked. "Nothing that happens under my roof is without the consent of all willing parties. That rule will apply to your wife as well as every other Flower who lives here."

"I don't care if she consents. No other man touches her."

Bella clucked her tongue. "Such a growly bear."

Silas made a face. "I mean it. I won't raise another man's child as my own."

"We have remedies to ensure that won't happen."

"I said, no one touches my wife."

The countess tapped her chin, thinking. "She is not to your taste...yet. But with a bit of seasoning, I rather like Isabelle for you. She has a good eye for the way things fit together."

"You forget, I am not a 'thing.' I am a man."

She smiled gleefully. "Isabelle is quite aware of the fact, I assure you." Her grin faded. "I must know what you've done to her to scare her off."

"I didn't do anything." He hadn't hurt her. Or had he? The fact that he didn't know rankled. He'd been so caught up in his own discomfort and anger that he couldn't be sure. "I wasn't violent toward her, if that's what you're thinking." After a fortifying swallow of brandy, he added, "I'm sure Isabelle has already told you everything."

"I've heard her side of events, but I want to understand yours."

He sighed heavily. "She caught me on a balcony at a party a few weeks ago. Kissed me out of nowhere, right on the lips. I was about to go back inside when she came out. I'd made a bit of pleasant conversation, that's all."

"You'd never met her before that night?"

"I had. We danced at a ball the Duke of Ardennes suckered me into attending. He's besotted with his own ward, Emma." Add them to the list of fashionable London newlyweds. Himself, too. Just because he didn't pay attention to such things didn't mean life didn't continue on.

How much of life had he missed over the years of his obsession with electromagnets?

"I danced with her one other time, too, out of politeness," he said. "There was nothing in our interactions that would have led me to believe she desired me. I was certain—and I remain so—that she entrapped me for my fortune. In a moment of frustration, I may have spoken this too harshly. She wasn't meant to overhear me say that."

"Interesting."

"What is?"

"If you had paid closer attention, you'd know that Isabelle doesn't care a farthing about wealth. She was miserable being a society debutante. As good as she is at mathematics, she doesn't seem to have an avaricious bone in her body. Furthermore, I strongly suspect there was a different reason that drove her into the questionable safety of your arms. When we next meet, I'd like you have a better answer for me about why she chose you."

Silas had to look away. He knew less than nothing about his wife, clearly.

"Before you leave, I'll need you to sign this agreement and pay Poppy's fee."

"Fee?" Extortionate witch.

"Five thousand pounds should cover her expenses."

He choked on the brandy. "What are you planning on buying her? Gowns of pure gold?"

"It's hardly a grand sum to a man like you. Did you or did you not recently set Wilder & Co. on the precipice by withdrawing money for an overseas investment and to pay your staff handsome holiday bonuses?"

While he had paid his staff well, most of that money had been for renting and fitting out the warehouse where soon, production would begin on his prototype electromagnetic engines. He hadn't wanted to tip his hand that he was going into business.

"How do you know about that?" he asked in consternation.

"There is very little of consequence that I am unaware of." Her brows pinched together thoughtfully. "What I don't know, I make it my business to find out."

Grumbling, Silas produced a blank bank draft from his inner pocket and began filling it out. "For this much, I want to see her in gold," he said, passing it to her. Isabelle would shine in gold. Literally, but also in the sense that it would complement her coloring in a way that innocent white did not. The red dress had been a revelation. She needed bright colors, not insipid innocence.

The countess smiled, catlike, and tapped the contract. He signed that too. She strode to her massive desk and set them on its gleaming surface, then refilled his glass and toasted him. "To transforming your wife into a sophisticate you can love."

"I don't need to love her." Nor did he want to. "All I need is for her to be someone I can make an heir with."

Her smile sagged slightly. "I can make her into a desirable woman, but it's up to you to come to terms with how you ended up married to her. Your part of this bargain is to court her. I expect you to return three days hence with flowers."

"Court my own wife," he echoed in disbelief.

"Not only her, Huntley." She swatted his arm lightly. "This is why you read contract before you sign them. You have to court *all* the Flowers. They shall help Isabelle become as fine a courtesan as any man could ever want, but they—and I—won't bestow her upon just any man. You must prove to us how much you desire her. Need her. Adore her. Love her."

"I get the drift."

What was he doing? He should be throwing Isabelle over his shoulder and dragging her out of here, not paying the most notorious countess in London to corrupt his innocent young wife.

He took in the deep shadows beneath Bella's eyes and the faint lines bracketing her lips. She was still beautiful, but there was a brittleness to her that hadn't been there before. "You look like shit, Bella. Get some rest."

"I hate resting."

"Well, I loathe courting, yet here we are."

"Three days, Huntley. Flowers. Don't forget."



B ella tucked Huntley's bank draft and signed contract into her private safe. The knob spun smoothly, the lock clicking almost inaudibly in the deafening silence. A wave of fatigue swept through her body with the ferocity of a summer storm.

Warm notes of recently burned tobacco mixed with the scent of shoe polish touched her nostrils.

"I know you're there, Hawke."

"I still don't understand how Biddy Ross's son sneaked up on you. The oaf walked like an elephant." Hawke stepped out of the shadows and cocked one hip against the corner of her desk.

"He was already there when I arrived. Besides, his pistol was rather convincing," she said drily. She didn't want to admit that after a full day of travel, she'd let down her guard. She'd gone there to flee from an unknown danger that Hawke had warned her to run from. They'd fought about it bitterly during her two-week recovery at the Overlook Inn, where her onetime Flower, Jasmine, had bought property with the money she'd saved during her time as a whore.

"I'm not going to re-litigate my capture with you, Hawke. Get out of my study, and stay out of my house from now on."

He regarded her solemnly. "I meant you no harm."

She snorted.

"I've been worried about you."

"I'm fine, Hawke. I returned to find my pleasure house in shambles. Not that I would have the faintest idea where to locate you in the event I did want to speak with you, which I don't." She ought to have vetted the newcomers she brought on before her unexpected departure better. Especially Daisy. Despite Bella's explanation that the second rule of being a whore at the House of Vice was that you did not compete for clients, Daisy had backstabbed and backtalked until all the other Flowers hated her.

The House of Vice was no ordinary brothel. Here, a woman could ply her trade and live in luxury without falling deeply into debt to the madam. Bella carefully managed the health of her Flowers. They could set boundaries with the clientele and not have to worry about giving offense.

To most whores, The House of Vice was a coveted destination.

To the men of the aristocracy, it had been an elite club where one's wildest fantasies could be fulfilled without the risk of reputational ruin. Queen Victoria did not hesitate to censure those who crossed her, and she despised Bella. Every participant at the House of Virtue trusted Bella to manage the queen and thus keep their fun safe and secret.

During her prolonged and unanticipated absence, Daisy had rampaged through Bella's beloved project with the subtlety of a wild bull trapped in a china shop, destroying years of work in the span of four short months. Archie, Bella's son, had been tasked with managing her affairs in case of an emergency, but her directive wasn't intended to be enacted at his tender age of nineteen. He was too timid to handle Daisy. Any of her strong-willed Flowers could have cowed him, but all of them together had driven him to the breaking point.

Among the many urgent matters she'd needed to take care of upon her return, Archie was Bella's highest priority. He'd requested a long seaside holiday with his lover, Geoffrey. She had therefore sent the boys off to Bath with plenty of funds to visit in luxury for months. Another expense she could ill afford.

Then, she turned her attention to cleaning up the mess Daisy had made in her absence. With one woman sowing discord and division among both the Flowers and their clients, the resourceful women had turned to other interests than sex for money, including one Bella knew all too well: the theater, along with Violet and Azalea's newfound interest in one she was deeply skeptical of, the occult.

Hence the workmen in her ballroom.

Still, there was no denying that four months of dwindling income was taking a toll on her lavish operations. Bella tried think about it objectively. This was an investment.

But there was no denying that her grand project had failed—thanks to this man. Bella did not forgive easily, if she forgave at all.

"Why are you here?" she demanded. He caught her chin and gently forced her to meet his eye. When he offered no explanation, she smiled thinly and pulled away. "I hear you are to be congratulated, Hawke. A knighthood is quite the recognition of your service to Queen Victoria. Tell me, how long have you been spying on me for her?"

"I never told her anything about the House of Vice."

"Are you claiming it's you I have to thank for never being raided?"

"Me, and every other aristocratic gentleman who availed himself of your services. No one wanted to be caught."

"So modest." She tsked. "Humility doesn't suit you, Hawke. Quiet arrogance is more your style."

That was what had drawn her to him. Years ago, recently widowed and fresh from France to bury her husband, Bella had leveraged every contact she had to purchase two townhouses in Mayfair, renovate them into a single, enormous mansion, recruit one of the best courtesans in London—her close friend, Rose Leland, another recent transplant from abroad—and

open her life's work. With Archie safely ensconced at school and her salacious reputation semi-redeemed by the acquisition of a title, she had all the tools she needed to rule London's underworld like a dark version of the Queen herself.

She knew Hawke was Victoria's personal spy. He had no title, yet he was welcome in every ballroom. He irked her. The way he dogged her every step yet refrained from speaking with her. Always nearby, but unwilling to engage. They'd circled one another like two wolves for years until she felt secure enough—or drunk enough—to force the issue via a conversation at a party.

Ever since, he had been sneaking into her home without permission... but, she suspected, with aid from the one man Bella trusted implicitly. Starke, her household manager. That had to end, now.

Like her, Hawke traded in secrets. How fitting that she would fall for a spy.

Don't be dramatic, she chided herself inwardly. You haven't fallen for him.

"I haven't decided whether to accept the knighthood," he said.

Bella's quiet scoff hung between them. "What possible reason do you have to refuse?"

"I like what I have now."

"What is that?"

"You."

His single word hung in the air between them.

"Au contraire, Hawke, you don't have me at all." He never would, either, no matter how her pulse quickened with anticipation whenever she found him skulking around her house. "Take the knighthood. You've more than earned it."

"Victoria has informed me that my reward is no longer assured."

"A pity."

He smiled faintly. Bella ignored the stupid part of her that wanted to swoon. She was a hard-hearted thirty-eight-year-old widow, not a foolish debutante like Isabelle. She knew what men were capable of. Especially this one.

Still, she was a woman—one who had yearned for this man's touch for years. Who never stopped thinking about their one kiss. That kiss had sustained her through months of living hell. She would never admit it. Not to the man who'd put her in that pit.

"I was under direct orders to forget you." Again, he brought his hand to her face. Tough-skinned, callused fingertips fanned across her cheek. Bella fought the temptation to turn into his touch. To press a kiss in the center of that palm. He had a workman's hands. All her life, she'd known the soft, pampered touch of wealthy men. The thought of this man's touch on her body make her weak at the knees. "I couldn't. I can't."

She didn't pull away. Instead, she forced her eyes open and held his gaze. "Forgiveness is not in my repertoire, Hawke."

Again, that ghost of a smile tugged at his lips. Her gaze dropped there and held.

"I wasn't asking for your forgiveness, Bella. I don't need it. I did what I thought was best given the information I had at the time. Victoria could have ordered me to kill you and I wouldn't have done it. You are far too unique a woman to destroy." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Besides, any fool can become a knight."

She scoffed. He let her go, his fingertips gliding down the curve of her cheek. Something deep in her core clenched hard.

"Flattery," she said. "Nothing but hot air. You cannot serve two masters, Hawke. Or, in this case, two mistresses. You have to choose."

"I have chosen."

"But I don't trust you enough to choose you in return. I mean it, Hawke. Take your knighthood. Retire and become a country gentleman." His scoff told her exactly what he thought of that notion.

"Not until I know you're safe."

"I have been looking out for myself ever since I was seventeen years old. I will manage Biddy Ross." Three women could not rule London. Bella's vile counterpart had to be dealt with. Brutally. She had never committed murder, but she had witnessed Hawke kill her captor, Ross's son. He had blood on his hands defending her, but she was greedy.

Bella wanted all his devotion. All his secrets. If she couldn't have that, then there was no trust deep enough for her to allow him into her life or her bed.

He had to go. Now. Before her resolve crumbled and she lost even more than it already had.

"Don't go looking for the Witch, Bella. Promise me."

"No."

He sighed. "Very well. You force my hand. I have already begun tracking Ross. Her life is mine."

"Hawke. By rights, it's mine."

"Do you have the nerve, Bella? Or the strength?" His gaze trailed down her wasted body, missing no detail. The way her dress hung loosely on her frame. Her withered breasts. The new, faint lines at the corners of her eyes and bracketing her lips. She imagined he could even see the single gray hair she had plucked from her scalp with horror this morning.

"I am more than up to the task," she insisted. Bridget Ross, the Witch of St. Giles, would die by her hand. But first, she had to find the witch in her lair. Which meant her visits to the slums must continue no matter how she hated going there.



"M ay I ask a question?" Isabelle asked Violet while they were watching the twins attempt a double stunt with a large metal hoop suspended from the ceiling.

"Of course," the dark-skinned woman in a purple silk turban answered absently. "Anything."

"How does one get pregnant without having sex?"

Violet turned to her slowly with wide eyes. Her shoulders shook seconds before laughter burst past her full lips. "Aren't you full of surprises?"

Heat scorched Isabelle's cheeks. Apparently, one did not simply ask whores how to get pregnant, even if they said you could ask anything. Good to know.

"I made an agreement with my husband," she said. "I would provide him with an heir and he would allow me to live my life in relative freedom as long as I didn't embarrass him socially."

"But why not have sex with him?"

"I don't enjoy it. If there is a way to fulfill my end of the bargain without having to endure that again, I prefer to use the alternative method."

"Hm." Violet watched the twins rotate the suspended hoop. It wasn't very far off the ground. Their toes brushed the padding beneath when they

dipped their legs down. The silver ring wasn't tilting properly. Ivy's weight pulled it to an awkward angle until she tumbled from the contraption onto the pad. Iris swung wildly, clutching the ring with desperation until she crashed into her sister. They both went sprawling in a tangle of limbs and florid curses.

"They'll be all right," Violet said. "Azalea has this well in hand. Come. I'll show you one potential solution."

Violet's rich purple and bright gold overdress clung to her hips and shoulders. Her churning legs were clad in a shimmering transparent tissue split skirt. The essentials were covered, but only just. She strode into the library, where Isabelle had meant to spend more of her time but kept finding excuses not to. The expansive room was lined with built-in shelves and decorated with comfortable furniture that invited one to settle in with a good book.

Or not. Violet went to one shelf and pulled out a box, removing a...fake penis? Isabelle's lips parted in astonishment. At the base, like an obscene pair of testicles, was a rubber bulb.

"If your husband is willing, you could have him spend into this"—she held up the ivory replica— "and use the bulb to pump his seed into your vagina. It's crude, but it would work. In theory." She held it out. Isabelle recoiled. "Don't be afraid. It's only for show. It's never been used for its true purpose. Belladonna collects dildos."

"I beg your pardon?"

"These are called dildos. This one is a unique style, with the bulb. She brought it with her from France. It's over a hundred years old and quite valuable, so don't drop it." Her lips twitched into a grin. "We had quite a lot of fun with Rosalyn one night, using it to drink liquor. I had such a headache the next morning."

"Somehow, I can see Rosalyn doing that." Isabelle took the device and squeezed the base. "This part can't be original. Rubber like this didn't exist

a hundred years ago. Vulcanization was only discovered about thirty or forty years ago, by a man named Goodyear. This must be a more recent addition."

Which meant she wasn't the first person to wonder about artificial insemination.

"Why you would know a thing like that is beyond my ken." Violet collected the device and set it back where it belonged. Isabelle had the distinct and disappointing sense that her companion didn't care much about vulcanized rubber. She sighed. One day, she would learn not to trot out random facts that she had learned to near-strangers. She'd known Violet for only a few days. While Isabelle had never felt so welcomed or cared for, there were still moments like this when she was abruptly reminded that she remained an outsider.

"I understand not enjoying sex," she said. "I love Azalea. Being together with her is passionate and sweet. With the gents, it's pure business." After setting the device back in its place, she dropped her arm to her side. "Fancy a tour of the garden?"

"I'd like that."

They exited the library through French doors onto a stone balcony with a short flight of stairs leading into a private garden. Early summer had begun to paint the leaves of slumbering plants vivid green. Daffodils bobbed around the perimeter of the stone walkways. A small hedgerow maze occupied the center of the garden. Stone benches placed at intervals gave the impression of a larger space than it actually was. On two sides was a high brick wall. Behind them was Bella's mansion, and on the fourth side was a low-slung extension.

The only discordant note in the otherwise bucolic garden were the ugly stone steps leading down an imposing iron door, with a pathway leading to the outer wall. Tulip's dungeon, the House of Vice.

"One would hardly know we're in a city," Isabelle remarked, tamping down her curiosity about Tulip's infamous domain. Beyond the stone walls the sound of coach wheels on cobblestones and the clip-clop of horse hooves were audible.

"This place is a paradise." Violet raised her arms and spun in a circle, her tunic hem flaring. "As close to one as whores like us will ever get." She stopped abruptly and fixed Isabelle with a stare. "You, however, don't belong here. Is it men in general that you don't like? Or just your husband?"

"Men in general, I think." Memories of that night flashed through her mind, unbidden. She wished she could forget the whole incident. Her wedding night was seared into her brain. Branded into her skin. Everything she thought she knew about sex had been reinforced in the worst possible way.

"Do you prefer women?" Violet asked.

"Like you and Azalea?" Isabelle had been shocked to learn that two women could be together, but she'd quickly gotten over it. Everyone else treated them as a normal couple. Isabelle took the example to heart and immediately accepted them as lovers. Evidently, she still had a great deal to learn about sex.

Violet nodded.

"I don't think so."

"What makes your heart race, Poppy?" She crossed her hands over her heart and made a thumping motion. "What causes butterflies in your stomach? Ties your tongue?"

"Everything ties my tongue," she answered wryly. "I enjoy spending time with people one-on-one, as we are together now. I struggle in groups. I never know what to say. Everything I do say comes out wrong. My interests are peculiar, as you saw just now. I can sit there like a pretty doll, but my mind wanders when I do. I can't make casual conversation to save my life."

Growing up, she'd never had to. Her father always encouraged her to explore any subject that caught her fancy. He was genuinely captivated by her explorations. He'd been a talker, always filling the silence, but Tully Kingston was also a wonderful listener. She hadn't known what a gift he gave her until she lost him.

Her heart ached.

"That wasn't my question, Poppy."

She inhaled. Silas was the only person who had ever made her pulse race, of any sex. Yet she hadn't liked his touch. Surely that meant she didn't like anyone's touch?

Only a few months ago, when she'd been unwittingly betrothed to her own half-brother, she'd been comfortable with the thought of never experiencing romantic love. She wanted nothing to do with the churning emotions that drove Rosalyn to distraction. The only reason she had agreed to marry Alexander was because she cherished security.

Now look at her. Isabelle had taken a flying leap into Silas's arms. In retrospect, she had been projecting all the things she loved about her father onto a near-stranger. She thought she'd seen hints of the same qualities she'd abruptly lost when Tully Kingston passed away. Now, she knew it had all been in her imagination.

Love was nothing but an illusion. The security she craved—also an illusion. She had the Huntley name and his protection, but despite their charged interaction when he barged in searching for her, she would never have his trust. A hollow crater opened up behind her sternum.

She had followed her heart, and her heart had led her astray. She couldn't even blame him. This was all her fault.

"No one makes me feel that way," she said.

Violet regarded her solemnly. The sun dipped behind a cloud, casting a chill over the spring garden. "That's very sad. I might be a whore, but one

thing I have learned by living here is that love sustains the soul. Life is a lonely place without it. I wouldn't give up love for anything."

Isabelle broke eye contact. Shame crawled up her spine. She'd lied to her friend, who was only trying to help her. Yet admitting that she was hopelessly in love with her husband, even to herself, was too humiliating to admit.

"One last question. Why did you launch yourself at Huntley if you didn't want him?"

Isabelle winced. "I had no other choice. I was being...pursued by a man whose intentions were not honorable. He made me afraid and uncomfortable, but I couldn't tell anyone. He was too powerful. I desperately needed to get away from him, and Huntley seemed to actually enjoy my company, so..." She sighed heavily. "I did what was necessary to escape."

To her surprise, Violet accepted this explanation.

"We are always surprised by what we're capable of, when push comes to shove. We are stronger than we think." Violet hooked her arm through Isabelle's. "It's getting cold out here. Let's go back inside and get ready for Huntley's first night of courtship, shall we?"

A shiver rocketed through Isabelle's body. She might never be ready to see her husband again.



S ilas trudged up the walkway to Number 9 Dove Street carrying a bouquet of red poppies larger than his own head. Behind him trailed six footmen carrying slightly smaller bouquets, each one themed with the blossoms that gave the other Flowers' their monikers.

Except for Belladonna. One did not give anyone that much of a toxic plant to any woman, but especially when one couldn't be entirely certain what she would do with it.

Besides, the purple flowers were dull and not at all suitable for a woman of Belladonna's charisma. After dithering over what kind of flowers to bring the countess, he finally opted for an arrangement of pink and white roses. The blasted bouquets cost a small fortune. *Hothouse flowers for my hotheaded wife*, he grumbled to himself as he strode up the walkway. He and his footmen were admitted before he even knocked by that odd yet imposing liveried butler, Starke. He couldn't be certain, but he thought there was a gleam of approval in the stoic man's eye.

Inside, the women were gowned in rainbow colors. The redhead, Azalea, wore a tight-fitting emerald gown that presented her lush breasts like a pair of ripe melons. Once, years ago, he had spent quite an exciting evening with her. She accepted her pink azaleas with a knowing wink.

His stomach sank. This evening was going to be unbelievably awkward. Had he anticipated such a bizarre twist of fate he never would have stepped foot inside the House of Virtue. What nonsense were these women filling Isabelle's head with, anyway?

He was half terrified to find out.

Violet and Tulip, clad in deep amethyst and gold, respectively, accepted their bouquets next. Then came Ivy and Iris. The latter twin's bouquet had been easy, but coming up with a floral arrangement for the first had been almost as challenging as Belladonna's. She ended up with pink roses twined with ivy, and seemed pleased enough with the result. The twins both wore delicate pink gowns.

Finally, he passed the enormous cluster of roses into Bella's outstretched arms. He could barely see her face behind the bouquet.

"You went above and beyond," she said approvingly. Shifting the roses to one arm, she gestured to the grand marble stairway behind them, where Isabelle descended slowly, her crimson gown dripping down behind her. His jaw dropped.

He knew she was beautiful, in an abstract aesthetic sense, but in this gown, she was stunning.

"Red?" he croaked, trying to collect himself and failing.

"She is a married woman now. Colors are appropriate," Bella reminded him.

"But crimson red?" Specifically, that particular shade made her look like a—a—

Courtesan.

Gleaming satin caught the light and emphasized her subtle curves. Isabelle had favored girlish shades of white, cream, and pale pink. There was nothing girlish about Poppy. She trailed one gloved hand casually down the railing. Silas had never wished to be a piece of polished wood

before. Hell, he was suddenly as hard as that handrail. In fact, he might pass out from all the blood rushing southward.

"Are you complaining?" Bella asked, arching one brow.

"I..." He didn't have time to finish that thought, assuming he could have summoned coherent words, which seemed highly unlikely under the circumstances. Red. Whore. Sex. The devious countess had short-circuited his brain. He shot her a sidelong glare. "You did this on purpose."

"You agreed to this," Bella reminded him in a singsong tone. "Isabelle, you look radiant. Your husband has done very well by all of us. Let's see what he brought for you."

Huntley's heart did an odd little thump when he all but dumped the mix of red poppies and white roses into Isabelle's arms—a nod to the fact that she was under Bella's protection.

A blush stained Isabelle's cheeks. She stared at the flowers as if she didn't quite know what to make of them, tracing one soft petal with her fingertip. Watching her, a barrel of eels writhed in Silas' stomach.

Did she like them?

Hate them?

He knew nothing about her tastes and preferences. To him, she had been a fawning little doll, then an albatross. Not once before this evening had he regarded her as a woman.

"Thank you. They're beautiful," she said softly.

*Shy*. He hadn't recognized this aspect of her personality until now. After all, there was nothing shy about kissing a man on a balcony. Trapping a man into marriage was hardly timid. But he'd been blinded by his anger. Which only intensified his question: why had she done it?

Isabelle had given him a plausible reason in the coach. He didn't believe her answer had been anywhere close to the full truth. He knew he'd stomped on and torched any trust between them, and that he would have to earn it. Suddenly, his wife was a fascinating puzzle box that he desperately wanted to solve.

"Beautiful flowers for a beautiful woman," he mumbled. This time last week, he couldn't have imagined himself flustered, much less by his own wife

"Shall we have a drink before dinner?" Bella had deposited her roses somewhere. Hopefully not into the nearest rubbish bin. In any event, her arms were free and she gestured down the elegant hallway. The Flowers with their bouquets led the way in a rainbow-hued swish of silk and satin. Silas offered Isabelle his arm. Gingerly, she tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow.

"Have you learned much during your stay thus far?" he asked.

She nodded quickly, her cheeks turning almost the same shade as her dress. Her throat worked. "I find I am far more ignorant of the world than I previously believed."

"How so? Give me an example."

"I didn't realize women could be lovers." She gestured subtly to Azalea and Violet, who strode arm-in-arm with their heads bent together. "They have been partners for years. They choose to remain here because they're accepted as equals. Outside of The House of Virtue, they have had a much harder time finding acceptance."

"Are you tempted to try it?" Silas watched her reaction from the periphery of his vision.

"Being with a woman? No." She shook her head. Blond strands bobbed artfully around her slim shoulders. "I don't fancy myself with anyone."

He stiffened. He could stomach her rejection if she'd discovered a preference for women. That would be easier to swallow than the idea that she liked men, just not him.

"I was told not to bring up the subject, so I won't." Her fingers crabbed anxiously along his forearm.

"What subject?"

"Children." She stared straight ahead. "How to get the heir I owe you."

The eels that had squirmed in his stomach earlier returned with a vengeance. "There is only one way, Isabelle."

"Poppy," she corrected immediately.

"I'm not calling you that."

"Everyone here takes a new name," she insisted. "Besides, what you said isn't true. I found another method—"

"Poppy," Bella interrupted, her tone filled with warning. "Why not try to relax and enjoy the evening?" The countess' gaze slid to him. "We have an evening of entertainment planned. Your lovely wife has been working very hard. Haven't you?"

Isabelle's chin dipped. Good lord, how had she survived weeks of pressure in London's social scene if she could hardly manage an intimate evening with her own husband and a group of women who were trying their damndest to be her friend? He almost felt sorry for her.

But then, he remembered why they were married, and the feeling faded.

"What delights do you have in store for me?" Silas asked, half-fearing, half-anticipating what London's most notorious countess had cooked up.

"We are working on a new kind of performance. A cabaret, with music and ladies on swings."

"Swings," he echoed, trying to picture it. "Like a trapeze?"

"That will be one option. We also have rings and silk banners," interjected Iris. Admittedly, he didn't know her well, but this was the first time he could remember seeing her light up with excitement. Her twin mirrored her enthusiasm.

Honestly, he found the sisters eerie. Definitely one of the stranger aspects to this fantastical bawdy house.

"I will summon the spirits of the dead," Violet declared in a dramatic tone that did nothing to dispel the increasing weirdness of the evening.

"Here I thought I was entrusting my innocent wife to whores, not fortune tellers."

"We're still whores," Tulip said indignantly. "Excellent ones."

"You, lucky Lord Huntley, get to be the very first person to witness our new performance." Bella raised both arms and spun away into a large ballroom. Lights came on abruptly, casting a warm glow across the now-scuffed wood floor, in the center of which was a sort of pedestal or stage. The scent of fresh-cut wood hung not-unpleasantly in the air. The women handed their bouquets to footmen and sat gracefully in chairs flanking the stage. A black cord dangled from the center. The scene resembled a gallows more than it did a cabaret.

"Our place is set here." Isabelle tugged his arm gently and indicated three comfortable wingback chairs placed around a small circular table. Silas groaned inwardly. Bella wasn't going to hang over their shoulders and try to manage the conversation all evening, was she?

Evidently, that was her plan. Bella settled into the chair behind them.

"To love." She beamed, raising a glass of dark red wine. Reluctantly, Silas toasted her and then held out his glass to Isabelle. She hesitated for a long second before touching her goblet to his, and barely sipped from it. Mindful of the miserable way he'd resorted to drink when he was full of resentment toward her, he abstained except for a few polite sips.

The man called Starke flicked back his coattails and sat at an upright piano. Notes tinkled out of the instrument, accompanied by Azalea's alto voice singing a mildly dirty ditty. He leaned over to Belladonna and said, "This is not at all the experience I anticipated."

Isabelle kept her gaze riveted upon the performance. She still seemed ill-at-ease. For the next twenty minutes, he felt her attention fall on him, but whenever he tried to catch her looking at him, she turned resolutely back to the performance playing out on stage. This became a game of cat-and-mouse. He would watch the twins, who were spinning on a hoop midway to

the ceiling, doing aerial things that displayed their legs to full advantage. When he felt the heat of Isabelle's stare, he would turn quickly.

Each time, he was a beat too late.

Buried beneath the music and singing, with Violet and Tulip taking turns announcing the next act, Silas was sure he heard a familiar buzzing sound. Then it would disappear, and he was equally certain he'd imagined it. The pair of cat-and-mouse games he was playing with Isabelle kept winding him tighter. There was little opportunity to talk. Frustration coiled around him like a boa constrictor suffocating its prey.

The music faded. Ivy and Iris glided down to earth, their silk skirts floating. Their landing was a little bumpy, but that, he supposed, was why he was a practice audience. Whatever had prompted Bella to change direction from running a clandestine brothel to a private theater, her Flowers weren't quite ready for the world to see them. But she was certainly moving fast.

That whirring sound came again. Silas snapped his hand out to capture Isabelle's wrist, oversetting a glass of wine. Red spread over the white cloth reminiscent of spilled blood.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, squeezing hard enough to feel her bones. He could break her. Snap her in two.

Her lips parted. "I found it."

"Where?"

"You know where." She yanked away, breaking his grip with a surprise twist. Someone had taught her how to defend herself from a physical attack. What a fascinating young lady he had married.

"You can't have it. I need it," he said.

Isabelle backed away, then turned and fled.

Bella's brows knitted. She took his hand and led him carefully away from the spilled wine. "How can that silly object be more important than your own wife, Huntley?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, Silas rushed off to find his device.



A t the edge of the ballroom, Silas caught her by the hand and spun her to face him.

"Isabelle. Wait," he said.

Wide-eyed, she jerked to a halt. She cast a pleading glance at Belladonna, but the countess gave her a small encouraging smile and said, "I'll leave you to work out your differences."

She exited, taking the Flowers with her. Blast those women for abandoning her to her own husband. Huntley didn't release her. He drew her closer. Isabelle balked, tucking the swivel into her palm and hiding it in her skirt.

"What do you need it for?" he asked, more gently than she expected him to.

"I'm working on an improved design," she mumbled. "I don't have metalsmithing skills, so I have asked Starke to assist me in obtaining a smaller version. Once I have new ball bearings, I can create a swivel sized appropriately to keep the silks from twisting."

He stared at her for a long time without speaking.

"You thought of this?"

"I don't understand your question." She ducked her chin. Embarrassment crawled over her skin like the time she'd been sick with a feverish rash. Hot and itchy.

"Did you take it on purpose?"

"Y—yes. I didn't think you wanted it. It was spinning on the floor and I was listening to you and that man...I picked it up to stop the noise. When I heard what you said about me..." She inhaled. "I ran."

"The bit about the bog witch."

She bit her lip and nodded. "Inspiration for the practical application came later, after I saw the twins perform their routine."

"I see."

"Are you angry with me?"

"I don't know yet." He rested his chin on his fist and tilted his head. "I can't decide whether to be fascinated by the way your mind works, or furious with you for taking my invention. Or both."

A shaky chuckle shook her. Competing impulses, to flee or to fight, had been tearing at her all evening, and she was already exhausted from her own reaction to this man. Shame had drilled deep into the core of her being. She had wronged him once, and now she was doing it again by keeping his trinket. But she needed it. The swivel was crucial to the twins' safety. It would keep the silks from getting twisted.

"I'll give it back to you once I'm finished making the improved version," she promised. "Are you angry with me?"

If their positions were reversed, she would be furious with him. But Huntley was more generous a person than she, for he crossed his arms over his chest and said, "I was. I'm not anymore."

Relief blazed through her body. The aching hollow pit in her stomach eased for the first time since he'd arrived. "You're not?"

"Isabelle—"

"Poppy," she interrupted. Isabelle was her old self. She was becoming a bold new version of herself. Trying to, at least.

"I'm not calling you by that ridiculous name."

Her spine snapped straight and she cast him a narrow glare. "Within this house, you will use my new name. Everyone here has a flower name."

"Fine. Poppy," he gritted out. "I don't want to fight with you over trivial things like nicknames. We started off on the wrong foot. That's as much my fault as it is yours. I was angry and I let it get the better of me. I want us to try again. For real, this time."

Isabelle lifted one eyebrow and studied his face for any sign of sincerity. She was so bad at reading people.

"Give me a chance to prove how much I regret my part in how our marriage began." He scrubbed his face, then caught her gloved hand and curled her fingers around the swivel. "Keep it. You seem to enjoy keeping having the blasted thing with you."

"The buzzing sound it makes when it spins is...soothing." She lifted her gaze to meet his. "I thought you needed this back."

"I do. But I've spent nearly a decade trying to make this design. Another week or two won't matter."

"You think you can win me in such a short time?" The audacity of this man. She wasn't entirely sure he was wrong. She'd already fallen in love with him once, only to discover that her one-sided love was as fragile as a soap bubble.

"Allowing my newlywed wife to take shelter at the House of Virtue is not exactly a testament to my name." He winced. "The sooner this is over, the better."

"Another scandal." Isabelle sighed. "I cannot seem to avoid them. First becoming engaged to my own half-brother, then trapping you. Fleeing here."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry I said I'd rather marry a bog witch. I spoke harshly in a moment of frustration when I didn't know you were there to overhear. It wasn't true then, and it isn't true now." He held out his arm. "Shall we go in to dinner?"

Isabelle hesitated. If she truly wished to become a confident, independent version of herself, she needed to figure out how to manage men with the same finesse that the Flowers did.

Poppy would make him earn her trust, she decided.

Knowing when to flirt and flatter versus when to hold firm was the key to seduction. She didn't want to seduce Huntley—she was done with sex, forever—which made the way her pulse quickened at his nearness all the more disheartening.



## Silas

APART FROM THE FOOD, which was exquisite, dinner was a disappointing experience. Had he gone to Glenmore as the Earl de Lucey had requested, he imagined it might have played out similarly. The Flowers mostly talked about him as if he wasn't sitting right there.

It was like having five meddlesome aunties with differing opinions about how to achieve the same objective: how Isabelle could win over her own husband. Considering only Bella had ever been married, at least to his knowledge, Silas found their advice as absurd as it was impractical.

Iris and Ivy wanted Isabelle to "play up her innocence." Men, they informed her, loved instructing ladies in the art of lovemaking. Both of them cast him sly grins, apparently not realizing that his particular tastes didn't run to teaching young women how to fuck.

Bella had the audacity to wear her amusement openly. Isabelle's cheeks flushed nearly as red as her gown on several occasions.

"That's not what he needs," Tulip argued. "Huntley needs a firm hand. I can show you how to wield a birching strap if you like."

"A what?" Isabelle choked.

"Plenty of gents like getting birched. It's one of the gentler tools in my arsenal." Tulip winked. "So to speak."

Azalea and Violet both chortled at her joke. Silas rolled his eyes. He'd never met a woman who took so much pride in her work as a dominatrix. Then again, he'd never known another dominatrix. Perhaps it required a certain personality.

"You have to treat marriage like any other relationship with a man," said Violet when she had recovered herself. "As a business transaction."

Azalea nodded. "Isabelle, you should be coolly receptive to his overtures."

"I am sitting right here, ladies," Silas seethed. "I can hear you."

Both women dissolved into giggles. By dessert, he wanted to explode with frustration. This wasn't courting. This was making an ass of himself for Countess Oreste's entertainment.

She took pity upon him after supper and gave him and Isabelle half an hour alone in the garden. Mayfair was among the wealthiest neighborhoods in London. While street noise did come over the garden wall, it felt remarkably secluded considering they were still in the city. Isabelle trailed her fingertips along the bright green shrubbery.

"You seem like you're enjoying your stay here," Silas said, breaking the silence.

"I am. Being Poppy is much more interesting than being myself."

"Why do you say that?"

She studied a tightly furled bud waiting to open. "Isabelle is a stupid girl. She misunderstands people. I'm tired of being myself. I want to become someone better. Different. Stronger."

"You're not stupid," he said quickly. "You can't become someone you're not." Part of him liked what he was learning about Isabelle. He didn't want her to change into a version of the Flowers. Yet wasn't that exactly what he typically wanted? This was a very confusing situation.

"I'm only eighteen," she said, a bit crossly.

He grimaced. "Don't remind me.

"My age is an issue? I thought men liked young women."

"I prefer independent women who know what they want."

"I can be independent. I'm proving that to you, aren't I?" Her eyes searched his face.

Silas felt a knot tighten around his lungs. He didn't know what he wanted anymore. He knew what was convenient, and inconvenient, and that he'd never had such a strong visceral reaction to a woman as he had tonight when seeing her come down that stairway.

Yes, he resented the way she had upended his life. But the truth that he had been a self-centered, petulant brute about their mutually dire situation sat heavy on his chest.

She gave a shuddering sigh. "Bella told me I wasn't supposed to talk about getting heirs tonight, but if you're open to hearing about it, I can show you exactly how I imagine this would work."

"All right. Show me."

Isabelle darted up the stairs back into the house, where she led him directly to a shelf. With slender hands, she picked up an ivory dildo with a rubber bulb at the base and displayed it like a prize.

"We could use an instrument similar to this one," she said breathlessly. Silas stared at it. Then at her.

"You want me to use a dildo," he said. Color rushed into her cheeks. "This won't get you pregnant, Isabelle."

"It might if you filled this with your...um..."

"Seed," he supplied, wincing. He had far more to make up for than he'd thought. And what he'd thought was already bad enough.

"I've given it a great deal of thought. There is no guarantee your petition for a divorce would have the desired result. I believe it is best for us to proceed on the assumption that this marriage, however unwanted, is a permanent state," she said, speaking quickly as if she had been bursting to say this all evening and finally had her chance. "I made a promise. After the way I forced you into this situation, the least I can do is hold up my end of our bargain."

Thick silence descended over them. Choking. Heavy.

ou can do your part in private," she blathered on. "I would craft a similar device—this example is not for actual use—with a squeeze the bulb at the base like so."

Never mind heat—her face flamed with embarrassment. She had been able to discuss this subject with Belladonna and the Flowers without any hint of awkwardness. But with Huntley? Such intimacy felt strange and out of place.

Thanks to her, they'd done everything in the wrong order. A couple was supposed to get to know one another before agreeing to marry, but she had taken him by surprise and forced the issue. Never mind her reasons for doing so—they were strangers stuck in a marriage of mutual inconvenience.

Huntley's large hand wrapped around hers. Gently, he removed the dildo from her grasp and replaced it on the shelf.

"I am not going to father my heir using a false cock," he said, lifting his hand to cup her cheek. "You have a fascinating mind, Isabelle. You see a problem and jump straight to finding a solution, however unconventional. I find myself intrigued by the way you look at the world."

Her pulse tripped in its haste. Intriguing was good, wasn't it? *Only if you want to stay married to him.*She did.

Fine. She couldn't bear the thought of letting him go.

What would Poppy do?

She would do one of the three things the Flowers had recommended: act innocent, boldly assert herself in this marriage, or treat it as a business transaction.

Instead, Isabelle was attempting all three approaches at once.

"I could stand to learn how not to act upon impulse," she said meekly.

That was the difference between physical objects and people. Objects could be sorted into categories and assigned measurements that worked together to create this miraculous world. But people inevitably defied her attempts to categorize or understand them. Like this man, who tempted and tormented her in equal measure. She hated this helpless yearning, which made her sick with want and fear and hope.

"Holding back your genius isn't the solution, Isabelle." He stroked his thumb over the curve of her cheek. "In the long run, you can't conceal your true self."

She couldn't tear her gaze away from his. He held her there, a beat of tension that lasted eons, though only seconds passed. No one wanted her true self. Least of all this man.

"Watch me," she whispered. "I can learn how to be a proper lady."

He moved closer, his body angling against hers. She edged back a step. Her back bumped into the shelves.

"What if I like you just the way you are?"

"You don't."

His lips brushed hers. "I think I might. Can I convince you to give me another try?"

Warm breath ghosted over her lips. With an impatient moan, she rose on tiptoe and closed the distance between them.



A LOW MOAN, closer to a growl, rumbled in Silas' throat. He was certain he'd never made that sound before. Isabelle's rapid pulse fluttered beneath his light touch on her throat. She was strung as taut as a wire, on tiptoes, clinging to him as if their kiss was life itself.

Her enthusiasm more than made up for lack of skill. Her kiss was artless and achingly sweet. He fanned his fingertips along her jaw and tilted her head to a different angle, sweeping his tongue gently past her lips. She stiffened fractionally at the intrusion. Silas reined in his impulse to pin her against the bookcase and take everything he desired. Belladonna wouldn't care. This library had seen more indiscretions take place than there were pages in all the books on its shelves.

Yet that would only frighten his inexperienced bride. She might accept his kiss eagerly, but she was like a skittish filly, unsure whether she wanted more of this or not. In his anger, Silas had made his job of seducing his wife far more complicated than it needed to be. But here, in the taste of her lips and her wanton sigh as her hands braced against his chest weakened, was evidence that she was not as immune to him as she was pretending to be.

He wrapped one arm around her waist and tugged her closer. The silk satin was so sleek beneath his touch that he couldn't resist skimming his palm upward to feel the shape of her beneath the intricately crafted red silk.

"This looks like a good place to end the evening," came Belladonna's firm voice. Isabelle's eyes flew open. "Poppy needs her rest. We have a busy day of rehearsals starting bright and early tomorrow morning."

Rage coursed through Silas's body. This was his woman, his wife, and the meddlesome countess was preventing him from enjoying Isabelle the way nature intended. His cock kicked impatiently against the prison of his trousers, but then reason broke through the haze of frustration clouding his judgment. Silas reluctantly loosened his grip on Isabelle. Cede the battle. Win the war.

He brushed loose tendril away from her face. "Thank you for the lovely evening, my little bog witch. Sleep well." Then he pressed a kiss to her forehead before striding away to Bella's side. "Your timing leaves much to be desired."

"Au contraire, Huntley, my timing is exquisite." The insufferable countess winked.

"You're enjoying this," he grumbled.

"Aren't you?"

"I was, until you interrupted us."

"You will get farther in the long run if you leave her wanting more." Bella cast him a sidelong glance. "I shouldn't need to tell you that. But if you need lessons in courtship from a courtesan, you have all of us at your disposal."

"I'm only annoyed that you're right."

She patted his cheek. "I know. Now go home and plot your next move to win your wife's heart."



## Bella

ONCE HER GUEST was finally gone, Bella sent her Flowers, except for Tulip, off to their beds. Tulip, clad in black leather and three-inch heels, with her hair pulled back in a severe style, led the way to the House of Vice. They paused at the top of the stairs leading to the underground dungeon. Tulip's domain, where she flogged bottoms and humiliated men who paid her handsomely for the privilege.

"The archbishop is coming tonight?"

Tulip nodded. Somberly, she took in Bella's costume and said, "Be careful out there. You're not invincible."

"I won't take any risks," the countess promised.

"Leaving this house is a risk." Tulip ran her gloved hands up and down her forearms. A cool spring breeze swept through the garden courtyard. "The House of Virtue is a palace, but it's also a prison. For you as much as the rest of us."

"Enjoy yourself with the archbishop," was all Bella said. It wasn't true. She hadn't built a prison. She'd created a sanctuary where women could support themselves in the world's oldest profession on their own terms. A world that reduced women to mere vessels for sex or child-rearing was not a world that respected any woman's dignity or independence. Her solution wasn't perfect, but it was better than anything else out there.

Or had been. Until Daisy ruined it. Tonight, she intended to have a word with the disgraced bawd.

Bella strode out to the street with a hint of swagger. She wasn't especially tall, but she could pass for a man in the right light, when dressed in trousers and a loose-fitting coat, as she was now. She tugged her hat low over her brow and walked several blocks until she reached the outskirts of Mayfair, where one had a better chance of hailing a cab wiling to drive into the rougher parts of the city. Tonight, Starke would stay behind.

She wasn't headed to St. Giles, or anywhere else dangerous. Before she confronted Biddy Ross on her own turf, she needed information. She needed to deal with the spy she had failed to see coming.

"Damn you, Hawke," she muttered as the third cab passed by without stopping.

"You called?" a masculine voice said from behind her. Bella whirled.

"Speak of the devil," she said ruefully. "What are you doing here?"

"Since you've banished me from the premises, I am forced to wait for you to exit your gilded cage."

That was twice in one night someone had called her beloved home a prison. Both were irksome and incorrect.

"It's not a cage, Hawke." A cab rumbled down the road. She raised her arm to signal for it to stop. It didn't slow until Hawke whistled, loud and clear in the night. He opened the door and gestured gallantly. "I am perfectly capable of hailing my own cab."

The damnable man climbed in after her and took the seat beside her.

"Where are we headed, mate?" the driver asked. He didn't blink when Bella gave the address. Hawke waited for the opening to slide closed before giving her an incredulous look.

"From the way you're dressed, I didn't think you were headed to a ball. But going to a rival brothel? That's bold. Even for you."

"I want to speak with the woman who ruined my House of Virtue. I must go where Daisy is."

"The ruse was never going to last, Bella. What's remarkable is that you kept it going as long as you did."

"If not for you and Daisy, I could have kept it going for years longer." She gazed out the window to avoid his eye. "The posh prats of the *ton* had every incentive to keep my secret. What I cannot understand, Hawke, is why you did. All these years and you've never confirmed what I know you've witnessed."

Now it was his turn to stare out the window.

"I couldn't bring myself to do it." He spoke the words like a confession. "Any more than I could let the Queen be assassinated. What you were doing was technically against the law, but you acted according to your principles. I found you...admirable. I couldn't be the one to bring you down."

The memory of their searing kiss blazed through Bella's body. The heat and the taste of him. Her long-dormant desire had awakened in that heated moment. She had been trying to shove it away ever since, but now it asserted itself with a vengeance. Her need for this man's touch prowled

through her veins like an insatiable monster. Which was one very good reason never to relent.

Hawke was her weakness. He'd proved that once. She might not survive a second lesson.

"But you were," she said softly. "You nearly got me killed."

"I'm not litigating that with you again." He cut her off like she was a petulant child.

"I am merely reminding you of your culpability in bringing me low, whether you intended to or not."

He stretched one arm across the scant distance between them. She didn't flinch at his touch though it took all her willpower not to. "You never stay down for long, Jane. Your backbone is pure steel. I know you have enough secrets in that little black book of yours to rebuild the House of Vice if you so choose. The question I have been asking myself ever since your return is, why don't you want to?"

"Who says I don't?"

"The workmen transforming your ballroom into a theatre."

"Men are such gossips," she huffed. "I suppose Starke gave you all the answers you wished for."

"No, he has guarded your secrets well."

She turned away. Guilt for mistrusting one of her oldest friends nipped at her. They rode the rest of the way in silence until the cab pulled to a halt.

"We're here," Hawke said neutrally, and paid the cabbie. Bella let him. She would accept any form of contrition he wished to offer.

Outside, the air crackled with raucous energy. The bawdy house where Daisy had flounced off to after causing the collapse of the House of Virtue teemed with men. Bella clucked her tongue disapprovingly. Quantity over quality was an excellent way to ruin the health of one's whores. She'd taken precautions to protect her Flowers, which was one reason the House of Vice was so popular. No one wanted to catch an incurable disease.

"Daisy has come down in life," Bella said with grim satisfaction. The brothel was garishly and shabbily appointed, the air redolent of tobacco, sweat, and cologne. Her nose wrinkled.

"She goes by the name Daphne Pugh now," Hawke bent low to say in her ear. A flutter tried to gather in her belly. She quashed it ruthlessly.

"Returned to the original, I see. I'm rather shocked Daisy's reputation doesn't precede her." Had Bella not been so distracted before the holidays, she would have done a more thorough job of vetting her newcomers. The other two had been fine, but Daisy drove them off first thing.

"There is a reason she went from being a courtesan to the House of Virtue, to this place. No other house would take her on." Hawke cast a wary glance at the women lounging on sofas. Several appeared to barely qualify as adults. Whether that was an intentional trick of the light and careful application of cosmetics, or they were truly underage, didn't matter. Bella shuddered. She did not stoop to such tricks, and neither did her Flowers.

"Help you gents?" A madam somewhere north of fifty, wearing a bad blond wig and caked-on cosmetics, sauntered over to them.

"My brother and I are looking to share a whore tonight," Hawke told her. Bella ducked her chin. She didn't have to feign embarrassment. They hadn't discussed this on the way over. He acted, and she could go along with it or not.

Blasted spy.

"First time?" the madam asked, eyeing her. Bella nodded, doing her best imitation of a young man who was out of his depths.

"First time here," Hawke clarified. "Jimmy doesn't like to visit the same house twice. Needs variety. He likes to play rope games. I understand you have a whore here who specializes in submission."

The madam had clearly heard stranger explanations. "All our girls get on their knees and beg if paid enough. But I know the one you mean. Daphne!"

A buxom brunette sidled into the room. Her wrinkled red dress clashed with the rosy undertone of her pale skin. The saffron yellow silk Bella had given her had been much more flattering. Along with the cheaper quality garment, her hair was half-undone as if she was coming straight from a previous client's bed.

"Can you take two?" The madam asked.

"I can take a hundred cocks for the right price." She gave Hawke a flirtatious yet mercenary once-over before flipping a dismissive glance at Bella. "Doubt I'll even feel this one."

Anger boiled up Bella's insides. "You might be surprised," she gritted out in her best imitation of a man's voice. She would make very certain Daisy felt all manner of things tonight. All of them unpleasant.

"Hmph." Daphne said. "Seeing is believing. Come along, boys. Show me what you've got."



T wenty minutes later, what Daphne had discovered was not a customer's enviably large cock, but that she had put herself into a predicament she couldn't get out of.

Bella shed her jacket and left it slung over the back of a chair while Hawke set to work tying the whore's arms and legs. He'd already stuffed a rubber ball on a rope between her lips.

"Impressive knots," Bella removed her hat and hung it on the bedpost. "Been taking lessons from Tulip?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." Hawke's mouth twitched.

Yes, she very much would, but Bella wasn't going to admit that to him. They were already a quarter of an hour into their allotted time, and Daphne's eyes were fixed on the cracked case of the clock set on a shelf, when she wasn't glaring daggers at them.

A halfhearted pretense at foreplay and Hawke's quick, efficient trussing had Daisy right where they wanted her. Only then had Bella revealed herself, relishing the bawd's squirming, muffled fury.

She scraped a wooden chair across the floor and sat on it backwards. Men's clothes were so freeing. Bella loved feeling pretty and feminine in silk and satin dresses, but there were times, like tonight, when being a woman felt like such a chore.

"You know why I'm here, don't you, Daisy?"

The whore's brows knitted. She couldn't speak with her mouth stoppered with a ball gag, but her eyes flashed with anger. She shook her head. Dark curls danced around her bare shoulders. An enticing sight for many, but Bella was unmoved.

"I know you were sent to destroy the House of Virtue."

Again, Daphne shook her head.

"Don't lie." Bella propped her chin on her hands. "I know how uncomfortable it is to be trussed like a Christmas goose. I spent four months tied up in a cellar in France. Were you involved? Did you send word to my captors?"

Daisy turned statue-still. Her lashes flared wide, then narrowed with resentment.

"Remove the gag," Bella said. Hawke obliged her.

"No one sent me," declared the whore. Lying. Obviously. Bella exchanged a glance with Hawke.

He was the queen's personal spy. Surely he had done his fair share of torturing confessions out of captives over the years. Amusement flickered in his eyes, causing a cascade of warmth low in her belly.

Not here, and definitely not now.

Bella pushed the ball gag between Delphine's ripe lips and pinched her nose closed. Her mouth stretched into a grimace. Saliva dripped down her chin as she labored to breathe around the obstacle.

"Smart," Hawke said approvingly. "Won't leave a mark."

When she let go, Delphine coughed and retched until Hawke removed the rubber stopper. Her chest heaved as she unleashed a torrent of foulmouthed abuse.

"You never even paid me what I earned," Delphine spat.

"Well, you did cajole my regular clients into patronizing your goldplated pussy exclusively. The contract you signed said you were entitled to a portion of your earnings, to be held in trust until such a time as you wished to leave. You left and took my clients with you." Bella surveyed the room they were using. Threadbare curtains hung from iron rods that had been torn down from the walls, the plaster poorly patched and the holders re-hung. The bed sagged noticeably in the center despite being unoccupied. The entire brothel reeked of opium. "Evidently, you have ushered in a taste for trash over elegance among the faster set."

"You fucking witch. I didn't come there to ruin you, but I'm glad I did."

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm far from ruined. The Flowers want to take the House of Vice in another direction. They had months of relative idleness to explore interests outside of screwing men for money or pretending to be reformed for the condescending delight of London's upper-class ladies. We'll be fine." Eventually. "In the meantime, your fees have gone to cover the damage to my house."

"Bitch—"

Hawke calmly tucked the ball gag into the flailing whore's mouth. He winced.

"She bit me," he said ruefully.

Bella reached forward and pinched the whore's bare nipples. Hard. Daphne turned as white as a sheet. This was no pleasurable torment, but pain, intentionally inflicted. "Play nice with Mr. Bird."

"Mr. Bird?" He echoed, side-eying her.

"You named me Jimmy this evening. You're lucky I'm not calling you by your true name."

Hawke smiled at that. "Who's to say what my real name is?"

"Infuriating man." She flicked Daphne's forehead. "You didn't come to me through the usual channels. I took a flyer on you, to my eternal regret. How did you know so much about my operation?"

Hawke carefully removed the gag so the whore could speak.

"If I tell you, will I get my money?"

"You'll get what you didn't steal from Tulip. It will take her months, if not years, to rebuild her clientele."

"Not my fault the gents like flogging a lass more than they like being flogged." Daphne gave an insolent toss of her head. "Back in the day, I used to know a man who was so lonely he'd tell anyone about what you were doing."

"Not one of my regulars." Any man who passed through her doors with the intention of availing himself of her pleasure house signed a contract before he was allowed to lay a finger on one of her Flowers.

Daphne shook her head. "Wasn't me who spied on you for Biddy Ross." "Then who was it?"

"A gent named Jack Fernsby."

Bella gaped at her captive. That was a name she hadn't heard in months. Against her better judgment, she'd allowed Charming Jack to hang around her new enterprise. He was a chatty sort. Gave the House of Virtue a friendly atmosphere. She'd felt sorry for the man. He so clearly envied the upper class and was desperate to rub elbows with them. But he'd had a gambling problem and five children to support. His two eldest daughters had ended up working for the House of Virtue, for a time.

"I have what we came for," she snapped. "Release her. Let's go."



Outside, Bella wordlessly accepted the cigarette Hawke handed her and lit it on his struck match. The light danced across his face. Smoke curled into the spring night.

"Was it good for you too?" Hawke quipped. She elbowed him. He hardly moved, standing too close. Bella swung into a loping stride. "Where are you headed?" he asked.

"I need to think."

"You need to rest."

"Enough with the resting," she snapped.

"I could help you," Hawke said casually. "I'm very good at tiring people out. In bed. You'd sleep like a baby."

Bella couldn't quite suppress a twitch of her lips despite her annoyance. "Innuendo is beneath you, Hawke."

"Nothing is beneath me. Sadly." He inhaled a plume of smoke. "These things are truly terrible."

"They are. But it does help one blend in with the lower classes." Hers dangled loosely, mostly a waste of good tobacco. She didn't enjoy smoking under ordinary circumstances. Certainly not now when she wasn't at full health. The rush of tobacco made her scalp tingle. Her step wobbled.

"Careful."

Bella let Hawke take her elbow until the dizziness passed. Then she shook him off and said, "I need to get home."

He tossed his cigarette away. "Now you know that I wasn't the only spy planted in your House of Virtue. Fernsby had a loose tongue."

"I knew that much. He was good advertising. No one took him entirely seriously, which was useful to me. He piqued interest in my operations. The bolder gents would seek out an invitation, either to satisfy their curiosity or for their own needs."

Hawke raised one arm and whistled loudly. A cab with a black gelding trotted over to them.

He held the door for her. Bella clambered in.

"I don't suppose you need me for this," he said somberly.

"No."

Tense silence stretched between them.

"Get in." She caved. Either this would be her demise, or she would finally get some answers about Hawke's role in all this. She only prayed the truth didn't destroy her all over again.



"R emind me why we're headed to a silver smith?" Azalea panted as she struggled to keep up with Isabelle's brisk pace. Even with a chaperone, being out and about in the city made her nervous. There was none of the soothing openness of the countryside. While London teemed with fascinating new ideas, she was finding that her father's opinion was more in line with her own than she'd previously thought.

Besides, there were simply too many men out wandering without adequate supervision. Who would have guessed that so many of them were obnoxious, loud, rude, and aggressive to complete strangers? So much for being protectors, she mused.

"I need a casing made to improve the swivel," Isabelle said, cognizant that her companion might not share her rather low opinion of the male sex. Azalea generally liked men.

"This will be an expensive swivel," Azalea commented.

"Bella said Huntley is paying for it." She'd even given Isabelle permission to put the design fees on her line of credit. Isabelle had only a vague notion of how much a custom design would cost, or how lines of credit worked, but she quickly concluded it was far more than the pocket money she'd had with her when she ran blindly from her husband's townhouse.

In the end, Huntley would be the one to benefit from her design improvements. She could see how he'd gotten close to achieving what he needed the swivel to do, but she had identified a crucial flaw that caused excess wear on the ball bearings. That was why his version buzzed. Although she liked the sound, it indicated that the casing wasn't quite true. She had made a precise diagram and Bella gave her the name of a jeweler who could craft her vision. Azalea had come along for the journey because it wasn't safe for women to travel alone in London.

A woman on a bicycle breezed past them.

"Have you ever thought about riding one of those?" she asked her companion.

"No. I don't like heights." Azalea shuddered.

Isabelle laughed as they went into the jewelers' shop. Inside, glass cases held gleaming coffee pots with intricate etchings and ornate feet, trays that shone as clear as a mirror, and delicate spoons with places to etch an important date, such as a baby's birthday. Her heart pinched, seeing them.

"May I help you?" asked the bespectacled shop keeper.

"I—" Want a baby. Someone who wouldn't think her strange. Babies loved their mothers unconditionally, and Isabelle yearned to feel the glow. But a silversmith couldn't help her with that. Only Huntley could, and he refused to entertain the idea of artificial insemination.

"She's looking to have a custom job done," Azalea answered when she froze. "Some kind of round casing. Show him, Poppy."

Isabelle dug the faulty swivel out of her reticule and placed it on the counter. With a tiny screwdriver, she opened the casing and let the ball bearings spill out.

"I need a new one of these, only thirty percent smaller." She smoothed her careful drawings with an open palm. "Actually, I'd like at least three of them."

That way, she and Silas wouldn't have to fight over them. He could keep his prototype and the replacement, and she would have the swivel she needed to keep Ivy and Iris safe on their silks, plus a replacement, just in case.

The jeweler studied her designs and the circle. He tapped a loose ball bearing with a metal tweezer-like implement and said, "These show wear. This isn't quite true. You'll need a precision-made casing and fresh bearings."

"You understand." Isabelle shifted her weight from foot to foot, hardly able to contain her excitement.

"Bella wouldn't steer you wrong." Azalea chuckled.

"Countess Oreste is a valued client." The silversmith examined Isabelle's sketches under a magnifying glass. "I've known her family since she was a young girl."

The thought of Belladonna being anything other than a confident adult woman bewildered Isabelle. Of course, everyone started out life as a child, but she was such a force of nature that Isabelle had trouble imagining her in any other stage of development.

"I can make this for you," said the shopkeeper. "How soon do you need it?"

She was tempted to ask how much it would cost, but ladies didn't discuss money. No matter how good with numbers she was, Isabelle was woefully unprepared to bargain.

"Is next week reasonable?"

"Aye. Do you need them all in one size? Or do you want different sizes?"

She hadn't even considered the possibility of multiple sizes.

"Can you make some in the original diameter?" The words were out of her mouth before she could think better of them. Silas had made the prototype, but she would return to him an improved version. He would like that, wouldn't he?

Since when did she care what her husband liked, or didn't?

She couldn't identify the moment when her feelings for him had flipped from despair and anger to cautious optimism. Their kiss was part of the change, but the rude truth was that despite what he'd said about her, she had never been as angry with him as she was with herself. Gaining his approval felt imperative. She owed him. An heir, yes, but a heartfelt apology for forcing him into marriage, as well. The new design would express in concrete terms what she could not with words.

"Why not have a nice piece of jewelry made instead?" Azalea asked. "As wedding gifts go, this would be far more suitable than that thingamabob."

She pointed to a silver cravat pin with a ruby head. Isabelle could see it being perfect for Silas. He was not a showy man but he liked accessories that subtly displayed wealth.

The childish part of her that had been attracted to Huntley's handsome exterior had given way to an intellectual's admiration for a fellow-thinker. She had been seduced by the idea that a man everyone swore was the most brilliant investor and soon-to-be-renowned inventor in London might see in her a partner. An equal. Someone worthy.

Lord knew she wasn't a worthy lady. Her mother had tried to mold her into one during the few months they'd had together. Isabelle had no affinity for the kinds of activities that marked a fine lady of the ton. She wasn't a witty conversationalist or an elegant hostess.

But perhaps she could succeed as a countess the way Bella did: on her own terms.

Which meant that a custom silver swivel was a better gift than the one her friend suggested.

"I can have these ready for you in two weeks, perhaps a bit sooner," the smith said, interrupting Isabelle's racing thoughts.

"Perfect. We'll return then. Come along, Poppy, we need to get back and get you ready for you husband's visit this evening."

Azalea took her by the arm and dragged her out into the damp spring afternoon.



LATER THAT EVENING, Isabelle smoothed her hands down a gold tissue gown that was cut a bit too low in the bosom for her personal comfort. The gold was offset with crimson tassels brushing the curve of her shoulders and dangling in a V formation, which, along with a bit of clever padding in her corset, made her appear more buxom than she actually was.

"Quit fussing with it. You look incredible."

"It's a beautiful dress. It's just not...you know. Me." She tugged a tassel straight. They annoyed her. The way they brushed her shoulders with every movement made her frustratingly aware of her own skin. The way the red fringe kept getting tangled was worse. Why wouldn't they hang straight?

"I think it works," Violet said. "Poppy would definitely wear such a dress to seduce her husband."

"I'm not seducing him," she said quickly.

"Maybe you aren't, but that dress is made for seduction." Violet gave her a once-over.

"I should change," Isabelle fretted. "The blue was a nice color on me."

"Blue will be fine for a matron. Huntley said he wanted to see you in gold. Don't you want to please your husband?"

Isabelle suddenly found her jeweled velvet slippers fascinating.

Yes, she wanted to please him. Desperately.

Was such a thing even possible?

She was good at seeing the way things went together, but she wasn't particularly adept at assessing people. She just wanted to make the world calm. Peaceful. Harmonious.

The way people were not.

Even the Flowers had their squabbles and arguments. Today, the twins were in a tiff. Yesterday, Azalea and Violet had argued. Isabelle tried to avoid these situations, but the more she spent time observing Bella and the world she had created, the more she was starting to realize that there was no avoiding conflict.

Perhaps she'd been thinking about it wrong. If conflict was part of life, then she needed to be like Belladonna and find a way to manage it instead of running away from it.

With this revelatory thought reverberating around her skull, Isabelle went to greet her husband. Huntley stole her breath. Tonight, he wore a close-fitting black jacket over a white shirt. He preferred simple clothing, yet the quality spoke volumes about his wealth and personal taste. The collar framed his sharp jaw and the column of his throat, but it was the way his eyes darkened that made her pulse race.

"You look lovely." He brushed a kiss on her gloved knuckles.

"So do you." Isabelle flushed with embarrassment. "I mean, you look handsome." She was a fool. "Would you like to come inside?"

"I'm already inside."

He spoke with such suggestiveness that Isabelle's cheeks flamed.

"Indeed. I meant into the garden."

"Which is outside."

"So it is." Isabelle laughed airily. "This way."

Her hand was dwarfed by his. She led him through the library where he'd kissed her so thoroughly and out onto the balcony, then down the stairs into the garden where Starke had arranged for a table to be set. Despite the cool evening air, she was too warm. City air retained a certain heat in

defiance of the actual temperature, unlike the crisp assertiveness of the countryside.

"How have you been occupying yourself since we last met?" he asked. Isabelle settled her skirts as artfully as she could manage, letting them spill to one side as Iris had shown her earlier. Her hair fell loose over one shoulder. The tassels danced along her shoulder with every shifting air current. They still tickled but now that Huntley was here, the shivers coursed up her neck and down her spine causing havoc with her senses.

"I have nearly finished designing the stage set. I also have a gift for you." Triumphantly, she passed the old swivel across the table. "I'm finished with it now. You can have it back."

He plucked it from the white tablecloth and examined it closely. Thoughts of those fingers on her body flashed through her mind. Isabelle swallowed. She had tried that once, and she hadn't liked the experience one bit. Her body was betraying her with these peculiar yearnings. What she desired didn't exist.

"How have you been occupying yourself?" she asked too brightly. Huntley lifted one eyebrow. Her insides squirmed in response.

"Among other things, I met with investors yesterday."

"Did they give you pots of money?" She propped her chin on her fist and batted her lashes.

"No." He spun the swivel. "I turned them down."

"Why?"

He set the swivel on the table and watched it spin like a top. "Each one wanted too much profit in return for too little funds. I have been on the other side of the table, and I know perfectly well how to drive a hard bargain. I'd have done the same thing, in their shoes. My factory is a risk, and they want a high reward to compensate."

"Are we in financial difficulty?" The instant the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Isabelle's shoulders crumpled. She sounded like

a mercenary, when all she wanted to ask was whether she needed to stop spending money on frivolities like custom-made swivels. But he didn't know about that. "I didn't mean to sound...I meant..."

Huntley tucked one knuckle under her chin and brought her gaze up to meet his.

"Isabelle."

"Poppy," she corrected. "Don't call me by that name anymore. Please."

He held her gaze for a long time, during which she struggled to breathe. "I've been thinking about your proposal to provide me with an heir."

"Have you reconsidered?"

"No."

Her hopes collapsed like a flimsy tower of cards. "Are you sure you won't try? I've been studying the process."

"Studying, how?"

"Bella has a book, *Clinical Notes on Uterine Surgery* by an American fellow named J.M. Simms. I was hoping to lend it to you."

"I'll read it, on one condition." He reached across the table and flipped one of her tasses. Isabelle tried to hide her smile and failed. "I want a second chance to seduce my beautiful, brilliant wife."

"Is that what you're doing?" She sounded like she'd run a mile at top speed. "Seducing me?"

"Yes. Are you going to let me?"

Her breath caught. Was she?



C learly, his wife needed more convincing. Silas knew her answer before she spoke.

"I'm not ready to try that again," she said, playing with her fussy but elegant tassels. Not for the first time—nor, probably, for the last—he mused that Belladonna was a diabolical woman. She'd given him the gold gown he'd joked about. The dress invited a man's touch. Those silly tassels drew his eye to her breasts and the smooth curve of her shoulder. Shimmering silk hugged her narrow waist and followed the gentle swell of her hips. He couldn't stop drinking in the sight of her.

"I promise you it would be a completely different experience," he said.

Isabelle didn't seem convinced. "I've seen sex. You know. The Flowers. The House of Virtue might not be operating but Tulip still sees clients in the House of Vice."

He nearly spat out his drink.

"The kind of sex Tulip has down in that dungeon is nothing like what we would do." He refrained from telling her what he really thought about the men who sought Tulip's peculiar brand of services. That was neither here nor there. The mere thought of Isabelle and sex provoked a visceral reaction. He didn't want his wife experiencing sex in any way, shape, or

form with any person other than himself. He was jealous and covetous of his own bride.

He needed to get Isabelle out of this infernal house and back to Cheveny where she belonged.

"I promise I shall read your gynecology book if you give me a chance this evening to demonstrate that our kiss in the library was more than just a promise...and one other thing."

"What sort of thing?" she asked warily. He would give anything to erase that vigilance. Watch her spin frantically out of control like that faulty swivel she found so fascinating. Feel her come apart in his arms.

If he didn't know better, he'd accuse himself of falling in love with his own wife. But desire wasn't affection. Needing to get a child on her was a biological imperative as much as it was a potentially pleasurable experience. His pride was wounded—on several levels.

"You can imagine that it has not done my reputation any favors to have my wife living at the House of Virtue." He was only partially surprised by the way eyes flared wide. For all that her active, clever mind spun with ideas, she was curiously unable to predict how people would react to things like a wife away from her husband to live at a clandestine brothel. No other woman on the planet would have been surprised by what he'd said.

"I never meant to embarrass you," she insisted in a rush of breath. Nervous again.

Perhaps his wife was not the only one who was terrible at reading other people. How had he failed to notice how badly she wanted to please him? In retrospect, it was obvious in the way she followed him around ballrooms and parlors whenever her mother wasn't herding her in direction of prospective suitors. Now, he could recognize the way she'd hung his every word.

To think, he'd nearly lost her adoration through his own stupidity. Well, Silas had never seen as good an investment as his own wife. He'd wager his

substantial fortune on an investment in her paying off handsomely for the rest of his natural life. She was well worth winning.

"I know you didn't." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The fact of the matter was that her rash actions had made finding investors, already a painstaking task, that much more difficult. "I want to know if you will accompany me to dinner with a prominent potential investor two days hence."

"I don't have anything to wear."

"I gave Belladonna more than enough money to outfit you appropriately no matter how short the schedule. That woman has contacts throughout the city. I have no doubt that she can find something suitable for you." Money he could ill afford at that.

"I can ask her."

"Try telling her. I need to impress this one. I need your help to achieve that."

"The last time I was confident about doing something, I coerced a near-stranger into marrying me," Isabelle said ruefully. "I am trying to learn to think before I act."

"I think you should think less, frankly."

"What do you mean?"

"Overthinking is how you arrive at erroneous conclusions. I've observed the way you work with Bella to create a stage set. You dive right in. If something doesn't work, you adjust. You think and act at the same time." He brushed a stray tendril of fine blond hair behind her ear. "When done right, sex can help you turn off the part of your mind that spins incessantly like that swivel you're so fond of." He rose, taking her hand and prompting her to do the same. "Shall we take a tour of the House of Vice?"



## Isabelle

HER PULSE SCRAMBLED ERRATICALLY as Silas placed one hand on her low back and guided her to the stairs leading down to the House of Vice. She wanted to ask whether he was a regular visitor here, but she wasn't sure if she could accept the truth if he answered affirmatively.

Downstairs, they found Tulip in her customary black leather skirt, tall boots and corset, but she wasn't plying her usual trade. Instead, she was perched on an old desk while Starke smacked a second man's bare bottom. The dominatrix lifted one finger indicating that they should wait.

"Who's been a very bad boy?" she said in a cloying tone.

"I have," whimpered the client, who was bent face-down over the desk. "I've done terrible things, Headmistress."

"Such as?"

"I cheated at cards," he whimpered. "Fleeced my own best friend."

"Five lashes," she ordered briskly. Starke raised his arm and brought the branches down with considerable force. New streaks of red bloomed across the man's already rosy backside. Tulip pushed off the desk and strode over to them, her heels clicking on the stone floor. In the corner on the wall, a blindfolded man was suspended in chains. Tulip kicked his ankle as she walked by him.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Tulip glowered at Huntley. "What brings the two of you down here? This isn't a tourist destination. Observers are only permitted with prior approval from all participants."

"We're not here to gawk," said Silas. "Bella told me we could use one of the rooms down here for privacy."

Isabelle tore her gaze away from where Starke was readying his next strike. Right. No gawking. These men paid handsomely to have their fantasies fulfilled, and Tulip was the only Flower actively working at the moment. They needed the revenue until their new cabaret performance was ready.

Tulip raised one eye eyebrow gesture for them to follow her. "You can use the white room."

Huntley winced. "Is there another color room we could use?"

"What? Innocence doesn't appeal to you?"

"No, it does not," he said flatly.

Shame scorched through Isabelle. Then she reminded herself sternly that no one was making her feel ashamed. Her husband preferred knowledgeable sophisticated women. She could pretend to be that. Poppy was a coquette, she decided. She was only playacting, the same as all of the other Flowers when they were with their clients. Huntley wasn't her client, exactly, but in a way, he was also her only client.

Treat the marriage like a business transaction, Tulip had said. That's all this was. After all, her half-brother Alexander had browbeat Silas into marrying her. He needed an heir. That process could be painful or it could be pleasurable. Of the two options, she was persuaded that pleasure was preferable. But that didn't mean either of their hearts were in it.

"The red room then." Tulip unlocked an iron door. "Pull the shade down. I'll make sure the panels are closed. You were promised privacy, not voyeurism." She went and returned to her post.

Isabelle strode into the room and stopped abruptly. The space was dominated by a large, plush bed piled high with red pillows. The wallpaper was red, the lampshades red, even the bedside table was red lacquer. This was a room made for sex. Her pulse galloped. A blush crept across her cheeks. "Where are we supposed to sit?"

"On the bed." Huntley sprawled his long, lean form across it. "I want you to give me another chance."

"I will fulfill my duty," she said, toying with a tassel.

"I'm not speaking of duty. I am talking about pleasure."

Isabelle's fingers tightened around the largest tassel hanging between her breasts. "I understand my obligations, Lord Huntley."

"Silas," he corrected, patting the bedspread next to him. "I don't want this to be an obligation. Sit. I'm not going to attack you. I want to show you something."

Reluctantly, Isabelle clambered onto the bed. She felt awkward and uncomfortable as she leaned against the headboard, keeping as much distance between their bodies as possible.

"When we wed, we knew little of one other. I realize we started off disastrously, but in the past couple of weeks, I've come to admire your intelligence, your grace. Now I want a chance to show you what marriage can truly offer."

"The physical aspects," she said, her voice barely audible.

"Yes, but not as you might fear them." He dared took her hand, his fingertips brushing her knuckles. "Your mother likely warned you of discomfort and duty."

Isabelle's breath caught. "I was told to endure. Women aren't supposed to experience pleasure."

But hadn't she learned differently from the Flowers? Some of them enjoyed the experience. Even Violet and Azalea, who treated sex with men as purely a business transaction, found it tolerable.

Anger flashed across his face. "That was a cruel misrepresentation, passed down as cynical wisdom. Sex is what you make of it. There is nothing to endure when it's done properly. Only enjoyment." He stroked one knuckle down her arm. Despite her misgivings, Isabelle leaned closer.

"I find that difficult to believe," she whispered.

Silas moved to stand behind her, close but not touching. "May I demonstrate? I promise only what you allow. We can stop at any moment."

The silence stretched between them before Isabelle nodded again. "What do I have to do?"

"Just feel me." He shifted, placing his hands lightly on her shoulders. "You're so tense. Just breathe."

She laughed airily. "I can't."

"I'm not going to hurt you, darling. I promise." His warm breath graced the tender spot on her throat right beneath her ear. She tipped her head fractionally as the image of his lips touching that same spot burned through her with startling clarity. Gradually, her shoulders relaxed as his thumbs made gentle circles on her bare back. "That's it," he encouraged. "Marriage can be this—comfort in another's touch."

"It's nice," she admitted with surprise. She'd never thought of marriage as companionship. It was duty. The marital bed was an approved outlet for one's animal passions, and it was a vessel for the romantic notions of girls like her who were being hunted across ballrooms. Not that he knew about that. Nor was she going to tell him. Huntley had no reason to take her word over that of a prince.

A small sigh escaped her lips as his hands moved to the base of her neck, working upward into her hairline. He carefully removed pins until her golden hair fell loose around her shoulders.

"Your hair is beautiful," he said, running his fingers through the silken strands. "Does this feel nice?"

"Yes," she breathed, tilting her head back slightly. Huntley wordlessly pressed her back into his chest, his long legs framing hers.

"Can you feel my heartbeat?" he murmured near her ear. "It quickens for you."

What would Poppy do now?

Huntley wasn't responding to Isabelle, after all. He was enamored of Poppy, the woman she was pretending to be. Despite this prickling of knowledge, her body softened against his. Part of her still wanted him badly enough that she would take her husband on any terms she could get. Being pressed against him in this fashion was unfamiliar, but it prompted a clench deep in her low belly.

She shifted onto her hip, bringing one hand up to brush her fingertips along his jaw, turning his head to meet hers over her shoulder. He kissed her slowly, carefully, her lips moving hesitantly against his.

Touch was a kind of conversation, she realized.

"Help me with my dress," she said with heat searing her cheeks.

"We don't need to take things that far."

"It's difficult to move around. I'd like to loosen it, at least, while we continue this." She sat forward. His hands moved down her back, deftly unfastening the tiny buttons marching down the column of her spine. Awareness spread outward, a tingle of hyperawareness radiating along her ribs to her front, pooling in her breasts, which ached to be touched.

"Beautiful," he murmured, his hands lightly skimming her sides through the cotton. "You don't know what you do to me, Isabelle."

She was too drunk on sensation to correct him.

His hands moved to her waist, then slowly upward, gauging her reaction. When his thumbs brushed the sides of her breasts, her breath caught. She craned her neck forward and brought his mouth to hers again. Firmer this time. Hungrier. He shifted her onto her side until they were lying face-to-face. The red room cast a warm glow over his handsome features. She'd never felt so safe as she did with her skirts hiked up around her hips and his arm draped over her waist.

"I was never told..." she began, then stopped.

"What, Isabelle?"

"That it could feel like this. Like something I might want."

He smiled, genuine happiness warming his expression. "That's exactly what I hoped to show you. There's more, much more, but I think we'd best stop here for the evening."

Her heart plummeted. "Stop, Huntley? Why?

## SILAS

E very fiber of Silas's being screamed to roll Isabelle to her back, hike up her skirts even farther, and plunge into her without even bothering to remove her drawers. The split garment would pose no barrier—assuming she bothered to wear one. He stifled a groan at the thought. Maybe having his innocent little wife corrupted by the Flowers was precisely what they both needed.

"Why do you want to stop, Huntley?" she demanded. Shock and hurt snapped in her blue eyes. "What have I done wrong?"

"Silas," he insisted. "I want you to call me by my proper name."

"Fine." Her eyes narrowed. "What did I do to make you stop?"

"Nothing, darling." He pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead, reveling in her outrage. He'd done his job a little too well. "I promised you we would stop if you were uncomfortable in any way."

"But I didn't say I was!" Whether it was the ruddy lighting or a blush, her creamy cheeks were a becoming shade of pink. "I was enjoying myself. Do I not please you?"

Innocents truly were so much trouble. "We can keep going if you want, Isabelle."

"Poppy," she insisted huffily, twisting around to slip her golden dress off like a snake shedding its skin. "There is no Isabelle Huntley in this house."

Her rejection of her own name made him irrationally angry.

"I am not married to Poppy," he growled, grabbing her wrist and dragging her back onto the bed. "I'm married to you, Isabelle, and I want no other woman."

He captured her wrists and pinned her to the bed on either side of her head. She squirmed, but fire flashed in those pretty cerulean eyes. Silas was done being gentle. He wanted to push her. He settled himself on top of her with his hips between her parted legs. There were still layers of clothing between them. Petticoats and trousers and drawers, although the ridiculous padding that went into giving her dress its shape seemed to be sewn into the garment itself—a clever workaround obviating the need to remove unappetizing items like bustles and crinolines. Only a courtesan with a background as a seamstress would have thought to make such adjustments to make a lady's gown that much easier to remove from its wearer's body.

"You do please me," he growled. "Can you feel how much?" Isabelle's chin tipped back with a low moan when he rolled his hips to bring his raging erection into contact with her sex. "I can make you feel good. Do you want me to show you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"How badly...Poppy?" He could concede the name if it emboldened her to ask for more.

His gambit paid off. She strained to nip his earlobe and said, "Very badly, Silas."

He released her wrists and pressed open-mouthed kisses down the column of her throat. Her skin was silk and she tasted like a fragrant dessert he could never get enough of—a sweet treat, one made with honey and lavender.

"You're delicious," he murmured, moving downward to dip his tongue into the hollows of her clavicles. She squirmed like a woman who didn't know how to handle her own body's response. Mercilessly, he continued his path down, nudging her pert nipple over the top of her corset. The rosy pink bud begged to be teased. He captured it between his lips and sucked. Isabelle's fingers scrambled in his hair. Her scratches caused waves that chased down his spine and straight into his dick. He rutted helplessly against the mattress, then pried his mouth off her long enough to say, "I could eat you all night."

"Eat...how?"

If she wanted him to demonstrate, Silas couldn't promise to hold back. He moved to the other breast, teasing the one he'd abandoned with his hand. An insane part of him wished he had two mouths to give her double the pleasure. From the way she writhed beneath him, she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Shall I show you?"

She stilled beneath him. The seconds that passed between his question and her response were eons, his heart thudding madly against his ribs as he waited.

Say yes.

It would drive him to the brink of madness to be this close to taking her. He could. Making love to his wife was his right, by custom and law. But if he let himself go now, he risked scaring her again. He wouldn't hurt her, but he didn't trust her to stop him if he went too far or too fast. He wanted her wild with desire for him. He wanted her to scream his name as she came.

Silas could not have pinpointed the moment when Isabelle had become a necessary part of his existence, but she was, he would settle for nothing less than her complete surrender. Which meant that tonight, he needed to hold back while driving her over the edge at least once.

"Please," she finally whispered. "Show me."

He shuffled up on his elbows to kiss her lips. "How would Poppy ask?" She chuckled softly. "Poppy wouldn't ask. She would make demands."

"Try it."

"I don't know what to say."

He gave her an incredulous look and then kissed her soft cheek. "After weeks in a brothel you don't know how to ask for what you desire? What have the Flowers been teaching you?"

"Carpentry, painting, and aerial acrobatics, mostly." She smoothed his hair away from his face. Silas loved the bush of her fingertips. He could almost be content with being petted like a cat.

"An odd curriculum for a house full of whores."

"They haven't neglected their instructions in seduction," she hastened to say. "I have told them repeatedly that I don't need it, for I never intended to indulge. I may have to reconsider."

"How about I give you a reason to." Silas shifted to one side and worked his hand beneath her petticoat. A sound he'd never made before tore out of his throat when he found the top of her stocking. Silk was harsh to his touch compared to her skin. He dragged his finger along the top and savored her reaction. When he was sure of his welcome, he brought his hand higher.

"No drawers. I had wondered."

If Isabelle blushed any harder she was going to turn into a tomato.

"Azalea's idea," she muttered darkly.

"A fine idea it was." He paused to feel the fine hair that marked his true destination. "At least you're learning something here."

"I've learned a great deal," she said defensively. "Now what were you planning to show me?"

"This." He traced his finger along her center. Isabelle bucked into his touch even as her grip on his shoulder tightened. Conflict furrowed her brow. "Easy. I'll stop if you don't like it."

"More." She gripped his wrist with sudden strength.

He gave her what she demanded. "Good, Poppy. You're doing very well."

"This doesn't feel anything like the last time," she panted. He dropped his forehead to hers and pumped two fingers into her wet passage. He could finish without ever removing his trousers. If this went on much longer, he might.

Gently but firmly, he brought his attention to the bundle of nerves hidden at the apex of her sex.

"Last time, I wasn't trying to make things pleasurable for you. This time, I'm determined to make up for it."

When he thought about how they could be at Cheveny, spending days in bed while he took her over and over again in every way humanly possible, instead of this drawn-out seduction in the dungeon of a brothel, Silas wanted to go back in time and smack sense into his former self. He'd landed the most beautiful bride in the *ton* without even trying. He should have been more grateful that Isabelle saw what he hadn't: how they were a perfect fit.

He could have an heir on the way by now.

The thought nearly undid him. He tensed, trying to hold back, only to have Isabelle lose control on his hand. Her back arched, her lips parted, and she clutched him like a drowning woman. Frantically he circled her clit until the immediate crisis waned. Desperate for it to continue, he thrust two fingers into her tight passage and pumped, revealing in her desperate gasps.

"Too much," she gasped, shoving his arm away. "That was intense."

"Good intense, or bad intense?" He would be mortified if the latter.

"Good. I have never felt this...light. Relaxed."

He kissed her forehead. Relief coursed through him. He hadn't pushed her too far and ruined all their progress, but it had been a near thing.

"I think we'd better stop here," he said. "I will see you in two days for the dinner party?" "If Belladonna agrees," she said as she slipped of the bed and stood on wobbly legs to shake her petticoats free. She pulled on her dress. Silas buttoned up the back with equally unsteady hands and a cock that ached so violently he wasn't sure how he would walk out of here.

"She'll agree," he assured her. He'd paid her to keep his wife safe, not a prisoner. He wondered whether Isabelle knew how much he was paying for her education. He certainly wouldn't be the one to tell her.



The third time Isabelle reached for her screwdriver and found it had rolled away, Ivy gave her a stern look and said, "You seem distracted."

"I suppose I am." Isabel peered up into the ceiling, where cross beams had been bolted together to provide a strong base for the device she was trying to figure out how to attach to it. "I can't decide whether the swivel should go here at the top, or if we should attach an intermediary length of strong rope."

"What is the advantage to using a rope?" asked Ivy.

"Keeps a man from wiggling off your hook." Tulip winked and made a fishing motion.

"Let me rephrase that. What would be the point of using an extra length?"

"The extender could be used to quickly change out devices during your aerial performances." Isabelle brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek. "We could use a clip to attach the hoop or the silks, and we could lower it up or down with a pulley. Aha! That's the solution. A pulley." she scrambled down the ladder. "But where am I going to find one? Is there a hardware shop on high street?"

"If the lady requires a pulley, then the lady shall have the necessary device," intoned Starke. "Tell me what size you want and I shall procure the

implement."

"How soon can you get it?" Isabelle jotted down figures on her everpresent notepad, swiftly calculating the amount of weight the pulley would have to be capable of holding. "The sooner we have the right equipment, the sooner we can start practicing for a live performance."

"Our routine is fine. You just worry about not letting us fall." Ivy huffed and strode away.

"What's gotten into her?"

"Iris has a suitor," Tulip sang. "The twins have been inseparable for most of their lives. Ivy is struggling with the idea that a man wants to be a regular fixture in her sister's life."

"That is difficult." They couldn't both be with the same man. Or could they? Isabelle shuddered at the memory of kissing her own half-brother, even a chaste peck on the cheek.

If she understood the source of her friend's frustration correctly, Ivy was fretting about being displaced from her closest relationship. The twins' rancor didn't bode well for their aerial acrobatics performance.

She ripped the page out of her notebook and handed it to Starke. "I hope these calculations are correct. I'm less concerned with the actual size of the pulley than I am its strength. It needs to be able to hold the weight of two women and their various costumes and equipment. I'd say it has to be able to support at least a four hundred pounds."

"You shall have it, Lady Poppy." Starke bowed.

"You know, I think I am a bit distracted," she said to Tulip. "I can't stop thinking about..."

"Your handsome husband?" The blonde bawd winked. Isabelle ducked her chin to hide a smile.

"He's managed to change my mind about sex," she said.

"I thought Bella forbade him to move that quickly?"

Isabelle scoffed. "As if Silas would heed anyone's restrictions. Speaking of Bella, where is she?"

Tulip's expression shuttered instantly.

"Gotten mixed up in that nasty Witch of St. Giles business again. Either that, or she's sleeping. Ought to be the latter," she muttered grimly before smoothing her features into pleasantness. "When is your Lord Huntley due to visit next?"

"Tonight. He is taking me to dinner." Heat crawled over her cheeks and down her throat. Would she ever stop reacting like this whenever his name was mentioned? The first time she'd fallen for Silas, it had been from a distance, based on girlish fantasies about what he would be like. Those dreams had been dashed by reality, but now that she was falling even harder for the real him. His intelligence. His passion. His sensuality.

Despite the Flowers' warmth and friendliness, she knew in her bones that she didn't belong here. She would decide tonight how soon she would return to Cheveny and take up her duties as a wife and countess. The prospect of following in her mother's footsteps and living in exile abroad no longer appealed to her, if it ever had.

This would be a test of her new identity. While she couldn't be called Poppy in polite society, she could keep that part of herself close in her heart and use her newfound confidence to succeed where she had previously failed.



## Silas

SILAS AGAIN BROUGHT bouquets for each of the Flowers when he arrived at Number 9 Dove Street. He hadn't gone all out this time, opting instead for

small clusters of blooms representative of each Flower's moniker. Tulip in particular seemed pleased.

"You're so thoughtful," she said, sniffing the yellow flowers. "Poppy is ready for you."

He'd brought a corsage of white roses for her. They still seemed more appropriate for Isabelle than scarlet poppies. She let him pin it above her left breast. On a whim, he stole one of the smaller flowers from Belladonna's display of roses and tucked it behind her ear. Where was the countess, anyway?

The thought was there and gone in an instant, driven straight out of his mind when Isabelle tucked her arm into his elbow and smiled. His breath caught. She was beautiful when she smiled. He could spend the rest of his life finding ways to make her lips curve up with that mischievous, knowing smirk.

It occurred to him that he hadn't seen her smile genuinely very often. A couple of times during her brief Season when he'd been too self-absorbed to really notice, and again now. In between, there had been tight smiles that didn't reach her eyes.

Progress. He liked that they were finally making some.

"Did you miss me?" she asked, leaning on his arm as they ambled down the short walkway to where his carriage waited for them in the street.

"Every second of every hour of every single day was torment without you."

She lifted one brow. There was a haughtiness, a confidence about her tonight that called to him.

"You lie well." She chuckled.

"It's not a lie. I think about you all the time, Isabelle. You have become quite a distraction."

That caused her to blush. He loved making her blush. This was a game he could play all day long. He handed her into his coach and deliberately sat next to her. He wanted to touch her as much as he could. Her perfume and the flowers scented the air. Tonight, she wore a sophisticated scent. Still light, with roses and lilies mixed with a muskier undertone he couldn't quite place.

"Have you tried it before?"

"Tried what?"

"Making love in a carriage."

"As a matter of fact, I haven't."

"Would you like to?" An impish smile played on her pretty lips.

"Madam, are you propositioning me?" He pressed his palm against his chest, feigning shock.

"Depends upon your answer," she teased, angling her body away from him and leaning against the far squabs. "If you say yes, then I am most definitely propositioning you, husband."

"If I say no?"

"Then I was only teasing."

"You have learned a great deal during your time at the House of Virtue." Silas leaned over, planting one fist on the leather seat beside her hip. "Do you fancy a lesson on male anatomy?"

"In general, or yours specifically?"

"Mine, specifically. In fact, if any other man's anatomy were to come anywhere near your person, I solemnly vow to remove his balls from his body. Personally."

"Possessive." Isabelle twined her arms around his neck and kissed him lightly. "I like it." Silas kissed her deeply, tasting mint and the faint waxiness of whatever cosmetics Belladonna had coaxed her into wearing.

He leaned back and unbuttoned his coat, tossing it carelessly onto the opposite seat.

"Good. You're about to discover how possessive I can be." They both were. He didn't know where this feeling had come from, only that he had

never felt such feral ownership over a woman before. It was irrational—the only "owner" of Isabelle was herself—yet intellectual knowledge did absolutely nothing to tame the beast prowling within him, growling *mine*.

Once he had her back at Cheveny the impulse would pass, surely. He'd be able to focus once again on his long-delayed invention. Court investors with his beautiful, intelligent wife at his side. Tonight was a test of her skills as a gracious guest who could woo prospective partners—not that he would say that to her. He intended this to be a gentle introduction with people she had already met socially.

Isabelle unpinned her corsage and set it carefully on the seat. "I don't want it to get crushed," she explained. "How does one go about making love in a carriage?" She propped her chin on her fist and looked at him expectantly.

"Minx," he said affectionately. "Come and kiss me."

A sudden bump all but tossed her into his lap. She yelped in surprise and clung to him to avoid being thrown to the floor. Silas locked his arms around her waist and kissed her again, playfully at first, then deepening it with a sweep of his tongue. She yielded to him with a soft moan. He found her breast and squeezed it through the prison of silk and cotton. Frustration boiled inside him, though he knew they didn't have time for undressing.

"One day soon, I am going to have the pleasure of seeing you nude," he growled.

"I didn't think you liked skinny little bog witches like me," she panted. He captured her hand and moved it to the thick ridge straining his trousers.

"I do now. You are the prettiest bog witch a man could want."

"Men don't want bog witches," she laughed.

"This one does." He brushed a kiss to her temple and squeezed her hand around his erection.

"Oh," she said softly, suddenly fascinated and blushing again. "Does that feel good to you?"

"It would feel better if you took it out."

She cast him a skeptical look, but he helped her unfasten his trousers and work his stiff cock free.

"Better still if you touched it," he added in voice as rough as sandpaper.

"Like this?" She grasped him lightly, experimentally. His little scientist, he thought affectionately.

"Harder."

She squeezed. A noise gusted out of him. Silas's head dropped back onto butter-soft leather. He stared up at the pleated satin ceiling as she stroked, up and down. Bliss poured through his body like water from a broken tap.

"Better, Lord Huntley?" When had she adopted that sultry voice?

"Keep talking," he gritted out, covering her hand with his own and demonstrating what he wanted from her. Isabelle caught on quickly.

"I have seen a variety of penises—"

"Cocks," he corrected, wining. "Please don't say that ever again."

"Cocks, then," she echoed playfully. The filthy epithet falling form her lips in her cultured, refined tones thrilled him. He was corrupting her, and damn his soul, he loved every minute of it. "I have seen a variety of them in the past few weeks."

"I didn't want to know that."

"Mostly fake ones, to be honest. Yours is without a doubt the most aesthetic I have witnessed."

"Promise me mine is the only one you've touched," he growled.

"What would you do if it's not?"

"I would rip the offending appendage off its owner and beat him to death with his own cock," Silas growled, meaning every syllable.

Isabelle collapsed into giggles. "I cannot envision how that would even work. I appreciate the sentiment, however, such violence is unnecessary, for yours is the only appendage I have...enjoyed." She swirled the pad of her

thumb around the head of his cock, spreading the bead of moisture forming at the slit around the sensitive skin. "I have the strangest impulse to kiss you here. Would you mind?"

## SILAS

M ind? He'd be bloody ecstatic. Words, however, had retreated to the far recesses of his mind. He nodded. Isabelle had to shift around to make enough space to bend over. Infernal corsets. Silas was of half a mind to cut her out of that contraption. Slide his pocket knife straight up her spine and watch the ribbon part until the pieces fell away, leaving her in a semitransparent shift. Still too much clothing.

Isabelle's lips found him, and his mind blanked. Her technique was artless but what she lacked in experience she made up for with enthusiasm. He groaned and wound his fingers into the hair by her temple, finding the rose he'd placed behind her ear earlier. She licked the underside of his cock.

"Do you like it when I do that?" she asked.

"What do you think?" He grunted.

"I am trying not to make assumptions about you, Silas. Considering how badly I misjudged your interest in me before."

"This is all the confirmation you need, darling." He indicated his rampant cock. She ran the head across her soft lips. He moved his hand to her cheek and dragged his thumb down the curve. "Open your mouth."

Trusting blue eyes with pupils blown so wide that the cerulean was nearly swallowed by the black met his. He could drown in her eyes. Her pink lips parted to admit him entrance. Her lashes flared wider, but then fell to half-mast. She shifted to get a better angle. For the next several minutes, silence reigned in the carriage. He unwound her hair, heedless of the fact that this would be a dead giveaway for what they'd been doing during the ride to Prince Leopold's mansion. The prince was something of a libertine himself. He wouldn't mind two newlyweds showing up to his dinner party looking fresh from bedsport. That would certainly give London something new to talk about.

Silas had woken up every morning since Isabelle's departure with a raging cockstand that only relented after a vigorous self-pleasuring. He would give just about anything to have Isabelle properly in his bed.

She shifted experimentally to take more of him into her mouth. Wet heat and gentle pressure made his eyes roll back in his skull.

"Isabelle," he groaned at the exquisite torment. He didn't want to finish in her mouth for her first time. He'd already frightened her once. But he was very near to falling over the edge, and she made no protest. Instead, her blue eyes flashed with challenge.

Silas erupted. Blindly, he tented his fingers against her temple and arched off the seat. A distant speck of rational thought kept him tethered to reality enough to remember not to frighten her. Isabelle thought she was brave and tough, but she was an unbroken filly prone to startling. Pleasure tore through him like a summer storm. When he collapsed against the squabs, she eased off him and sat back, looking pleased with herself.

"I succeeded." She smiled triumphantly.

"You are a quick study," he wheezed.

Inconveniently, the carriage pulled to an abrupt halt at that exact moment. Silas scrambled to right his clothing. Isabelle was still pinning up her hair when the footman opened the door and placed the step down for them to disembark. He pinned her corsage to her bodice a second time. Her cheeks remained charmingly flushed, and she couldn't meet anyone's eye.

"Where are we?" she asked. "I don't recognize this...magnificence."

"It's quite something, isn't it? Prince Leopold has extravagant taste." He leaned in to add in a whisper, "Along with pots of money to spend on things like my electromagnetic engines."

Was he imagining it, or did the happy shine in her eyes dim from a moment ago?

"I shall endeavor to be a credit to you this evening," she mumbled, low and brittle.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong." Her grip on his arm tightened. She flashed him a weak smile. "The adjustment from the coach to dinner is a bit jarring."

There was no time for further discussion. They had reached the top of the stairs leading into the enormous marble mansion. The elaborately carved double doors parted to reveal a tall man with shining blond hair and a predatory glint in his eye. Silas's stomach clenched as Leopold's gaze lingered too long upon Isabelle.

She was his wife.

The prince had an unsavory reputation, but no one dared to speak ill of him publicly considering his connection to the queen. Besides, he had a longstanding and well-known *affaire* with a coveted courtesan known as The Rose of London. Reportedly, Rose Leland and Belladonna were fast friends.

Any predatory intentions the prince displayed toward Isabelle were surely a product of his imagination. He'd been denied. Thwarted. He was seeing things that didn't exist.

"Welcome," Leopold said, taking her hand and brushing a kiss across her knuckles. The possessive beast inside Silas roared with fury, an impulse only compounded by Isabelle's reticence.

Stop touching her. She is mine.

"I am delighted to host you this evening. I understand Lord Huntley has an interesting proposition for me." Something about the way Leopold said proposition caused an alarm bell to clang in the back of Silas's mind. He suddenly regretted coming here, but there was no backing out now. Not when Leopold was the late Prince Consort's nephew and therefore connected to Queen Victoria.

He edged fractionally closer to his wife.



## Isabelle

SHE WAS NOT GOING to survive this evening without making a fool out of herself. Again.

To dampen her rising panic, Isabelle studied the elaborate pattern in the marble floor. If push came to shove, she could run. Turn left—it would be a right coming the opposite direction—and then dash past the double-story stairs leading up to the second level, past the foyer, and out into the front yard. Which she had barely seen, considering how distracted she'd been upon their arrival.

You're being ridiculous, she chided herself. You won't have to run from the prince. You have Silas to protect you now.

But how could he protect her when he didn't know that Prince Leopold had pursued—nay, hunted her—through ballrooms for weeks? Dangling the prospect of a match as he tried to put his hands where they did not belong. Cajoling and mocking her at every turn. Cornering her whenever he could catch her alone. She had tried very hard never to go anywhere alone, but he had proven remarkably adept at *showing her a painting* or *escorting her* to another room.

On one occasion, he had shown her a painting of a nude woman being pleasured by three men and asked if she would enjoy that. It hadn't felt flirtatious. Instead, he made her feel trapped and panicked.

"I trust you won't object to the presence of Rose Leland." The prince's oily gaze landed on her and stuck. Isabelle barely suppressed a shudder. "Considering where your wife is currently residing."

Why hadn't she asked Silas who was hosting them for dinner this evening? She had trusted him. A small, irrational part of her felt betrayed. She knew it wasn't right, yet a tiny part of her blamed him for putting her in danger.

You knew you'd have to see the prince again one day. She wished she'd stayed at Cheveny despite her loneliness and determination to win over her husband. If she had, she would be safe. She could have had her lonely walks in the countryside and endured terrible sex with a spouse who hated her, at irregular intervals, until she fell pregnant. Then she would have had a baby to dote upon.

But no. She had been desperate to win Silas over.

Because she loved him.

Knowing Silas despised her had broken her heart, despite him having a perfectly good reason to hate her. Now he didn't, but at what cost?

Prince Leopold surely hadn't invited them here only to discuss an investment in his factory.

"How did you learn about my wife's visit to the House of Virtue?" Silas asked. Isabelle thought she detected a tense edge in his tone, but she couldn't be quite sure who he was angry with: the prince, or her.

"Didn't you know? Rose was the original Flower." Leopold glanced again at her. This time, he made her feel like she wasn't wearing any clothes. "Belladonna told her there was a new girl named Poppy. Rose passed the message to me. I had heard rumors about your wife running off, Huntley. It didn't take long to put two and two together." He tapped his temple. "Are you taking tips from Tulip? I understand she is an exceptional instructor."

Isabelle gulped. She was in a great deal of danger. But what could she say to Silas that wouldn't sound ridiculous? No. She must see this through, for his sake.

"You'll never know for certain, will you, Leo?" a woman's voice interrupted. Isabelle startled and pressed her palm to her chest, nearly dislodging the corsage pinned to above her breast. The hard edge her tone was a jarring contrast to her naturally melodic voice. "I am Rose Leland."

"The famed Rose of London," Isabelle smiled genuinely. "I've heard so much about you."

Rose was even more beautiful than the other Flowers had described. Her small, thin nose sat above full lips and a delicate chin. Her huge green eyes were framed by dark brown lashes, and a halo of sunlight-blond hair was gathered atop her head. Her slim neck was adorned with layers upon layers of diamonds and pearls that dripped all the way down to the tops of her cleavage.

Even her elbow dimples were perfect.

This goddess of a woman cast her a dismissive sidelong look and offered her hand to Silas. Outrage blossomed in Isabelle's chest when he took her fingers and made the same gesture Leopold had done to her. At least she'd been wearing gloves. Rose's hand was scandalously bare.

Impotent, furious envy exploded in her chest when his gaze dipped briefly down that glittering elaborate necklace to the creamy globes on display in her low-cut dress. Granted, it was difficult not to look. The placement of her jewels and the low bodice invited the eye to trail downward.

Whereas Isabelle hardly had any bosom to speak of. Was that what Silas truly wanted? A blowsy...oh, who was she trying to fool. Rose was the most gorgeous woman she'd ever laid eyes on. Even she couldn't stop staring.

"Always nice to meet a new man," Rose purred, curling her fingers around Silas's. "I've certainly heard good things."

Her gaze darted down to his breeches. Flames scorched Isabelle's cheeks.

How could this...this catty bitch be Belladonna's closest friend?

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Leland. I've heard a great deal about you as well."

Was she imagining the low rumble in her husband's voice? Isabelle flinched. This woman was a courtesan. Her bread-and-butter was seducing married men! Her stomach fell and kept crashing down and down until Isabelle didn't think it could fall any further, only for it to crash again. Her vision turned watery, and her chest ached. All she wanted to do right now was run back to Violet and Azalea, cry on Tulip's shoulder, and drink tea with the twins while they comforted her by calling Silas colorful names.

She wasn't ready to leave the House of Virtue.

She wasn't ready to be a wife, never mind becoming a mother. She wasn't Poppy, the bold courtesan training to seduce her own husband. She was just awkward Isabelle Kingston, the erstwhile bog witch who yearned for a place she'd spent barely twenty-four hours. She longed to return to Cheveny and make her home there.

"I understood the Wilders were joining us?" Silas tucked his hands behind his back as if to keep them out of Rose's reach. The courtesan ambled over to a black-and-gold lacquered bar and poured herself a hefty amount of amber liquid. Her hips twitched languidly beneath the tight green silk satin. The back of her dress was cut low enough to reveal both shoulder blades.

"The Wilders can't stand Leo." Rose chuckled. "Can they, darling? They wouldn't have come if we begged. What can I pour for you, Lord Huntley?"

The courtesan was drunk, Isabelle realized with a shock. How else to explain the casual way she'd just shamed the prince? She darted a quick look at Leopold and found him scowling.

"I'll have what you're drinking," Silas was saying.

Rose nodded approvingly and poured four fingers of straight whisky into a glass, making sure to press her fingers along Silas's when she passed it to him with a knowing little smirk. Isabelle despised this woman.

"Can I get you a drink, Lady Huntley? Perhaps a ratafia? Lemonade?"

"I'll have what you're having, too." She shot Rose a narrow glare. The whore rolled her eyes and poured barely a splash of whisky into a glass, followed by at least three times as much water.

"A waste of good single malt," complained Leopold, seizing the bottle and evening the proportions and adding a generous splash.

"You'll make her sick," Rose warned. There was something off between the prince and his courtesan. She ran her palm down his chest, but there was no affection in the way she flirted with her benefactor. If Isabelle didn't know they'd were a couple, she'd say Rose and Leo hated one another.

And that framed her actions toward Silas in a different light.

Isabelle might not be very good at reading people's emotions and intentions, but she saw the way things fit together.

She also saw the faint bruises on Rose's neck and wrists.

Sudden understanding crashed into her.

Rose was looking for a new protector, or whatever it was called when a man set up house with a courtesan. Hadn't he told her he intended to take other women to his bed?

Her stomach dropped sickeningly.

"I'll be fine," Isabelle said breezily. She raised the glass to her lips and made a show of drinking deeply, though she spat most of the whiskey back into the glass. What little she did swallow tasted not unpleasantly like hay and smoke with a harsh kick that burned all the way down her esophagus. She would not cough. She refused to betray any hint of weakness.

She would need all her wits about her this evening. She needed to fully inhabit her new persona if she wanted to to get out of here unscathed. Poppy wouldn't be bothered by Rose flirting with her husband. Though it required every ounce of her willpower, she was determined to ignore it.

She just needed to grit her teeth and get through this. This project meant everything to him. He valued his precious devices far more than he did her. Despite the pinch in her heart, she wanted Silas to succeed.

She couldn't let Leopold ruin Silas's plans.

"If you are settled with your refreshments, why don't we repair to the sitting room where Huntley can regale us with all the details of his invention," Prince Leopold said. He held out his elbow to her, eschewing Rose, and despite her mistrust of the man, Isabelle tucked her hand into the crook. Her heart hammered against her sternum. Turnabout was fair play and all, but she did not want Silas to think she was entertaining the odious man's attention.

"Are you learning all kinds of wicked lessons from Bella and her whores?" He bent low to whisper in her ear. His lips brushed her ear. Isabelle forced herself not to react despite the shudder that crawled up her spine.

"That is for me to know and Mr. Huntley to find out." She stared straight ahead.

"What if I want to find out?" the prince said.

"That's not why we're here," she said primly.

"On the contrary, that is precisely why you are here." His lips stretched in a predatory grin. "I plan to have my way with you while Rose entertains your husband. Don't look so surprised. Everyone knows there's no love lost between the two of you. Clearly, he doesn't care who fucks his wife, or he

wouldn't let you stay at the House of Virtue, Isabelle. Or should I call you Poppy?"

He traced one finger down the curve of her shoulder. This time, Isabelle couldn't conceal her shudder.

The weight of Silas's stare bored into her back.

S ilas barely touched his drink. His gut churned. This wasn't the evening he'd anticipated. At all.

In the sitting room, Rose crossed her legs, letting her skirt ride up practically to the knee. An unforgivable sin in polite company. But this was not polite company.

This was an ambush.

He glanced at Isabelle, who made no protest when Prince Leopold bent his head too close to hers. He balled his fist at his side. He wanted her to charm the man, not allow him to seduce her.

Sudden clarity blazed through him. The prince and his courtesan hadn't invited them to dinner to hear him pitch his brilliant invention. They'd brought them here for debauchery.

Not that Rose seemed particularly interested in the idea. He had the distinct impression that she was merely going through practiced motions. Her eyes were glassy and rather vacant except when they lit on Leopold, when they sparked with cold anger. Right now, she was slouched in her seat with one shoulder of her gown falling down the curve of her shoulder. Her breasts were about to spill out of her low-cut bodice, but the idea of seeing her naked wasn't enticing. Quite the opposite.

Apart from her hair color, she was exactly the kind of woman he used to find appealing. Past tense. Isabelle had changed him. Where her innocence had initially been off-putting, he now found a core goodness to her that was too pure for the world to sully. It had nothing to do with experience and everything to do with the way she viewed life through a lens of undue optimism. What he'd once seen as a weakness was her greatest strength.

"How do you like being married?" Rose said, interrupting his racing thoughts. She jerked her head in Isabelle's direction. Leopold was edging Isabelle into a literal corner. Leaning in too close, waiting for her to back up a step, then invading her space again and repeating the process. The hair on the back of Silas' neck lifted in warning.

"He's only toying with her," Rose said dismissively, stretching one lean arm out. "You needn't worry. He likes the chase. The instant they surrender, he loses interest." The pose pushed her tits out, and Silas had the distinct impression that she was vaguely offended by his indifference. There was an unmistakable deep purple spot on the underside of her arm, the size of a thumbprint.

"I'm not worried." Silas sipped his drink in a show of relaxing. He wouldn't be indulging this evening. Nothing about this scenario made him comfortable, yet he could not afford to walk out. He'd been a fool to think he could make an ally of the prince, but he definitely couldn't make an enemy of the man, either. Not unless he wanted to alienate most of London society and possibly the Queen herself.

"Why don't you tell them about your invention, Huntley?" Isabelle twisted away from the prince and hastened over to him. Her face was a shade paler than usual. The urge to throttle the prince came within heartbeats of overwhelming him.

"Now?" Rose's tone dripped condescension.

"If you aren't interested in filling your empty, pretty head with knowledge, you can go upstairs," snapped Leopold.

"I am most definitely interested in finding out where you intend to invest my money." Rose displayed her teeth in what might have passed for a smile were it not for the glitter of pure hatred in her green eyes. Leopold scoffed.

"You don't have any money, mein Schatz." He cupped Rose's chin. She reacted with a disturbing passivity. The prince ran his thumb over her lower lip. "If you want to keep Rosecourt, darling, you're going to have to pretend to have a functioning brain inside that lovely decorative skull of yours for once. Play along."

He slapped Rose's cheek. Not lightly.

Silas's body snapped straight, every muscle tense. That mark on the courtesan's arm was definitely a bruise.

Isabelle flinched and kept a wary six paces between herself and the prince. He was disturbed by the way she was holding her ground. Until now, he had only ever witnessed her act with shyness. Tonight, it seemed she had adopted her Poppy persona too completely for his taste.

"Tell him about the engine," she said.

"Now is not the time."

"You wanted an audience, Huntley." Leopold dropped into the chair beside Rose's. She sat beside him posed like a sullen doll. "Entertain me. Tell me why I should invest my fortune in your unproven factory."

Isabelle cast a beseeching gaze upon him and nodded quickly. *Yes. Tell him.* Fine. The sooner they got this farce over with, the sooner he could get her out of here.

"For the past twelve years, ever since I was at Eton, I have been working on an electromagnetic engine that can power machines. Imagine a bicycle powered by electromagnets. A person could easily ride up steep slopes. Delivery could improve exponentially, benefitting every shopkeeper in England. My engines could power locomotives if I could craft one large

enough to be practical. There is a man named Nikola Tesla who is working on wireless electricity. We are on the verge of an entirely new era—"

Silas bit off. He sounded like such a bloody idealist. This was why he'd stopped talking about his work years ago. People's eyes glazed over. They asked about practical applications of things that didn't exist yet. Sharing his love of tinkering and science only made others laugh at him.

Until Isabelle.

"Do you have an actual product, or is this still a theoretical engine?" asked Rose, startling everyone. Silas cast her a dark glare.

"I have already dipped heavily into my own funds to lease space, hire workers, and purchase equipment. Production will be necessarily limited at first, but I do plan to start an investment pool to fund manufacturing. Having a cornerstone investor would provide confidence to others."

"So, no, then." The courtesan scoffed.

"Why not fund it yourself and keep all the profits?" Leopold asked laconically. Silas already knew he wasn't going to invest a single penny. He'd spent years being pitched to, looking for profitable ideas. He'd been the one politely—more than the prince was currently pretending—turning down a hopeful inventor. He could read the signs from miles away.

This interview was pointless.

"I'll give your proposal due consideration, Huntley. If my whore can manage the walk, it's time to go in for dinner."

Rose got up and brushed past Isabelle without a glance. She stumbled slightly, steadied herself with a death grip on the wainscotting, and turned to him, wiggling her fingertips.

"Oblige me. Kindly do the honors, Huntley."

Reluctantly, he offered the courtesan his elbow. Every instinct screamed for him to take his wife and get the hell out of here. As for Rose and Leopold, whatever was going on between those two, he wanted nothing to do with it.



## Isabelle

THE PRINCE OFFERED her his arm with a wolfish smile.

"Come, pet. Don't be one of those tedious newlyweds who prefers her own husband's company. To cling to one's spouse at a party is simply not done."

Still, Isabelle hesitated. Was that Rose's assignment this evening, to distract Silas so that the prince could prey upon her? She had a doomed feeling that it was.

She was a married woman now. There was no possibility of someone discovering them and him being pressured to marry her. Her mind spun wildly. What would she have done if he had succeeded in forcing her and they'd been caught?

Isabelle knew she would have been given no other option but to marry him. Deep down, she also knew that no prince would deign to tie himself to an illegitimate earl's daughter. This wasn't a fairy tale, and Prince Leopold was no hero.

Despite social censure, she had little doubt in her mind that he would have continued about his business without the slightest care for ruining her life.

She couldn't refuse to go into dinner with him. That would be unforgivably rude. Silas needed to impress this man. This was her opportunity to show that she could be an asset to him. Isabelle clenched her jaw and perched her fingertips lightly on the prince's arm.

He slowed his steps, hanging back. Isabelle's pulse kicked into an alarmed gallop as she pulled her hand away. Leopold manacled her wrist.

"What are you—" She gasped.

"Now that you are a married woman, you have no further excuse for refusing me." Leopold shoved her up against the wall. Isabelle's head cleared instantly. She tried to knee him in the crotch but was hampered by her tight skirts. The prince expertly pinned her hands to the wall beside her head. "Show me what you've learned at that whorehouse, Isabelle."

His lips crashed down. She whipped her head to the side. The prince's lips collided with her cheek. He chuckled, low and menacing, then licked a slow, wet stripe up the side of her face. Isabelle's shudder of disgust reverberated all the way through her body. She squeezed her eyes shut, flailing against his grip.

Suddenly, his grip slackened. Her eyes popped open in disbelief.

"Darling," Rose's lilting voice called out in a flat, affectionless tone. The courtesan had mastered her slurring for the moment. "What is keeping you and Lady Huntley?"

"We'll be right there," Leopold called out, his flat blue eyes bright with eagerness.

You promised you wouldn't embarrass Silas, Isabelle thought. What would Poppy do in such a predicament?

She couldn't run. She couldn't fight. She had to get to the dining room and convince Silas to curtail this disastrous evening. He couldn't have known what the prince had planned. She needed to believe that.

A film of water clouded her vision. Her nose itched. What if Silas had agreed to hand her over to the prince in exchange for funding for his business?

"We're coming now," Isabelle said, her voice surprisingly firm as she wrenched away and glowered at Leopold. He seemed almost surprised. The predatory gleam in his eye gave way to cold wariness.

Footsteps echoed upon elegant tile.

"There you are." Silas stared at her intently. Isabelle held his eye with her chin high. She went straight to his side and cowered there. Tension radiated from his body.

"You were taking a while," Silas said tersely. He stared at the prince, then at her. "Are you feeling well, Isabelle?"

"No. I find I am quite indisposed. I would like to go home now."

To her eternal relief, Silas immediately led her away, past the grand stair she'd been prepared to run past if she needed to, and out into the cool evening air. She'd left her wrap but she didn't care enough to go back for it.

Outside, she could breathe again. The pressure of tears faded.

"You cannot simply leave," Leopold called out, following them.

"My wife is unwell. Surely you understand, Your Highness. Please give our regrets to Miss Leland."

Leopold's gaze vowed retribution.

"You will regret offending me," he vowed. "Your factory will fail. Your wife will betray you. If not with me, then with another man. Assuming she hasn't already whored herself out to half of London already."

Isabelle stiffened

"Get in," Silas ordered. They hadn't waited for his carriage to be brought round. He marched her straight into the street and around the block to where a row of horses and drivers awaited their master's call, including theirs.

Did he blame her for tonight's catastrophe?

hat just happened?" Silas demanded roughly the instant they were safely ensconced in the carriage.

She shuddered. "Leopold...he licked me."

Don't start with that. Begin at the beginning! an inner voice cried in dismay. But what was the beginning, exactly? The time Prince Leopold had held her too closely while dancing? Or the time he'd placed his hand on her hip and tried to feel her bottom while no one was looking?

There had been so many small moments that could be explained away as an accident, as a normal interaction from the cosmopolitan foreigner who wasn't completely adapted to English customs. It was hard for Isabelle to decide which incident had truly been the first assault upon her person. In the aggregate, she had understood that he was the predator and she was the prey, a powerful man hunting a powerless woman through ballrooms where society turned a blind eye.

"Where?" Silas demanded, bringing her scrambled thoughts back to the present.

"My cheek. He was trying to kiss me but I turned away. He had me pinned against the wall."

Her husband's face became a thundercloud.

"He's been pursuing me ever since my debut," she blurted.

"Before you followed me onto that balcony?"

She nodded, her throat too clogged with emotion for words.

"Before you kissed me, and we were found?"

Again, she nodded. The words that had been bottling in her throat spilled out like champagne from a shaken bottle.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I was desperate to get away from Prince Leopold, but even my mother advised me to find a husband as quickly as possible. I never thought he would continue pursuing me after I was married. I should have told you. I didn't because I thought I was safe. If I had known where we were going this evening, I..."

"You still wouldn't have told me," he said flatly.

Wordlessly, she shook her head. Shame enveloped her, a filthy cloak she couldn't shrug off. How much of what happened was her fault? Had she inadvertently encouraged the prince?

"Isabelle. It's all right. I understand why you said nothing. I, an earl, was afraid of causing offense to Queen Victoria's nephew, or I wouldn't have come here this evening, either. I cannot imagine how powerless a young woman felt. Even a countess like your mother didn't dare tell you to defy him."

"She was trying to help me," Isabelle said. But Esther had failed. She knew she'd failed to protect her daughter the day Isabelle ruined herself by pursuing a near-stranger onto a balcony, and she had fled back to the Continent as soon as Isabelle was married. Esther loved her, but she remained too cowardly to confront her own shortcomings. She preferred to run from her problems.

Isabelle didn't want to be like her mother. She was trying so hard to be different. Braver. Yet hadn't she been running from her marriage?

A surge of tears threatened to overwhelm her.

"Did Lady de Lucey tell you to compromise me?" Silas asked seriously, then buried his face in his palm. "I sound ridiculous. I'm a grown man. I know what young women in search of a fortune and a title are capable of. I simply didn't think that you, of all women, were in that position." He leaned forward and took her face between his palms. "If I'd known that was happening, I would have offered for you on the spot. No questions asked."

Her vision swam. "You would?"

"Yes. Without hesitation."

She ducked her chin, pulling away from his grasp. "I didn't think anyone would believe me."

"I would have." He couldn't seem to stop touching her—a gentle press to her shoulder, nudging her knee, brushing her forearm. Isabelle found the contact both overwhelming and comforting. "Prince Leopold has been the subject of sordid rumors for years. I pride myself on ignoring society gossip. God knows people say enough about me." A weary sigh gusted out of him. "I ignored the rumors and placed you directly in his path this evening. I apologize, Isabelle."

Startled, she jerked her gaze to his. He was...sincere? She could hardly believe it.

"You didn't know," she said softly.

"Which is also my fault," he said ruefully. "I made sure you wouldn't trust me enough to tell me the truth about anything. Again, I am so very sorry."

Isabelle blinked. "I forgive you?"

It came out like a question, for she didn't quite know what to make of a man apologizing to her. In her experience, apologies from men were akin to unicorns: coveted, but illusory.

"You don't have to forgive me so quickly," he said, sitting back and looking rather put out. "I intend to earn your clemency."

"But you don't need to," she protested. "You already have it. Come and see me tomorrow at Belladonna's House of Virtue, and we'll—"

He cut her off. "Isabelle, end the charade. You're not going back there. Not tonight. Not ever."

Stubborn pride stiffened her spine. She didn't appreciate being ordered around, and coming seconds after his apology negated the effect.

"I'll come home when I'm ready, Silas."

She didn't have a home. Not at the House of Virtue, which was a way station between the girl she had been and the woman she was becoming.

"Damn it, Isabelle. Yes you are. Let me prove to you how much I want you for my wife."



## Rose

Rose Leland did not pretend to be anything other than what she appeared: a thoroughly wicked, frequently wanton, only occasionally nice, whore.

She had made her peace with her many flaws the day the deed to her beloved home, Rosecourt, was signed to her name. If being a slut and a bitch was what had brought that magnificent property into her possession, she had no regrets about any of it.

But now, touching her stinging cheek, she did regret one error of judgment. Two years ago, she had entrusted the deed to her new lover, Prince Leopold. He was dashing and rich. Usually, only one of those traits was required to earn a man's place in her bed. She had a weakness for handsome men. Being a mercenary at heart, she could also be seduced with piles of cash, jewels, or property. He had possessed both—or so it seemed to outsiders.

The man who had bought her Rosecourt had done so because he believed himself so in love with her that he would one day marry her. Rose had known better. Inevitably, financial considerations had thrust him into the arms of an American dollar princess who disapproved of her husband's courtesan.

Rose hadn't exactly been broken-hearted when her lover eventually left. She prided herself upon not having a heart to break.

She hadn't experienced a genuine emotion in so long that she doubted she would recognize one if it bit her on the nose. Even her hatred of Leopold had faded into a dull throb, blunted by an overreliance on wine and, sometimes, opium.

No, she was not a good woman.

But she did not deserve this.

"You stupid cunt," Leo seethed. "I could have had her. All you had to do was flash your tits at Huntley and he'd have been distracted for the next hour."

"Va te faire foutre," she muttered in French. Go fuck yourself.

"That's what I pay you for." He kicked her leg. Pain shot up her calf. Rose flinched and slumped further down the velvet seat. She tried to keep her mouth shut. She really did. Talking back always ended badly.

"You haven't paid me in months," she reminded him. "You don't have any money. Only what you've taken from me."

The prince's mouth tightened. Hatred burned in his eyes.

"Does Victoria know you spend your allowance on gambling, drink, and me?" she purred in the flirtatious tone that had won her the title of most coveted courtesan in London.

Leo's fist closed around her throat. Paste gems dug into her skin. The originals had been sold for cash ages ago. Back when she thought she still had a prayer of getting the deed to Rosecourt back.

After tonight, she knew better. Leo planned to sell *her* property that she had acquired by selling *her body* to the highest bidder, that he had no right to. He wanted to use her money for a ridiculous "investment" scheme he was certain would make him rich. His debts would be repaid. The specter of having to marry for money—perhaps even a dreaded dollar princess; the Americans were a dime a dozen these days, so to speak—would be lifted from him.

Her beloved home would be lost to a wasteful, cruel fool's fever dream, and there was little she could do to stop him.

Stars burst in her vision. One of these days, he really was going to kill her.

Abruptly, he released her. Rose choked, gasping raggedly for air.

"Sign Rosecourt over to me and I'll let you leave," he growled. Once upon a time, back when she was still under the delusion that he was a fairytale prince, she'd liked the way his voice deepened into a rumble whenever he was provoked. She had enjoyed poking that bear. For a while. Now, his claws came out at the slightest provocation.

Rose would rather die than give up her beloved home. She shook her head. Fine blond strands drifted down from her pinned-up hair. Ragged coughing made it impossible to speak. Her head ached. Her stomach was on the cusp of emptying itself upon his gleaming shoes.

"Suit yourself. I'll turn you in for common prostitution." He kicked her shoulder. A yelp like a dog's burst out of her. That's what she was to him: an animal to be abused.

Except she had no diseases for which he could have her imprisoned. This was the crucial flaw in his threat that had led to a months-long detente. The prince could not have her arrested without raising speculation about his own health.

Never mind that they hadn't had sex in many months. Lately, Leo hadn't been able to sustain an erection long enough to complete the act. He

took out his frustration on her. It was her fault for not trying hard enough, of course, though she pleasured him until her jaw and her knees both ached, hating herself every tormented second.

Poetic punishment for her many sins.

"You won't." She coughed, pushing up to her knees, then her feet. A purple bruise covered the inside of her leg from ankle to mid-calf. New contusions would join the old ones hidden beneath her necklace. She barely felt them anymore. Her neck always hurt. He liked to grab her there to shut her up.

Her and her stupid mouth. She had a terrible lifelong habit of always needing to have the last word in an argument. Such as now.

"If you do, I'll tell the world that you've contracted the French pox. Good luck finding another paramour to take you, between your debts and your soft cock and a plausible story about an infection of your nether regions."

Rose brushed her falling-down hair away from her sore cheek where he'd slapped her to start off this argument. Or perhaps it was a continuation of the same argument they'd been having for nearly a year. Ever since the night she had given him her deed for safekeeping instead of doing the intelligent thing and taking it to Belladonna.

Leo's jaw worked.

"That's the trouble, isn't it? We cannot stand one another, but your duplicity means that I will never leave until you return what belongs to me." A small, unhappy smile touched her lips. "We're as good as wed. That is, incidentally, the only way you could legally take my house. Holding the deed hostage only keeps us tied to one another. Return it to me, and I will leave at once."

"Women don't deserve property. Especially whores. I'll find a buyer willing to overlook a contested deed. For the right sum." He chuckled

darkly. "In fact, after your failure to secure me Isabelle Kingston this evening, I believe I shall start soliciting buyers tomorrow as punishment."

Rose swallowed painfully. Her stomach twisted.

Prince Leopold was calling her bluff, and there was little she could do to stop him.

D espite knowing that he had earned it, his Isabelle's wariness about accompanying him to his townhome stung Silas's pride.

Taking her back to Countess Oreste's would only leave him restless and worried. Whether she liked it or not, it was time for Isabelle to come home.

Seconds later, they pulled to a stop. He gave her a stern look and descended from the carriage, taking her by the hand as she cautiously followed. He wanted nothing more than to erase the pinched wariness from her beautiful face, smooth her brow and see her smile again. She did it so rarely. Yet she stared up at his townhouse like he was taking her into another trap.

He was her husband. He had every right to demand that she stay with him. He had given her a great deal of rein and now he was pulling back.

"Come in, Isabelle."

"Poppy," she corrected.

"Not here." He shook his head. "I didn't marry a Flower. I married Isabelle Kingston. I gave her my name. My home. My life. Everything I have, is yours."

She looked like a princess in a fairy tale. Her blue and gold gown shimmered faintly in the low light. His blood ran feverish at the thought of

peeling away every last layer and finding her bare. Yet it wasn't only her body he wanted naked. He wanted her soul bared to him.

"I am a stranger here," she said, glancing around. She had never stepped foot inside his city residence before.

"Not for long." He took her elbow, lest she attempt to dart out into the night. Silas felt like he was playing the beast and she the brave damsel in a fairy tale—except that he wasn't trying to scare her off. The opposite, in fact. "I'll introduce you to the staff in the morning. They will attend to your every need."

"I wasn't worried about that."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"That I can't be a good countess," she whispered.

His temple throbbed. He wanted to ensure she was safe, and she was worried about upholding the dignity of his title. Sod the earldom. Hell, after tonight, the entire English aristocracy could disappear tomorrow and the world might be better for the loss. "Why wouldn't you be a good countess?"

"I wasn't raised to be a lady. I'm odd. Everyone says so. What if I disgrace you publicly the way I did this evening?"

"You didn't. His Disgrace the Prince did that to himself."

She sighed, clearly unconvinced.

"Isabelle. You understood that man better than I did. I was willing to look past the vile things I had heard about his character because I was too prideful to listen to rumors. I put you in danger."

"Often, the gossip isn't true."

"There is usually a kernel of truth at its core." Even the whispers about him. He was filthy rich, or had been, until he'd sunk so much of his fortune into his own pet project. He was eccentric. He was allowed to be in a way that she was not. Social condemnation of women who did not conform to certain ideals of femininity was far harsher than it was for wealthy men.

She sighed again. "Which brings us back to me being socially awkward. Admit it, Silas, I make a poor countess."

"You will learn how to be the right Countess Huntley for me."

At the door to his bedroom, Silas's heart beat like a war drum. Seducing her at the House of Virtue had been one thing. Bringing his wife home for the first time felt wholly different. New. Sacred.

He bent to press a kiss to her nape, inhaling her light floral scent. Gently, he threaded his fingers through her blond tresses and plucked away the remaining pins. Her already-disheveled hair unraveled in silken waves down her back. She endured this stoically, which sent a flare of frustration through him. He wanted his sleeping beauty to awaken.

Not to please him—she was, if anything, overeager to do that—but to her own sensuality.

He brushed the long blond skein over her shoulder and began unbuttoning her dress. Buttons marched down the column of her spine. He freed them one by one. Blue satin and gold tissue parted to reveal a corset cover, which he made similarly quick work of.

Silas continued peeling her clothes away until she stood in her corset and petticoat with a veritable mountain of fabric pooled at her feet.

"Stunning," he murmured. "You are absolutely exquisite."

She turned to him, her eyes twin pools of blue in the darkness.

"Show me," she said.

Heat flared in his chest. Anticipation raced along his skin. Tonight, Silas was determined to show Isabelle how deeply he desired her. Gently, he cupped her face.

"Isabelle," he whispered, his voice a low rumble, "I want to make you feel good. I want to show you that you are safe with me."

Isabelle's lips parting slightly. Silas leaned in, his lips brushing against hers in a soft, gentle kiss. He could feel her body relax, her hands reaching up to tangle in his hair. He deepened the kiss, his tongue exploring her mouth, tasting her sweetness.

A good start, but he wanted more.

Silas's moved his hands to her shoulders, trailing his fingers down her throat to the sharp hollows of her clavicles. He could feel her heart beating frantically like that of a frightened animal. He kissed her collarbone, his lips trailing down to the tops of her breasts. Everything he was impatient to see, to touch, remained imprisoned behind a cage of satin.

"I want you out of this," he said, trailing his fingertips down the six front hooks.

"Then take it off." Her lips tipped upward in a bemused smile. Silas had the fleeting thought that he had been wrong, so very wrong, about her playacting as Poppy. He liked what she was learning at the House of Virtue. This was a side of Isabelle that would have taken a long time to show, if it ever did, had she stayed with him from the beginning.

How upsetting to think that Belladonna had been right all along.

Silas let these thoughts flow through him as he worked his blunt fingers into the hooks and pulled them free. The stiff steel boning had little give. Getting her out of the contraption—no matter how beautiful, with its pale blue silk satin that shone even in the low light, and gold embroidery, was not as easy as it might appear. At last, he succeeded in his mission and the damned thing fell away.

She stood in her chemise and pantalettes, suddenly the shy, innocent damsel all over again. His cock twitched against his thigh. Suddenly, he wasn't at all put off by the maidenly elegance of his wife's body. Quite the opposite, in fact.

There was nothing virginal about the transparency of her chemise. That was surely a gift from Belladonna and her Flowers. He yanked the ribbon holding the neckline closed. Isabelle's soft gasp as he pushed it down—not gently—to expose her breasts, pleased him greatly.

He dropped to one knee and sucked one perfect globe into his mouth, flicking his tongue to tease her nipples. Isabelle gasped, her back arching, her fingers clutching his hair.

Silas traced the curve of her hips with his free hand while feasting upon her splendid tits. He could feel the heat radiating from her pussy, her body eager for his touch. He unbuttoned her drawers and shoved the down around her ankles.

Then he scooped her naked body into his arms and carried her to the bed. Isabelle yelped and threw her arms around his neck.

"Take your hair down," he ordered, laying her on the crisp sheets. She sat up and plucked out pins one by one. Her fine blond hair tumbled down in long waves to the middle of her back, gleaming in the moonlight. His breath caught.

"Fuck, you're beautiful." The curse slipped out before he could catch himself.

She stilled. "Not a bog witch?"

He chuckled despite the pinch of guilt in his heart. "My beautiful bog witch. I have much to atone for. Lay back."

Trustingly, she did. Silas kept his touch light and teasing as he caressed her thighs. Isabelle moaned, her legs parting slightly, giving him better access.

Silas found her pussy, his touch gentle as he explored her folds. He could feel her wetness, her body ready for him. He slipped a finger inside her, his thumb circling her clit. Isabelle moaned, her body writhing against his touch. Silas added another finger, his movements slow and deliberate. Watching her reaction.

ISABELLE MOANED. Her pert breasts shook enchantingly with each shallow, panting breath. Silas's fingers moved faster, his thumb applying more

pressure to her clit. He wanted her ready for him when he took her.

"I'm—I'll..." She never finished her sentence. Her back arched, her eyes fluttered closed, and she pulsed around his fingers. Silas drew out her pleasure with expert strokes. His cock was hard and impatient inside the prison of his trousers, his body aching with need. He wanted to taste her, to feel her on his tongue.

He pulled his fingers out of her and brought them to his mouth. Her eyes flared wide as he sucked her piquant tang.

"That's—" She bit off. Even white teeth worried her lip.

"Delicious?" he asked, cocking one brow.

"Not the word I would have used." She shook her head. "Shocking, is what I was going to say. Though, after what I have witnessed at the House of Virtue recently, I suppose I shouldn't be shocked by anything."

Still innocent. He caught her chin. "I like that I can shock you."

She laughed breathily, but there was a hint of unease in her eyes before she looked away. A blush stained her pale cheeks.

Silas shrugged out of his jacket and waistcoat, tossed aside his ascot and slowly unbuttoned his shirt. Isabelle's wondering gaze followed his every movement.

He took his time removing his shirt but left his trousers in place. For the moment. He bent and licked her folds, exploring her pussy with his tongue. Isabelle moaned, her body writhing against his mouth. Silas found her clit and he flicked his tongue across her sensitive nub.

He wanted to be inside her, to feel her tight pulse of pleasure. But first, he owed her for what she'd done during their carriage ride earlier this evening. It felt like a lifetime ago. Desire blew her pupils wide. He thrust two fingers inside her and pumped wetly. Her sounds filled his ears: her sharp pants as she neared the crest, followed by her cries as he pushed her over the edge. Her body convulsed. Her thighs clamped around his shoulders.

All at once, she exhaled and released the tension in her body like a bow with a snapped string.

Now, she was ready for him.

Silas shucked his trousers and leaned down over her. A shadow of unease flickered in her eyes, and he knew that she was thinking of their awful wedding night. He wanted to do things this way to rewrite that memory. For both of them.

He positioned himself at her entrance, slicking his cock along her entrance. Her skin was silk beneath him where their bodies connected. He slid his cock into her with one thrust. Her muscles tensed, but this time, he had prepared her well.

"All right?" he asked breathlessly. She nodded. He moved slowly, his body rocking against hers. He withdrew fractionally and drove deeper, seating himself fully. Isabelle scored his shoulders with sharp nails and arched into him. Her breasts burned his chest. Hot puffs of air skimmed his neck.

"That feels..." She trailed off. For all the undoubtedly coarse vocabulary she would have been exposed to at the House of Virtue, he was going to have to teach her the language of sex. How to speak with frank honesty about what she liked, or didn't.

"Amazing," she finally finished.

A shaky exhalation burst out of him. He brushed a kiss to her temple. "Exactly what I wanted to hear." He withdrew and plunged back into her tight passage. "Now, I want to hear my name on your lips, wife."

Isabelle's chuckle faded into a low moan. Silas's movements became faster, his body slamming into hers.

She began to move. Her nails scored his back. Her delicate hands danced over the curve of his arse, then back up between his shoulder blades, trailing electric need everywhere she touched. She bucked to meet his thrusts. Wrapped her legs around the backs of his thighs. Let her knees fall wide to grant him better access.

Her low moans became harsh cries. She found his hair and tugged hard, arching into him and crying out his name like a prayer as she crested for the third time.

His body tensed, his cock pulsing as he came inside her. He collapsed on top of her, his body shaking with the force of his orgasm.

In the shuddering aftermath, he fought for air, every breath perfumed with her scent. Earthy and warm, light and sweet from soap or whatever perfume Bella had used on her. At last, he rolled away and pulled his wife into his arms. Her heartbeat reverberated in his chest, mingling with his own. Slowing gradually until her body relaxed against his. He kissed her forehead, tasting salt. Contentment like he'd never known curled through him on cats paws.

They ought to talk. There was still much to resolve between them. But one thing was certain after tonight: Isabelle was home for good.

He brushed a strand of hair away from her face and discovered she was asleep. Silas huffed a laugh. Soon, he followed suit.

Hours later, in the wan light of early dawn, he awoke. Alone.

I ndecision chased Isabelle halfway across the city. She hadn't gone home last night. Countess Oreste and her Flowers must be frantic.

Yet leaving Silas asleep had felt wrong, too.

No matter which choice she made, she would worry someone.

She had therefore left a note for her husband and dashed out into the early morning, hailed a street cab, and was now safely ensconced back at Number 9 Dove Place. Surely they had reached an accord last night. He would understand once she returned with her possessions.

You could have sent for them later.

The prospect of having to meet his servants for the very first time coming freshly tumbled from his bed had decided the issue for her. Isabelle wanted to be presented as a proper countess.

But her flagging confidence was further challenged when she promptly ran into one of two people she would rather never see again. The first, of course, was Prince Leopold.

The second was a certain blond courtesan in a tight-fitting emerald silk gown who glanced disdainfully at her as she strode in. Isabelle stopped mid-stride at the sight of Rose Leland. She almost turned and ran back to Huntley's townhome.

But then, she decided to hold her ground.

"You look freshly fucked," Rose said. "Good night?"

"Better than yours, from the looks of it," Isabelle said frostily. Perhaps she could pull off this countess act after all.

A reluctant smile touched the whore's beautiful lips. "Mine was rather eventful after you and Huntley left."

"Does that mean you've finally left that dreadful prince?" Azalea asked, gliding into the foyer.

"More or less." Rose shrugged. "I'll be staying here for a while until I can find another protector. One with very deep pockets. I'm thinking an American chap, this time."

"You always did have an enviably strategic view to collecting men," said Belladonna. Her blue taffeta skirt swished noisily into the room. To Isabelle's surprise, she bussed an air kiss to each of Rose's cheeks. She hadn't known they were friends.

Rose seemed like the type of woman who didn't have friends. Especially women.

"Welcome back. I have missed you." Bella took Rose's face between her palms and inspected her, changing the angle. She gasped at the bruises marching down the column of Rose's throat. "You're lucky he didn't kill you."

"I'm not out of the woods yet. I brought you something." She held out a small black notebook. "You will want to keep this secure. Read it later. Hold it for me?"

"What is it?" Isabelle asked, unable to conceal her curiosity.

"Leverage," the courtesan answered sharply. "Leo has something of mine. I want it back. Staying in that house to search for it wasn't getting me anywhere. I therefore took one of his valuables to hold as ransom."

A catlike smile stretched across her lovely but careworn face. A spark of life that hadn't been there the evening before shone in her eyes.

"I'm glad you're finally out of his reach," said Bella, tucking the leather-bound journal beneath her arm. "Come. Let's get you settled in."

"She can have my room," Isabelle blurted. "I'm leaving today. I came to retrieve my belongings." Such as they were. She hadn't arrived with much, and most of her clothes had been provided by Belladonna or the other Flowers.

"Rose has her own room always at the ready," Bella said. "I am sorry to lose you so soon, Poppy. I shall be down in a few minutes to say goodbye. Give me a moment with Rose, first?"

Isabelle nodded.

"You can't leave yet," said Azalea as she trailed Isabelle to the main stairway. "The jeweler sent word yesterday after you'd left. Your spinning devices are ready."

"How convenient." Excitement flared in Isabelle's chest. "Shall we go as soon as I've finished packing and said goodbye to Bella?"

A new and improved swivel would be the perfect gift to show Silas that she was truly sorry for running off this morning without speaking to him first. She'd thought she might make the trip there and back before he awoke, but she had vastly underestimated the travel time required. An additional delay wasn't ideal. If she went straight from the jeweler's to Huntley's townhome, she could probably arrive by lunchtime.



# Silas

"BELLADONNA," Silas raged. "Where is she? Where is my wife?"

Starke grabbed the back of his coat as if to force him back out the door. Two glowering footmen stood ready to back him up, should Silas succeed in breaking free.

He didn't.

"Let go of me, you oaf." He twisted. Fabric ripped. "I'm here for Isabelle. She is mine."

"Miss Poppy is not at home," intoned Starke as evenly as one might was announce a messenger's letter had arrived. He shoved Silas back three more steps. "She departed with Miss Azalea on an errand a quarter hour ago."

His stomach sank. Isabelle had hoodwinked him thoroughly. Coming to his bed, pretending to accept his touch, then disappearing the next morning to return to the House of Virtue, of all places?

Last night, he thought he'd won her. In the cold light of day, he'd been dismayed to realize that his lovemaking wasn't enough to make her stay. Perhaps Poppy was her true persona and he'd been too enamored of his young wife, too unfamiliar with her deeply unconventional ways, to see that sooner.

He felt rejected and angry. Now this blasted oaf was denying him access to his wife. Silas shoved Starke again and found himself in a headlock.

"Let him go," a feminine voice interrupted their scuffle. "Starke. I said to release Huntley."

Only a foot from the doorway, the manservant reluctantly let go of Silas's torn collar. He jerked his coat over his shoulders. Inspecting the damage could wait. He'd be sending Bella his tailor's bill, that much was certain.

He turned to find the same blond woman who'd been thoroughly soused last night at Prince Leopold's sham dinner. She looked both worse and better in the bright light of day. There were smudges beneath her eyes, a reddish-purple spot on her cheekbone, and florid bruises peeking out of the collar of her white gown. The color hardly suited her, yet there was an air of peace about her that hadn't been present the evening before.

"You," he seethed. Rose Leland cocked one brow. "You and Belladonna and these whores ruined my wife."

The other brow arched to meet its twin.

"Lady Huntley and I never met before last night." She shrugged.

"You're close with Bella. This was all a scheme, wasn't it?" He heard his accusation and knew, deep down, that he wasn't making sense. He was hurt and lashing out, fairly or not.

Worst of all, he was worried about Isabelle's safety. He couldn't seem to stop caring about her even though she had *left him*.

For all he knew, she was gleefully cavorting with Prince Alistair right now.

The thought gutted him.

"A scheme to what?" Rose asked. "If you mean Leo's attempt to bed your wife, I cannot say she's been the least bit amenable to his advances, either now or in the past. I doubt anything has changed dramatically in the hours since they last saw one another."

Dimly, he was aware that the courtesan was mocking him. She was not a nice woman. Men, apparently, liked a sharp-tongued whore. Otherwise, she wouldn't be the most coveted courtesan in London.

Once, he, too, might have found such verbal sparring enticing. But something had changed in the hours since their visit to the prince. Was it possible that bashing his head on the underside of his desk had been the catalyst?

He had changed.

Perhaps the shift had happened slowly, over visits where he got to know his young and, yes, rather eccentric wife. He hadn't noticed it happening, but somewhere along the way, he'd gone and fallen in love with her.

Isabelle's well-being meant more than the factory he'd painstakingly planned. More than his precious engine that would revolutionize the world and cement his name in history.

His heart ached that she would return here, of all places. To this den of scandal and iniquity.

"Leo was never going to invest in your factory, you know," Rose said. "He was trying to blackmail Isabelle."

A sharp sensation inside his mind like the popping of glass.

"Blackmail," he echoed.

Rose's lashes lowered, brushing the curve of her cheek. "You didn't know? He'd been trying to seduce her for months, but then she threw herself at you and escaped his clutches. He does it to all kinds of young ladies. He targets the ones with pretty faces and low chances of making a quick alliance. As the illegitimate half-sister of an earl, she had one black mark against her already. There was also the scandal from last autumn."

"She told me last night," he growled. "I'm not a fool, Rose. I knew Leopold wasn't a legitimate investor. I only knew that he is connected to Queen Victoria, who does take an interest in innovations. I didn't know about...the rest," he finished with a huff. "Isabelle thought she was the only one."

"Not remotely, unfortunately. I just wanted to clarify my role in last night's debacle," said Rose. "I thought for certain you already knew. I have witnessed plenty of men who like to watch their women with another man. But when you arrived, it quickly became apparent you were not willingly sharing your new wife. I was supposed to distract you while Leopold finally took what he wanted from Isabelle. I did a poor job of it, and I'm not at all sorry about that fact."

His head throbbed.

"Was she supposed to have any say in the matter?" he growled. Rose simply shrugged in response.

"He doesn't care what she would say about it. Leo knows he can operate with impunity. The only person who can either punish him or compel him to repair the damage he causes, through marriage, is Victoria herself."

How casually she threw about the queen's name, as if they were old chums.

"Why are you telling me this?" Silas trusted no denize of The House of Virtue's motives. They were crooked liars, the lot of them.

"Because I am also blackmailing someone." A feline smile tilted her lips. "Leo. I cannot force the queen's hand, but I can ruin him socially. I will, if he doesn't return to me what's mine." Her grin faded. "He has no money. He has been living far beyond his means for years. When we first connected, Leo showered me with expensive gifts and gave me a generous allowance.

"I was quite surprised, once I was thoroughly embedded with him, to discover that he was being hounded by every creditor in London. He'd already fleeced vendors across the Continent, as well. He cannot return home to Germany. Everyone there knows he is bankrupt and he is reviled for his behavior as well.

"Leo despises being outwitted. I advise you to keep your wife well away from him for the foreseeable future. He is incapable of letting go. Of me, or anything else he believes he owns." She smiled wryly. Silas glimpsed cold steel in her green eyes. "I felt I owed you an explanation of my behavior yesterday evening...and, though it is difficult for me to admit, I owe you both an apology."

Stunned, Silas broke eye contact and twitched a fleck of lint from his sleeve. "I shall convey your apology to my wife. When I find her."

If he found her. Isabelle had only trusted him enough to reveal a portion of what she knew about Prince Leopold. She had fled shortly after dawn.

He didn't know what that meant, ultimately, for their marriage. Yet he was certain of one thing: they were no closer to an amicable union than they'd been on their wedding day.



"Oo you know when he will return?"

She hadn't expected Silas to leave. She assumed he would be in his workshop, tinkering with his electromagnets. Now, she was being welcomed to his townhouse just as she had been the first time: as a guest.

Not as the lady of the house.

She remained a stranger in what was supposed to be her own home, now.

Nervously, she looked around. The atmosphere felt oppressively masculine. Last night, she had been too preoccupied to notice how there was no sign of a woman's presence. Now, she couldn't ignore the way it made her feel superfluous. Unneeded.

Unwanted.

He wanted you last night, she reminded herself sternly. Poppy wouldn't be cowed by a bit of polished dark wood and leather. Find your spine.

But as the minutes ticked by and she sat waiting in Silas's parlor, her confidence cratered with each passing second.

Tick, tick, tick.

The ormolu clock on the mantelpiece was hardly audible, but she felt each soft tick like the beat of her own heart. She stared out the window, waiting for one of the black coaches driving by to stop. None did.

Clouds gathered in the sky. Rain began to fall, a steady, soaking drip accompanied by brisk gusts of wind.

A loud chime startled her so badly that Isabelle yelped and clutched the decorative bow at her throat.

"His lordship has arrived," said the footman who had ushered her into this parlor to wait like a visitor who arrived at an inconvenient time, startling her a second time in as many minutes. The small package from the jeweler's slipped off the smooth leather and landed with a thump. Isabelle bent to retrieve it. When she rose, her husband was standing across the room, his face impassive.

"Silas," she blurted. His expression tightened into a slight scowl. Her pulse bucked with alarm. Perhaps he didn't appreciate her using his forename in public.

But they weren't in public. They were in the parlor of his private townhome where only the servants could overhear.

Which meant that something else, far bigger, was wrong.

She swallowed nervously.

"I've been looking for you," he said. "All over London."

"I left a note," she said. "Didn't you see it?"

"No. I was panicked when I awoke this morning and found myself alone. I dressed and went straight to the House of Virtue, thinking you had gone there."

"I did," she said. "But not to stay. I only wanted to collect my belongings."

"You could have sent for them."

"Yes, but I also wanted to say goodbye to the Flowers." A wounded stubbornness erupted within her. She had a right to have friends. Didn't she?

In truth, he could command her never to speak to Countess Oreste again, and she would be obliged to obey. She had *promised* to obey. Not only at their wedding, but during the ride after to Cheveny.

How many times had she broken that vow over the past few weeks?

*Hundreds*, her conscience whispered. She'd been pretending to be Poppy, a bold woman who went after what she wanted. But she hadn't even been away from the House of Virtue for a full day and she was already retreating back into her usual self.

Anxious. Shy. Awkward.

That was all Isabelle Kingston, now Lady Huntley, would ever be. How could she possibly be a countess when she was this easily cowed?

Dismay choked her. She should have thought of this predicament before she launched herself at an earl. London's ballrooms were full of suitably wealthy gentlemen without titles that she could have chosen, but her heart had wanted Silas.

"While I was there, I ran into an interesting visitor," Silas said casually. She knew before he spoke whose name he would say. "Rose Leland, better known as the Rose of London. She told me something rather interesting."

Cold dread flooded Isabelle's body. "It isn't true. Whatever she said, she is a liar."

"Actually, Rose confirmed the story you told me last night about Prince Leopold."

She bit her lip. She could hardly take back what she'd just said, but she knew it looked bad.

"I want to know, Isabelle, whether Leopold ever succeeded in forcing you."

"No." She shook her head, though his question angered her. Did he regret their lovemaking last night? Was he trying to ascertain whether she was pregnant and bearing another man's child?

She wouldn't do such a thing. At a bare minimum, she would have been honest enough to tell him the truth. But she no longer expected him to believe her.

Would any explanation she could give satisfy him?

Judging from the way his brows tightened and his jaw clenched, the answer to that question was a firm no.

Perhaps Poppy wasn't simply an affectation, for suddenly, Isabelle's mouth opened and a torrent of truths came out.

"I know you think little of me. After last night, I believed we could move on from the unfortunate circumstances that led to our marriage. I thought you could forgive what I did—"

"I have," he interjected.

"Let me finish, Silas." She inhaled deeply. "I did not betray you during my time at the House of Virtue. I will never betray you. I understand why you have no faith in me. There is also the issue of my mother's infidelity, though I had no control over the circumstances of my birth. I ask you not to judge me too harshly on that score. I was frightened and alone, and you seemed like a safe harbor. I wanted nothing more than to help you achieve your factory. I wanted it so much that I kept your swivel and had an improved version made. As a wedding gift."

She scoffed bitterly and thrust the paper bag at his chest. Silas fumbled it, weighed it with apparent confusion, and peered inside.

"I wanted nothing more than to be an asset at your investor meeting last night. I didn't know who you were meeting with. I panicked. I always panic. I promise you I will stay at Cheveny in the countryside so that you never have to be embarrassed by me again, and I will never stray no matter how infrequently you visit me there." A ragged gasp tore at her lungs. "I love you. I cannot imagine being with any other man. I have never desired anyone the way I do you. I was selfish when I entrapped you and I regret it

profoundly. I am begging you, please don't divorce me. I know that was our agreement. I know that I have failed. I am pleading for mercy."

Tears hazed her vision. She had just handed him her heart on a platter, and she was terrified that he would refuse her offer to remain at Cheveny. But she'd needed to say it out loud.

The silence stretched, deafening. Heavy.

"So no, Leopold never touched me," she finished sullenly. It rankled that he seemed to care about whether she had been violated. That wasn't the way he'd reacted last night when she finally told him her darkest secret. Apparently, his compassion had been a lie—a trick to get her to bed him. "I fended him off successfully when I was enduring my Season, though it was a near thing. I did it again at that wretched dinner. And I would do it again to any man who made such an attempt. The only one I want is you."

At last, her husband cupped her face.

"Isabelle."

Blinking to clear her tears, she peered up at him.

"What if I told you that you're not alone?"

She had yearned to hear those words for so long that it took her several seconds to comprehend his meaning. "You mean...Leopold has done the same thing to others?"

"Yes."

A shaky exhale escaped her. This was both strangely reassuring and horrifying news. She wasn't unique. There were more women who had endured his predation. But that meant other women had felt the same terror. She wouldn't wish the experience upon anyone.

"When I went to the House of Virtue, I was so angry with you," he said. "There, I encountered Rose Leland."

"Yes, I ran into her as well this morning." A scowl tugged her features. "I don't like her very much."

"Neither do L"

"But she's so beautiful." Jealousy flared for a fleeting moment. Men always fell for beautiful women. Didn't they?

"She is. But seeing her contrasted with you, I realized something. Unlike you, she is a genuinely cunning and manipulative person. She said she was trying to blackmail Leopold into giving her something."

"Right. I saw her give a leather journal to Countess Oreste for safekeeping."

He brushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. The vise around her ribs eased. Silas was being very gentle for a man she thought was furious with her. Clearly, she was no better at reading people now than she had been the day she fled to the House of Virtue.

But, perhaps, Poppy wasn't a complete figment of her imagination. Perhaps courage was not the absence of fear, but the determination not to let it hold one back.

"Interesting." He paused thoughtfully. "Isabelle. What you said just now...I was completely wrong about you. I'm a cynical bastard. I don't believe in love. I didn't, until you came along."

Isabelle blinked. She hadn't expected him to say that.

"When I discovered you were gone this morning, I was furious. But seeing Rose again in the clear light of day made me realize that you don't have a duplication bone in your body."

"I don't?"

"No. You see the world differently. In some ways, you see it more clearly than people like me. I was angry because my own blindness put you in danger, and I thought you ran away to punish me. Only when I was frantic and foolish enough to try barging into the House of Virtue looking for you was I finally able to admit to myself that I was overreacting because I loved you." He chuckled bleakly. "For all her faults, Rose made me see that I have been a beast toward you. For weeks, I've pressured you. Tried to control you. I wasn't so different from Prince Leopold in that respect."

"You are completely different from him!" she said indignantly. "How can you say that?"

"I shamed you when you were already ashamed. I hurt you when you were already hurting. I did not listen when you were begging me to hear the truth." He took her face between his palms. "I listened to every word you said, just now. I want you to know that I love you, too."

He kissed her gently, with such aching sweetness that a tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. Silas wiped it away.

"We are going to help Belladonna and Rose ruin Leopold. I promise you he will suffer for what he has done to you and every other young woman he terrorized. But right now, I just want you to feel safe."

She nodded.

"I know this doesn't feel like home yet. I'd like to introduce you to the staff now, if we can compose ourselves. Then we're going to go upstairs and not leave our bed for the rest of the afternoon. I need you to be brave for a few minutes while we handle a few minor duties. Can you do that for me?"

A blush rolled over her skin, clear down to her toes. She nodded.

"Wait." She poked the bag he'd tucked under his arm. "Open it first. Please?"

Silas extracted a simple black velvet box. Isabelle waited with bated breath.



S ilas opened the clamshell and found three perfect silver swivels. *Three new engines*.

He picked one out of its velvet bed and whistled. Although it was rude, he couldn't help but think, *this must have cost a pretty penny*. What he said, however, was, "These are stunning."

Useless, but stunning. Silver was a good conductor of electricity, but it was too expensive for practical production. Copper would have been a better material, but it was too soft to hold true under the weight of the magnets it was attached to. Hence his attempts to make casings out of alloys. All had failed.

But these were perfect.

"I had them made specially for you," said Isabelle. "Bella recommended a smith who could create a custom commission to replace the one I stole."

He was touched. Isabelle might not completely understand what he was trying to achieve, but she supported his work without question. She'd taken his component as a soothing toy, yes, but now he understood that she had insisted upon keeping it because it was the only piece of himself he'd ever given her. Even if he hadn't actually gifted her the object, during those early weeks when he had casually conversed with her on a handful of occasions, she had hung on his every word.

He'd been too blinded by his own cynicism to see how Isabelle actually appreciated his explanations of the physical properties of metals. He'd thought she was humoring him. He'd thought her odd. But she was sincere in her interests, both in him and in his work.

He had lucked out and married an absolute treasure of a woman.

Silas held the device up to the light to inspect it more closely.

"This is the best wedding gift any man could have asked for. Now, I have something for you."

She ducked her chin. Still shy. Brave in her way, but easily wounded. She cared so deeply about people, and again and again, they had hurt her. He could give her a sanctuary where she could learn to be a proper countess on her own terms.

"Isabelle. Let's go home."



#### Isabelle

THEIR RETURN TRIP to Huntley's estate was completely different from the first time she had arrived at that grand estate. Leafy oak trees still shaded the long drive. Sunlight dappled Silas's face as he sat beside her on the bench seat, their bare hands loosely clasped. He ran his thumb idly over her knuckles, trailing sparks.

After their tense reunion yesterday, Silas had introduced her to his servants at the townhouse the way she had imagined: respectfully, as an honored member of the family. The staff had been thoroughly welcoming, with the butler even commenting darkly that it was about time they had a woman's touch around the place. Then, she and Silas had spent the afternoon together in bed. A twinge in her core reminded her of why they

had refrained from making love during the journey here, even though there had been ample time and privacy for it.

Belladonna and her Flowers had turned her into a thorough wanton. Isabelle craved Silas's touch. She squeezed his fingers and looked over at him.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he asked with crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes.

"The first time I came to Cheveny, I had the distinct feeling that this was where I belonged," she said, holding his gaze. "I remember thinking how much I liked the word husband. How well it suited you. How proud I was to be your wife."

His gaze cut away from hers. A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I went and ruined it like a thorough cad."

She squeezed his hand sympathetically and said, "I'm still thinking those things. Proud to call you my husband. How thrilled I am to be home."

"You've barely stepped foot inside," he protested.

"I know." She sighed contentedly. "It isn't the house that makes me feel like I belong here, Silas. Although I know from my first brief visit that I will be more than comfortable here, what I love about Cheveny is this." She gestured out at the landscape. "The natural surroundings. You haven't tampered with the grounds and turned them into artificially manicured gardens, like so many lords have done with their estates. My brother Alexander, for example, has turned Glenmore into an overly cultivated palace. I much prefer the natural look of Cheveny."

"To be honest, it's not all untouched. My great-grandfather hired Capability Brown to create a 'romantic landscape.' My parents despised the style but they never got around to changing it. I, of course, have been preoccupied with mechanics, not landscaping, so I haven't given it much thought, either."

"I, for one, am very glad of that," she said. Speaking honestly from the heart made it so much easier not to trip over her own tongue.

He turned to her, his expression so open and at peace that Isabelle's heart swelled with joy.

"You may make any changes you wish to the grounds. I will have to return to London to oversee the factory. I'll need to travel from time to time, too. You can accompany me if you wish. If you prefer to stay here where you're more comfortable, I will try to limit my absences as much as possible."

Once, Isabelle would have been pleased to hear that she could remain in a place where she didn't have to monitor herself constantly to try and avoid scrutiny. But with Silas, she felt safe enough to consider exploring.

Poppy would love to have adventures.

While she didn't need her alter ego any longer, her Flower persona remained a helpful way to evaluate potential experiences. She didn't want to live her life in fear.

Fear was what had driven her to throw herself at Silas—yet there had been a kernel of courage, too. Trust that he would forgive her, in time. Hope and optimism that she could avoid Prince Leopold and claim a happy future for herself.

Poppy had always been a part of herself.



# Meanwhile, in London...

Bella slid the black pawn across the smooth surface of her desk and paused, fingers tented, thinking.

Once, she would have chosen a white pawn to represent Charming Jack Fernsby. He'd been an amiable nuisance, hanging around during the early days of the House of Virtue. Playing cards. Mostly losing. By the time he died he was deeply in her debt.

Then Annalise and Rosalyn had come searching for secrets about their father's past.

She moved two white pawns to his side and placed a knight beside each one. Wilder and the Earl de Lucey weren't in on this. She was certain of that much. Whatever Annalise and Rosalyn might know about their late father's attempts at blackmail and extortion would likely be tangential.

No, she needed to find the true source.

Bella nudged a carved rose no larger than the tip of her thumb and carefully placed it atop a rook. Whatever role Prince Leopold played in this mess; he was undoubtedly more of a pawn than a king. Rose would never betray her, but they were friends for good reason. They both held to a moral code that flexed and bent to ensure survival. A qualm of unease pinched Bella's midsection. She hesitated with her fingers tented on the carved rose.

What she had read in Rose's stolen journal disturbed her. Yet it was useful information. How could she best use it?

She moved the pieces aside and focused on her three queens. One white. Two black. Queen Victoria, empress of high society, herself, and Biddy Ross, ruler of London's dark underworld.

Could she get to her nemesis using Leopold's little black book?

She slid a pawn into place. She would have to join forces with Hawke again. That way lay danger.

With a quick twist, she removed her wedding ring from her left hand and placed it on the crown of one of the black queens. Its diamond glinted coldly in the low light.

Yes, that was better. A circle of justice for her crown.

She would have her vengeance. Whatever the cost.

#### SEPTEMBER, 1882

A fter six weeks of settling in with Silas at Cheveny, Isabelle was surprised to discover how much she looked forward to returning to London. The city's delights were far more enticing when she felt physically safe to explore them with her husband at her side.

There were many advantages to being married, she was discovering. Evading predatory men was only one of them. Waking up beside her husband every morning was a sensual delight she had never before imagined. Exploring the grounds at Huntley's estate kept her mind brimming with new ideas. Whenever he stepped away for a day or two to check on his new factory, she and Silas would spend hours talking about the latest developments. She took particular pride whenever she had an insight that he could apply to a problem.

He encouraged her to explore her ideas. Isabelle's were more mundane in scope than her husband's lofty ambitions: finding new uses for her swivel, which quickly found applications in the machinery Silas used to craft his engine prototypes.

Tonight, she would witness the fruits of another one of her visions. The House of Virtue was premiering its first cabaret performance. The stage she had helped design was finished. Seating had been acquired. The Flowers

kept up a steady stream of correspondence appraising Isabelle of their progress in rehearsals.

"I cannot believe Belladonna pulled this off in such a short time," she said to her husband as she surrendered her green paisley wrap to a footman she didn't recognize. There was no sign of Starke, to Silas's obvious relief. He had expressed apprehension about encountering the man again. But Isabelle refused to miss her friends' big night.

"Bella is a force of nature," he said. Now that they were inside the transformed House of Virtue, he relaxed. "This is, however, quite a change."

The odor of plaster, paint, and cut wood still permeated the onetime ballroom. Now, a bow-front stage with a small orchestra pit sat at one end of the room. Gilded embellishments scrolled elegantly over the gleaming wood surfaces. Scalloped gas sconces glowed in neat rows along the walls. A replica of Botticelli's Venus had been painted on the medallion in the center of the proscenium.

Some things never changed. Bella's signature winking nod to sex and culture was evident—and much like her previous efforts to entertain, beguile, and seduce London's upper crust, it was a wild success, judging from the packed crowd.

Isabelle saw no friends. Rosalyn was home at Glenmore awaiting the imminent arrival of her first child. Annalise, Rosalyn's sister, was in a similar condition, hiding out at a small cottage with her husband, Mr. Wilder. The only people she recognized were another of her half-brothers, Darius de Lucey, and his wife, Justine.

Her gaze trailed along the crowd. Even Cora Wilder was missing, which was too bad. Isabelle had looked forward to reconnecting with her this Season. She had been so kind last spring, until Isabelle had launched herself at Silas. She squeezed his arm.

"Don't look to your left," he said, and brushed a kiss to her temple. Naturally, she glanced over immediately and froze. He chuckled fondly. "I told you not to look."

Prince Alistair. He cast her a burning glare. Isabelle smiled sweetly and tucked herself closer against Silas's side.

The house lights dimmed. Starke came out to present Countess Oreste, who glowed in the spotlight. She had clearly regained her strength in the weeks since Isabelle had last seen her. Despite the soft pile of black hair pinned to her head and her gleaming silk taffeta dress that shone in the light, there was a hard edge to her jaw when she stared straight at the prince.

Cold pooled in Isabelle's belly. Something was afoot.

She relaxed moments later when the orchestra began to play. All of the Flowers came out, dancing and singing. After the risqué introductory song, which had the entire audience chuckling, Iris and Ivy began their acrobatic performance. They had come a long way since the beginning of the summer. Their legs flashed. Silk draped scandalously over their haunches and tightened over their breasts, but when they came down from the sky and stepped into the audience, it was the women they flirted with.

The twins made their way up the center aisle, perching in one lady's lap and draping a diaphanous veil over the two of them. She pretended to kiss the woman on the lips, which made the audience chuckle, and then whirled away. Colorful silk trailed both women back to the stage, where they scampered into the wings.

The lights went out completely. A single spotlight shone upon the stage where Violet was waiting in her turban and purple robes. She chose a man from the audience, and Azalea ushered him onto the stage. Violet proceeded to guess the man's name, his age, his marital status, and when it was revealed that he was widowed, she offered to make an honest man out of him. That made the audience laugh, breaking the spell.

She, Azalea, and Chrysanthemum sang a song that involved clever stripping of clothes, followed by a truly scandalous strip tease from Tulip. After the bawd had delivered a final joke, the lights again went out. When they came up, Rose was sitting on a square trapeze decorated with vines. Isabelle was relieved to see that the bruises around her throat were gone. She wore a simple charm at the hollow of her throat and sang about being pursued by a handsome prince who was secretly a monster.

Isabelle prodded her husband's arm and whispered, "It's about him, isn't it?"

"About as thinly veiled as the Flowers' costumes this evening," he answered.

When she looked around, half the room was buzzing about the clear subject of Rose's song. The Flower in question smiled coyly, kicking her feet in the air to reveal her legs all the way to the knee. She swung on her airy perch, finally flipped down and landed on the balls of her feet—a move that made the audience gasp.

"—and thus she fell into ruin," Rose trilled. She fell into Starke's waiting arms. He, playing the evil prince, made a foreboding villain as he carried her into the wings to be ravished.

The performance broke for intermission. As soon as people were out of their seats, Prince Leopold was shoving his way up to the stage.

Isabelle sipped her wine and watched with bated breath.

The prince forced his way onstage and into the wings over the protests of the Flowers and even Bella herself. There was a sharp slap, a female cry, and then a man Isabelle didn't recognize was pushing his way through the crowd and onto the stage.

A hushed silence fell over the crowd as shouts echoed through the room.

"My woman—" yelled the prince. A fragment of a louder argument. The second man emerged from the curtains with Rose in his arms, grim faced. He carried her out of the House of Virtue without interference.

"I am not sure whether that was supposed to be part of the performance or not," Silas said in confusion.

"Neither am I." Isabelle saw the same question on many other faces. Belladonna, her hairstyle looking slightly worse for wear, emerged and clapped her hands.

"If you will please take your seats. There will be an understudy performing Rose's role for the rest of this evening while the Duke of Gryphon attends to her minor injuries. Chrysanthemum is a wonderful singer. Please give her a warm welcome."

Everyone pretended the interruption hadn't happened. Once the house lights had dimmed and people were in their seats, Isabelle saw Starke hauling a bloodied Prince Leopold out to the streets.

She sat back and enjoyed the rest of the cabaret performance immensely.



#### ISABELLE, ELEVEN YEARS LATER - CHICAGO

The World Fair exhibition hall buzzed with excitement. Isabelle clutched her son's hand and swiveled her head, searching for her husband's booth.

Lord Huntley stood atop a raised platform bedecked with an archway depicting a controlled electric current with two models of his electromagnetic engine prototype on either supporting pedestal. The much-smaller working example sat upon a table beneath the display. He was only visible from the chest up due to the throngs gathered around to witness his latest wonder, a model horseless carriage, which zoomed from one end of the table to the other. A model locomotive was shown for scale.

The only problem was controlling the machine's trajectory. An assistant stood at the other end of the table to catch the vehicle and send it careening back to its inventor.

"Does it do anything useful, or is it just a toy?" one bystander called out, interrupting Silas while he was explaining the principles of how his electromagnetic engine worked. Isabelle frowned at that.

"A life-sized model is in production at my factory in England," Silas said proudly.

The past decade had been a roller-coaster of ups and downs. His first factory had folded within the year. However, leasing his patent to an investor had stabilized their fortunes, and several shrewd investments of his own had paid off handsomely. They had been flush for a few years, during which time their son Simon, and their daughter, Alice, had been born.

Undaunted, Silas again put all his funds into making this prototype of a horseless carriage. By 1886, a heated race spanning Europe and America was underway to invent the best newfangled vehicle. Huntley was certain this was his chance to finally stand out. His would be fast, clean, and elegant—but he and Isabelle had decided against trying to fund a second factory. After several years of working together to adapt his engine into one powerful enough to drive a full-sized carriage, they had come to Chicago for the 1993 World Exhibition, both to display their prototype and in hopes of finding a solution to a new problem: how to store enough electricity. Batteries were too large and too limited to be practical.

If nothing else, Huntley was reveling in the opportunity to network with other innovators and inventors. They had scheduled their visit from April through October of the year. While Isabelle found navigating an entirely new culture exhausting, she was also fascinated by the Americans. Their brashness. Their boundless optimism.

"Papa has my toy," Simon whined.

"Shh, darling. He's showing it to all these people. Isn't that amazing?"

Perhaps it would have been a month ago. Weeks of watching the same thing had dulled the shine, however. Her son's lower lip stuck out in a pout. The model his father had given him to play with was back at their hotel, along with Alice, who was taking her afternoon nap, and her nurse, who was watching over her.

"I need a demonstration assistant from the crowd," Huntley said loudly. Isabelle smiled. Every day after lunch, she would bring Simon to the exhibition hall. They would explore the exhibits and then visit his father, who would invite him on stage to assist with the demonstration.

Simon pulled away and jumped up on the platform. The crowd laughed. Anything to keep them engaged, Isabelle mused. She watched him turn the safety switch to connect the wires and place the car on the table. Its wheels rolled slowly at first. Then it picked up speed and careened over to Huntley. He caught the device and held it up.

"Safe enough even for a child to operate," he declared. His gaze snagged on hers, and he smiled. In that moment, the crowds fell away until there were only the two of them in the room.

She loved him. His tenacity. His cleverness. His determination to make the world a better place. She had chosen him not out of desperation, but because she adored everything he was.

"We'll take a short break and return at three on the dot," he said. The crowd dispersed. Huntley hopped down from his raised platform and swung Simon into his arms. He came to her and kissed her, heedless of the audience. Isabelle's stomach filled with warm flutters.

"What exhibits have you seen today?" he asked.

"We saw the balloons. When can we go home?" whined Simon. "I'm tired of Chicago. I miss England."

"Soon, dumpling. Soon."

Another six weeks and they would be on their way.

"Are you still enjoying the experience, love?" Silas bussed a kiss to her cheek.

"I'll be ready to return to Cheveny when it's time to go."

"We can leave early, if you like."

"We can?"

Together, they swung into step, exiting the pavilion into the lake-cooled air outside. Isabelle had never seen such an enormous lake before. It was much like the ocean, lacking only the tang of salt.

"We're to have dinner this evening with an investor." He caught her expression from the corner of his eye and chuckled. "Not like that. This man owns a company in Pittsburgh."

"Where is Pittsburgh?" asked Simon.

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"In a place called Pennsylvania."
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"Is it nearby?"

"No."

"Nothing is close by in America," said Isabelle. "Everything is spread out."

"Which makes this country an ideal candidate for an electric-motored horseless carriage," said Silas.

"You aren't planning to license your patents again, are you?" Isabelle asked in surprise.

"I am," he said. "I've concluded that trying to bring a machine like this to market requires more capital than even an earl possesses. Letting Westinghouse take over development will allow me to focus on new ideas." He squeezed her hand. "We can work together on your redesigned swivel."

One peculiar development was that her improvements to the swivel he had designed had made it sufficiently unique to qualify for patent protection. She had since made a name for herself as designer of precision parts used in sewing machines, bicycles, farming equipment, and yes, acrobatic safety equipment, too. Silas had found legal ways for her to be the sole owner of her patents, and Isabelle had become rather wealthy in her own right as a result. Her innovations had saved the earldom from ruin on more than one occasion.

"What if your engine never comes to fruition?" Isabelle asked. "You've worked on it for so long."

"There are many ways to leave a legacy." His eyes were soft as he looked at their son. "I've given ten years to this project. I'm not giving up, but I want to focus more on a different kind of legacy."

Isabelle stilled. "Can you be happy with that?"

"Yes." He kissed her forehead. "Isabelle, I am happy with you. It's time I gave you my full attention and proved that, don't you think?"

Simon led them to a lemonade vendor. Huntley bought three drinks.

"To family," she said, raising her paper cup.

"To you," he answered. They touched glasses and went to enjoy their afternoon.



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# Next in the Virtue & Vice series Rose (tk) Jane (tk)

## AUTHOR'S NOTE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A note about the research that went into writing this book and the Virtue & Vice series:

Bella is loosely based on a woman named Catherine Walters, known as "Skittles," a renowned courtesan of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who owned a mansion in Mayfair. The house was gifted to her by Spencer Cavendish, the eighth Duke of Devonshire, when she was his mistress. She lived there for the rest of her life, and today, the building is acknowledged with a plaque memorializing her life.

Queen Victoria, of course, is a real person—although she has been heavily fictionalized for the purposes of this series. Some of her lines of dialogue are actual quotes, particularly her dim views of marriage and motherhood. Although she and Belladonna are at odds throughout the series, they are parallel characters in their grief and isolation.

Hawke is entirely my own invention. While I'm sure there were plenty of spies for the British Crown, I have not found any account of Queen Victoria having a personal spy running around London doing her dirty work.

I admit it: I made him up.

Sex clubs, however, are not a figment of my imagination. "Whipping clubs" have been documented as far back as the 18th century. The dildo

plays a recurring role in the Virtue & Vice series, mostly because I am fascinated by the real-life example I based it upon, an 18th century ivory example with a "contrivance for simulating ejaculation" which you can find online in the Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection.

My deepest gratitude to the following people in producing this book: Eve Pendle, Zoe York, Tara Wyatt, Jayne Rylon, and the Write All the Words crew, you are wonderful and wise friends and virtual colleagues. You make every day a pleasure to go to work.

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With love and gratitude to my family, and to every single one of my readers—I wouldn't be here without you.

-Carrie Lomax

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Lomax is the bestselling author of historical & contemporary romance. She also writes angsty new adult fantasy romance under the pen name Joline Pearce.

Growing up rural Wisconsin, she spent a lot of time roaming the woods and fantasizing about new places. Adventures took her to Oregon, Michigan, and after a stint teaching in France, she moved to New York City, where she stayed for the next 15 years. There she acquired a pair of graduate degrees, a husband and a career as a librarian. An avid runner, reader, and cyclist, she lives in Maryland with two budding readers and her real-life romantic hero.

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