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TRUE LOVE Fades Away When the Contract Ends

Music of the Flower Gardens and Heavens

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She had certainly learned her lesson, but a part of her still found the situation grossly unfair. Perhaps that was why she stopped Giles before he could leave her room for good. She grabbed his arm from behind just as he was about to touch the doorknob.

“Fiona, why are you—mm!”

As Giles whirled around to look at her, Fiona stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his cheek. There was a light smacking noise, though not an intentional one. “Good night. Sweet dreams.”


Giles
Heir to the Earl of Bancroft and scion of House Bancroft. Dubbed "the Impenetrable Icy Scion." But when he enters a fake relationship with Fiona, he undergoes all sorts of changes...
Fiona
Daughter of Baron Clayburn. Her dream is to work in art and travel the world. Fearing she'll have to abandon her career if she gets married, she enters a fake relationship with Giles.
Rudolph
A thirteen-year-old apprentice to an art restorer. When he tries to steal Fiona's reticule (purse), he's caught by the lady herself. What's more, he used to work for Gordon making counterfeit paintings?!
Dennis
A new hire at the art gallery where Fiona works. Bright and friendly with a razor-sharp memory to boot, he is a former soldier and the third-eldest son of the Baron of Green.
Gordon
An art dealer shrouded in mystery. In hiding ever since Fiona exposed his attempts to sell a counterfeit painting, but it seems he has his hand in another counterfeiting scheme!
◆ Richard:
Son of the Marquess of Molins and Giles's closest friend. A handsome nobleman stringing along a whole host of lovers.
◆ Hans:
A long-serving butler at the Clayburn house. He cares deeply for Fiona and Cecilia.
◆ Norman:
Son of the Hayes house. Intended fiancé of Fiona and heir to the Clayburn house.
◆ Cecilia:
Fiona's little sister. She's as beautiful as their mother, but she's frail and shy.



Two big hands cupped Fiona's cheeks, sharply turning her head back to face him, and Giles pressed his chilly lips to Fiona's forehead.

Her eyes blinked closed in shock, and he planted a kiss on each eyelid as well. Her shoulders trembled as though an electric shock had gone through them. Slowly, timidly, she opened her eyes as she sensed him leaning away, and she was greeted by Giles's daring smile.

As he pulled back, his hands lingered on her cheeks. Her lips were still parted, and his thumb delicately traced them.

"Um," Fiona said, "I..."

"Payback for the other night. I'll see you soon."

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 1:
A Counterfeit Appraisal

ON BAY STREET, one of the high streets in the castle town, stood an art gallery. Gallery Roche, named for its owner, was renowned for handling some of the finest paintings and works of art. When news spread that Giles, son of the famous Earl of Bancroft, had joined their clientele, the already-popular gallery garnered even more attention.

In the bustling gallery's office, Fiona worked behind the scenes to keep the place running smoothly even in the busy season. Though her family ranked lowest in the peerage, the Clayburn Barony was a well-established noble house; as its eldest daughter, Fiona working outside the house was unexpected, but she was working for Roche by choice.

Second only to the art museum, this gallery was her most frequented place, and recently, it had added a new employee to its ranks. As Fiona penned a response to an inquiry from a client, this new employee approached her with a ledger.

"Miss Fiona, how should I handle the documents from this auction foundation?"

"Oh, first you need to see which artist and which work of art they're referencing."

Her new coworker was a young man with strikingly reddish-blond hair three years Fiona's senior named Dennis Green.

"The winning bid amount is written on the paper," she continued. "We keep contracts on the shelf over there. Check the numbers against the contracts, calculate the sums, then submit a transfer request to the bank, and—"

As Dennis jotted down Fiona's instructions, he let out an impressed sigh. "Wow, I thought all art galleries did was sell paintings, but there's actually a lot of administrative follow-up work, isn't there?"

"Is it challenging for you?"

“I suppose so. There’s a lot to learn, and I can’t make any spelling or calculative errors.”

“Well, you have nice handwriting, and you’re faster at sums than I am.”

“But I get so nervous every time I go to the bank. My first day there, there was an error, and my request was returned to me.”

“I made my fair share of mistakes at the start too,” Fiona reassured Dennis. She chuckled at the sight of his sheepish grin.

Dennis was the third-eldest son of the Green Barony. He had spent more time than customary in the compulsory military service for all sons of the nobility, and Roche scouted him for the experience he gained there in supply distribution. Fiona and Dennis became fast friends; she was amused by his self-introduction, in which he pointed to his golden-brown eyes and exclaimed, “My eyes are brown, but my name is Green!”

Though administrative work was their main focus, they also interacted with guests at the front of the shop, so his friendly, cheerful demeanor made him well-suited for the job. He quickly fit in with the rest of the team. And though he modestly downplayed it, his good memory was not only helpful but impressive.

Today, just like any other, he was taking on Fiona’s tasks one after another.

“This part of the season is our busiest,” she explained to him. “But once summer is over, the sales rush will settle, and things will be less hectic.”

“I will do my utmost to learn everything before you return to your lands, Miss Fiona.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.”

Thus far, Fiona had worked at the gallery while taking care of miscellaneous matters as a proxy for her uncle Reginald—secretly the artist Raymond Bailey. But not only had the gallery expanded such that there was more clerical work to be done, Fiona also planned to travel abroad with her uncle next year.

And thanks to my pretend romance with Giles, I’ve put a temporary stop to my engagement announcement to Norman…

The mismatched relationship between the plain daughter of a baron and the handsome nobleman who had no previous history with each other had, so far, posed its fair share of challenges. Owing to Giles's impeccable performance as her lover, however, high society bought the charade, and gossip-loving nobles took the narrative and ran with it. The results were a pause in the betrothal to Fiona's childhood friend that her father had been secretly arranging for her and a tapering-off of pushy ladies' unwanted advances toward Giles.

Ultimately, Fiona hoped to stave off marriage altogether and live out her dream. She longed to see the great wide world with her own eyes, and she wanted to earn her own living. Knowing that Fiona would leave her job the following year, the gallery discussed taking on new employees, and it was Dennis to whom Roche's discerning, bespectacled eyes finally gave the seal of approval. Dennis's big grin lent him a casual demeanor, but in his interactions with Fiona, he insisted on emphasizing his lower status despite his older age.

"Also, Miss Fiona, I wish to inquire about this matter..."

"Please, can't we drop the formalities? There aren't any guests around."

"No, Miss Fiona. You are my senior here."

"But I'm telling you, I don't like being put on a pedestal."

"Believe me, it's already a compromise for me to not address you as Baroness."

I should be the one treating him with extra respect. Maybe it's his military background. It was a convenient theory, but her childhood friend Norman had also served about a year ago, and aside from returning with a bulkier physique, he hadn't changed. Perhaps where one was stationed and who was in charge played a role in these things.

"Our boss would be upset to hear me call you just Miss," Dennis informed her.

"Oh, I doubt he would mind."

Dennis treated her to a look of overexaggerated horror. “No, no, no! He would cut my salary! That could even be grounds for dismissal!”

“Surely, you jest.”

He and Fiona had a good laugh, and his manner of speech had remained the same ever since. Due to the cumbersome daily tasks, even when her butler, Hans, was gone as he was now, Fiona never found herself alone.

I suppose…he’s worried about me. Apart from his high aptitude, Fiona had some idea of why a man of longstanding military service like Dennis was employed at the gallery: Gordon, the art dealer.

Fiona was on his hit list. Gordon had just set up shop in the capital and tried to sell a painting to Miranda, Marchioness of Colet and Giles’s older sister. Fiona happened to be there and exposed the painting as counterfeit. While the fact remained that the painting was a fake, Gordon was not pleased to find his deal thwarted at the last minute. He had glared bitterly at her, and when Roche heard some shady rumors about Gordon, he advised Fiona to be careful.

Gordon was currently out buying art elsewhere, so he was not in the capital that day. Still, Hans seemed concerned about him, and everyone in Fiona’s circle kept demanding to know if she had noticed anything strange or different.

Naturally, there was nothing to report. Even if Gordon did show up at the gallery, the clerks at the front or Roche himself would be the first to notice. *Besides, it would be to Gordon’s advantage to go looking for another painting instead of fussing over little old me.*

Fiona’s temperament was such that once she sorted out her feelings, she could easily let her anger or resentment go. She had a difficult time understanding why anyone would cling to a grudge for long. To be sure, Gordon’s attempt to pass off the redpoll painting as a Raymond original was inexcusable, but as long as he quit conning and stayed away from Fiona, she was prepared to let it all go.

“Ah… Isn’t it about time, Miss?” Dennis asked, glancing at his watch. Just as Fiona looked up, there was a knock at the door. Dennis gave her a smug smirk and Fiona frowned uncomfortably. “His arrivals are always so punctual—just like a clock tower’s chime.”

“Dennis.”

“Oh, don’t mind me. Come on in!”

Dennis opened the door to reveal the inevitable: Giles. “Pardon me,” he said, stepping into the room, and the moment he was inside, he shot a dubious glance around the place.

“Sorry I’m running late,” Fiona told him. “I’ll tie things up right away.”

“It’s all right. No rush.” Then, as Fiona stared at her desk and busied herself to hide her blush from Dennis’s teasing gaze, Giles pressed her with a question. “Where’s Hans?”

“Hans is at the post office. He ought to return shortly. Did you wish to see him?”

“No, that’s all right.”

Dennis smiled at Fiona, who retreated from her desk to the bookshelf, then turned to Giles and bowed. “Good afternoon, Lord Lowell.”

“Dennis Green. Have you settled in here?”

“Yes, my lord. My supervisor is a very good teacher.”

“Oh, Dennis, you’re just a good learner,” Fiona replied, not bothering to turn to them.

Giles’s eyes narrowed to slits. “‘Dennis?’”

“Uh, Lord Lowell, another employee here has the surname of Green, so I have people call me by my first name. That’s why Miss Fiona—”

“What?”

“Um! That is to say…I encouraged her to call me ‘Mister,’ but, well! Not that I’m inflexible! It’s quite all right!”

Flustered, Dennis tried to explain himself in a hushed whisper, succeeding only in making the terrain around Giles more treacherous to navigate. Fiona chose that moment to return to the pair of them, a reticule containing a tiny loupe in hand. “All right, I’m ready now.” She paused. “Is something the matter?”

“Not at all. Well, I’m going to borrow Miss Clayburn for a minute.”

“Yes! Do take all the time you need! Have a nice day!”

“Hee hee, Dennis, you’re acting so strange.”

Fiona cheerfully waved goodbye, and Dennis offered them a stiff soldier’s bow, his lips drawn into a tight line. Once the door was closed and their footsteps had faded into the distance, Dennis flopped, sweaty-browed, onto the sofa. “I thought his gaze would freeze me over,” he muttered.

Back in their military days, Dennis and Giles were in the same platoon. Giles, who was known as the Icy Scion in noble circles for his distaste for women, was infamous in those days as a particularly strict superior officer. His orders were precise, but the contents of those orders were merciless—he didn’t even show restraint in his drill exercises. Even in extenuating circumstances, he was a pinnacle of calm and never let his underlings see his emotions. And of course, he showed not an iota of interest in the opposite sex.

“So lacking in self-awareness. That’s some sick joke, lieutenant commander…”

—Dennis Green, age twenty-one.

He wailed up at the ceiling, unable to believe how much his former superior had changed.

Giles and Roche had become acquainted without Fiona realizing it. Early in their charade, on a day when Giles and Fiona didn’t see each other, Giles had sent a bouquet to her and a gorgeous flower arrangement to the gallery. Sending flowers was likely a suggestion from his friend Richard, an expert in both social graces and romance, but it was from that gift that Giles and Roche

became friendly. Giles probably felt conflicted about it after his sister, Miranda, was nearly deceived by the counterfeit painting.

Now that the topic of counterfeit art had been broached among the nobility, Roche was receiving numerous requests from aristocrats who wanted their own paintings appraised. As a result, Roche told a wide-eyed Fiona that she would be in charge of appraisals. This was only a little while ago.

“But wouldn’t you or somebody from the academy be better suited to appraise the paintings?” she had asked him.

“No. I can vouch for your keen eye, Miss, and besides, you know more about contemporary artists than I do.”

“I’m very flattered you’d say that, but…”

“I have no social status either, so they don’t want the art dealers already in their employ to know about me.”

“Aha… Now I see.”

Forsaking long-employed art dealers to call upon the help of Roche, a new art dealer, was a very tricky business indeed. Most closeminded nobles wouldn’t trust a commoner’s ability to appraise art in the first place, and aside from repair consultations and donations, Roche rarely associated with the royal academy; he would stick out like a sore thumb.

Therefore, the more peaceful solution was to have the daughter of a baron who “just happened to stop by out of personal interest” look at the paintings. If she happened to suggest their paintings might be fake, well, then they could seek out the opinion of a third party later without garnering suspicion, and their established art dealers could save face as well.

“The gallery will take on the contracts, and you will provide confidential appraisals, Miss,” Roche explained to her. “And if there are any on which you struggle to pass judgment, never fear; we can make a formal request to the academy for assistance.”

When it came to work, Fiona was disinclined to say no, so she nodded in agreement. So it was that, between their dates to soirees, performances, and dining out, Giles would bring Fiona to

an acquaintance of his to appraise a painting. Today was her third day of such appraisal work.

Fiona had doubted there were really that many fakes floating around, but in fact, she had encountered two counterfeit paintings thus far. She did not know where they were purchased or for how much; she merely hoped and prayed that there weren't many individuals like Gordon out there.

"I have a carriage waiting across the street," Giles said.

"All right."

Giles had only parked his carriage right in front of the gallery the first time he went there. Now he parked in a square a bit away. He casually offered his arm, and she slipped her hand into it, her ring glittering in the early-summer sun. Little by little, she had grown accustomed to seeing the yellow stone shining between her fingers like a rose, and the more frequently the people of the capital saw them walking cozily together down the street like this, the more they began to accept the fated lovers as part of the tapestry of daily life.

When they first started their romantic charade to avoid marriage, all the attention made Fiona nervous, but by this point she could brush it off. That the frequent staring had diminished somewhat certainly helped.

I guess rumors go stale in the royal capital rather quickly... Hm?

As they passed a shop that sold textbooks, she felt a harsh gaze on her the likes of which she had not encountered in some time. She turned around instinctively and blinked, doubting her eyes.

"What?!" she gasped, shocked. But when she tried to get a better look, an opportunistic gust of wind forced her eyes shut. When the wind stopped and she looked up, nobody was there. *Trick of the light?*

"Fiona, something wrong?" Giles called out to her when she stopped walking.

"No, um... I just thought I saw Miss Caroline standing over there."

Caroline was one of the ladies who had voiced an interest in marrying Giles. Even after Fiona publicly became his sweetheart, the fire of determination to be the next Countess of Bancroft had not diminished from Caroline's eyes. Naturally, as Giles stuck to Fiona like a proper escort during parties, Fiona was never the victim of any direct abuse or slander. Nevertheless, it was clear that Caroline had not given up.

Near the bookshop they had just passed, Fiona had seen Caroline Burleigh standing, her eyes filled with even more scorn than usual as she glared at her. The beautiful curls and expensive streetwear Fiona caught a glimpse of before she closed her eyes had convinced her Caroline really was there in the flesh.

Giles scanned their immediate surroundings, then left Fiona's side for a moment to check the alley by the side of the shop. It was dark, narrow, and filled with wooden boxes—not the sort of place one would expect a lady of high society to traverse.

"Nobody's here. Fiona, is this alley a dead end?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not sure. I don't use that alley."

Now that she thought about it with a level head, Caroline had no reason to be there. All the clothing shops were on a different street; few young women came this way. There was a popular bakery at the end of the street that sold pastries Fiona loved, but it was hard to imagine an earl's daughter going there alone to buy anything.

It was probably just somebody who looked like her, Fiona thought. Was she really so obsessed with Caroline that she would imagine seeing her? Though the mysterious, dull pain in her chest gave her pause, she shook it off and focused on the task with which she had been entrusted: appraising the painting.

"Sorry about that," she said to Giles, who still had a thoughtful look on his face. "It must've been my imagination. Let's go."

"Uh, but…"

No sooner did she start walking than Fiona felt a shock through her upper body. She shrieked, wobbling dangerously. Giles caught her, but her hands were now empty; a boy had

pretended to crash into her and stolen her reticule with the loupe. The boy kept running right down the alley Giles had just inspected.

"You there! Stop!"

"Fiona?!"

Before Giles could stop her, Fiona was chasing after the boy. The alleyway, which was sandwiched between the bookshop and its neighboring luxury dining ware store, was crammed with boxes, allowing the passage of only one adult at a time. At the far end of that alley, Fiona cornered the boy.

He had shaggy, straw-colored hair and amber eyes like Fiona. Between his extraordinarily sulking face and the spray of freckles on his nose, he was a picture-perfect imp. He clutched violently at the hem of his shirt, gulping for air.

"H-how can you," he wheezed, "run so fast?" A gasp. "You're rich!"

"I've been a pro at tag since I was a little girl."

The boy's skinny legs shot out from his too-short trousers, and from his ripped shirt collar protruded a neck so frail it looked likely to snap any moment. He clearly hadn't eaten a proper meal in months. Even if Fiona hadn't cornered him, the poor boy could not have moved.

"Fiona!"

"Lord Giles..."

Though he struggled with the narrow alley, Giles rushed through the passage at a surprising speed for a grown man. He stood protectively in front of Fiona, swiftly taking hold of the boy's arms.

"It's all right! You don't need to bother with—"

"It's most certainly *not* all right. Fiona, how can you be so—!"

He wouldn't let her insist everything was fine, but Fiona did succeed in stopping him from calling the police. Even under Giles's restraint, the boy refused to give up the reticule he'd stolen from Fiona.

Stopping Giles from twisting the boy's arms, Fiona crouched down until she was staring the scowling boy in the eye. He gritted his teeth and glared at her harshly, but she held her ground and glared back. "Give it back. It's very important to me."

"Hell no. You stole my job from me."

"Your job?"

"Thanks to you, I can't earn any more money! You owe me at least this much!"

As the boy screamed at her, Fiona noticed the paint stains on his shirt.

Fiona returned to the gallery with the struggling boy in tow and explained everything. Hans, who had come back earlier, dropped the papers he was holding, and Roche stared up at the ceiling and pressed a hand to his forehead in shock.

"Lady Fiona…"

"Oh dear. My lady, why must you be so…" Hans sighed.

"H-Hans! And Mr. Roche…"

Dennis's eyes and mouth were wide open, and Giles, who stood beside him, gave Fiona the impression that he had been quietly fuming since the encounter in the alley. She had a lot of concerns, but first, she needed to tend to Hans, whose tearful eyes were adding to the tension in the room.

"D-d-didn't you promise that you would never be alone?" Hans demanded. "Never put yourself in danger?"

Oh dear. I can't exactly tell him that the promise slipped right out of my mind. "L-listen, Hans, it was—what's the phrase?—a force majeure."

"Oh, you gave me the same song and dance when that cat got stuck in a tree! Thankfully, you made it out of that scrape with only a broken leg, but if anything were to happen to you, my lady, I would not be able to live with myself!"

“H-Hans…”

“How can I possibly apologize to your poor mother in Heaven?!”

Not content to relitigate an epic blunder from her past, Hans seemed dead set on taking her home and forbidding her from leaving ever again. Fiona’s only recourse was to apologize—and the fact remained that she had put an exorbitant amount of stress on the poor old man’s heart.

“I’m sorry, truly!”

“It was reckless of you to endanger yourself over a mere handbag, even if it was a gift from Lord Reginald!”

Fiona knew that if she protested that the bag had a valuable loupe in it, she would succeed only in angering Hans further, so instead, she bowed her head obediently. “I know! I’m sorry!”

Hans rounded on the boy. “Little urchin, you are the cause of this!”

“Eep!” The boy balked, his mouth agape.

Now it was Roche who stepped in to quell the flames of the hour of discipline that was threatening to begin. “Now, now, Hans, let it be. Boy, what is your name?” No answer. “Cooperate if you know what’s good for you.”

Fiona could have sworn she saw a dark shadow looming behind Roche’s smiling face.

“What’s your name and age?” Roche continued.

The boy flinched in his chair. Then, with his head still turned to the side, he murmured, “Rudolph… Fif…teen.”

He did not look nearly big enough for fifteen. Roche’s eyes sharpened into slits behind his spectacles, likely thinking along the same lines. “Now, don’t give me that. Let’s just have the truth.”

The boy cursed under his breath. “I’m thirteen. Probably.”

He was small even for thirteen. Roche asked him more questions, and to the surprise of no one, he answered that he had no home and no family.

“Now, according to this young lady here, you said she ‘stole your job.’ What did you mean by that, son?”

“What, like you don’t bloody know? They know they’re fakes now, so Gordon said he don’t need me or my paintings no more!”

I knew it! Fiona’s suspicions were confirmed: This boy was the artist behind the fake paintings.

Dennis, who was informed of Gordon’s forgeries when he was hired, could not hide his surprise. He had a hard time believing somebody so young could have painted the counterfeits. But there were many precocious artists out there, and even if Rudolph didn’t paint the counterfeits himself, he surely had some insider information about them.

“And I woulda got away with it if this *shrew* had kept her nose to herself!”

“Watch it, *boy*.” Giles was thoroughly aggravated to hear the word “shrew” used to describe Fiona.

Fiona grabbed his sleeve and stopped him. “Lord *Giles*.”

Roche, meanwhile, had a hand on his chin and an excited air about him. “Hmm, is this true? I find it hard to believe an urchin like you could paint something proper.”

“D-don’t mock me, old man! You grown-ups are all rotten! Gordon didn’t even pay me much!”

“Yes, well, be that as it may, you carried water for one of those rotten grown-ups.”

“Who bloody cares, as long as I get to eat!”

“Now that’s a selfish thing to say.”

“Like I care!”

Roche leaned in close. His tone remained sanguine, but his aura was subzero in temperature. “You took out your anger not on Gordon, the cause of it, but on a defenseless young lady. You’re a proper criminal, Rudolph.”

The blood drained from Rudolph’s face. He leaned as far back in the chair as he could go. “Sh-shut up!”

Roche set his hands on the armrests and hovered over Rudolph. “Tough break, son. But if you think I’ll hand you over to a nice policeman who’ll let you off with a warning, you’re sorely mistaken.” He righted himself and looked at the clock. They simply couldn’t fumble around in the back of the shop all day; it was time to move this meeting up to the second floor, where Roche resided. “Well, would you look at the time. Let’s continue this upstairs. Dennis, please bring the boy with you.”

“Oh, um, yes, sir”

“Oh dear, I don’t want my home getting dirty. We’ll have to wash him up first. Could you help with that, Hans?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hey! Hands off!” protested the struggling beanpole of a boy, but Hans and Dennis, the former military man, easily restrained Rudolph and dragged him away.

When he was certain the three of them were gone, Roche whirled around to face Fiona and Giles. “I’ll take full responsibility for the boy and question him. Lord Lowell, Miss Fiona, go ahead to your destination as scheduled.”

“Thank you for that,” Giles said.

“B-but Mr. Ro—”

“Don’t worry; your dress isn’t at all dirty. Compared to that time last year when you chased away those noisy drunkards in front of the gallery, it’s downright pristine.”

“Drunkards?” Giles demanded.

“Um! Mr. *Roche*!” *Giles doesn’t need to know about that!* Fiona could have sworn that Giles’s gaze had grown even harsher.

“Rest assured, I will not let the boy behave violently. He hasn’t eaten a proper meal in a while, and you attract more flies with honey than vinegar, I say.”

“But, um, Mr. Roche…”

“Caroline Burleigh’s possible presence on the scene is also concerning. Just in case, Miss Fiona, I request that you do not return here today.”

“How can you be so irresponsible—” Giles began, but Roche cut him off.

“Miss Fiona. *Have a good time*.” Heedless of her attempts to stick around, Roche gave her a smile so cheerful it was downright unsettling. Her shivering spine received the subtext of his message loud and clear: *No amount of protest will work on me*.

“U-understood, sir.”

Having received Fiona’s assent, Roche bade the pair of them adieu and left the office. The door closed sharply behind him, leaving Giles and Fiona alone with a strange silence hanging over them.

Ack, this feels so awkward. What should I say?

The atmosphere was unbearable, and it weighed heavily on Fiona’s shoulders. She faltered a little at the delayed rush of emotion she felt, but she knew she needed to apologize rather than explain herself. Resigning herself to this, she turned to face Giles—only to find herself gathered into his arms.

He held her tight, just like the time she tripped into him back in the garden and the time he gave her a fake kiss in front of her home. His embrace was firm and intentional, and the apologetic words she had planned to say disappeared into the wind, unspoken.

She felt a fast heartbeat against her chest, but whose it was, she did not know. Belatedly, heat rushed to her cheeks.

“Fiona…”

“Y-yes?” she managed.

He pulled her head even closer to him. She swayed backward at an angle that ought to have felt precarious, but Giles held her fast, permitting no space between their bodies. “I won’t restrict your actions. But do just this one thing for me—stay out of danger.”

I can’t believe it. I thought I’d made him angry. But instead of a rebuke, Giles had implored Fiona to keep safe. Her cheek was pressed against the fabric of his suit, and it muffled her hearing, but the strain in his voice came through loud and clear. That she

couldn’t see the look in his eyes only made his voice pierce her heart that much harder.

“What if he had a weapon?” Giles asked. “What if his friends were waiting in the alley? One wrong step and you might have come to irreparable harm.”

“But I…”

It clicked for her then. She had let her guard down because the pickpocket was a child, though she knew she would have chased after him even had he been an adult. In the end, neither of them were hurt, and they had apparently apprehended Gordon’s accomplice, but that was only by a stroke of good luck.

“You are neither the police nor a government official. You need to put your safety first.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Finally, with a deep exhale, Gile’s grip on her loosened. He stood Fiona up on her feet and smoothed her hair. His hand slid down to her cheek, all concern, and she quickly looked down, unable to withstand the penetrating gaze of his grayish-blue eyes.

“I’m a little late to this realization,” Giles said, “but I understand now why Baron Clayburn doesn’t want to let you out of his sight.”

“Huh?” Flustered, Fiona looked up, intending to protest—but when she was confronted by a fire in Giles’s eyes the likes of which she’d never seen before, her breath caught in her throat. Giles’s hand slid down her cheek to her shoulder, tracing the line down her arm until he reached her hand. He clasped it firmly, carefully lacing his fingers through hers.

“I think I’ll keep you like this, so you won’t run away from me.”

“Um… But…”

“Let’s go.”

It took everything Fiona had just to keep up with Giles’s quick gait.

She was concerned they would be late for their appointment, but her worries were unfounded. Giles's original plan had included them going somewhere for a light meal before meeting their client, and as such, they would arrive at their appointment just on time. What a relief.

Still, after the events that had just transpired, the mood in the carriage was strange and heavy. Giles still held Fiona's left hand tight. He had never let it go. They both knew there was no way she could escape a racing carriage, but he remained silent and kept her hand firmly in his own.

"So, um…" Fiona ventured.

Giles glanced sideways at her but said nothing, and she awkwardly dropped her gaze to her feet, murmuring, "Never mind." Giles's reticence was so unbelievably different from Hans or Roche that Fiona was at a loss for how to handle him.

I know this is all my fault, but it's still so awkward!

The silences that had passed between them before had never caused such discomfort. It wasn't even that she completely lacked for conversation topics, but it was painful trying to spring a one-sided conversation to life. She did not want to be given any preconceived notions about the art she was to appraise, so she couldn't talk about that, and unless she was imagining it, she could have sworn there was a chilliness to Giles's stubborn silence.

Aha, this must be the Icy Scion in his natural habitat… Wait, stop being impressed, Fiona!

Truth be told, though Giles trusted her, their relationship was temporary, nothing more. Any public display of intimacy was merely an act to convince others they were in love. Once they returned to their respective domains, their relationship would end.

But unless Fiona was mistaken, Giles had her on his mind more than necessary. It was surely because Fiona had made an enemy of Gordon over what had happened at the earl's estate; she was certain that Giles felt partially at fault for that, just as he did now for Rudolph's grudge against her. Fiona having dashed off

without sparing a thought for the consequences only angered and frustrated him further.

Yet despite all of this, Giles was concerned, first and foremost, for Fiona's safety.

Yeah, I know how he feels without him even telling me. I really ought to give him a proper apology.

Clenching the handle of the reticule in her lap to boost her resolve, she took in a deep breath—and in the same moment, a loud sigh beside her made her flinch. She glanced up timidly to find Giles looking away, a hand slapped to his face.

He…he can't even stand to look at me? Is it too late to apologize? I could get down on my knees and beg—wait, he's still holding my hand, that won't work…

As she sat there, her mind a flurry of cluttered thoughts, she heard a whisper beside her. "…rry."

"What?" she asked, not quite hearing him.

Her eyes met his gray-blues, peering out cautiously from behind long fingers. Fiona batted her eyes. She had never seen such vulnerability from him before. *Wh-why?*

Fiona nervously tilted her head in confusion, and Giles repeated himself, louder and clearer. "I'm so sorry, Fiona. That was so childish of me."

"Lord Giles?" *He was childish? When? Just now?*

The embarrassment in his voice revealed genuine shame. It was a side of him she had never seen. This day was full of firsts.

Giles took another weighted breath in and explained. "I keep pushing my agenda on you without even hearing your side. That was wrong of me. If not for me, you wouldn't even be caught up in this counterfeit mess or the danger with Gordon."

He was clearly trying to say that Fiona was the victim in all this, but that wasn't true. Fiona had involved herself willingly. "Lord Giles, I believe I would have found out about the counterfeits eventually even if I hadn't met you. Have you forgotten what I do for a living?"

“No, but—”

“Besides, you were right to voice your concerns to me.”

Embracing her when no one was around to see it could not be called an act, and the energy between them earlier could hardly be passed off as practice. He seemed like a man genuinely concerned for his beloved—but Fiona cast the thought away as soon as she had it. Still, the abnormality of his actions made it clear to Fiona that Giles’s plea was sincere. His actions were also effective in chastening Fiona’s recklessness, where a simple verbal warning would not have sufficed.

“I promise I’ll be more cautious from now on,” Fiona told him. Giles lowered the hand from his face to reveal a look of relief. Fiona gave him a reassuring smile. “And I’ll only run at full speed if I’m running away from someone.”

“Let’s hope it never comes to that.” Giles smiled cynically back at her, but it was a smile all the same. Fiona finally relaxed.

“But Lord Giles, I assure you, I will be fine.”

“I do wonder where your self-confidence comes from.”

“Well, you see, I got rather serious injuries at ages five, ten, and fifteen—every five years. So my next big injury shouldn’t happen for another two years, when I’m twenty.”

Giles’s eyes narrowed at Fiona’s assured confidence. “Is that what Hans was referencing earlier?”

“That’s right. I fell from the tree saving a cat at age ten. And at age fifteen, I tripped on the stairs…”

“I almost dread to ask, but what happened at age five?”

“I was playing near a river and fell in. Hit my arm against a boulder. I went through some rigorous training after that, though, so now I’m good at swimming and at gauging water currents.”

“Your family and Hans have my deepest sympathies.” Giles looked at the floor, sighing heavily and squeezing Fiona’s hand even more strongly, like a lover should. The way it pressed her lavish ring into her hand hurt slightly, but she had no desire to complain or brush his hand away. “Whoever is by your side when you’re twenty will need a lot of courage, I think.”

“Oh, um, it’s just a coincidence, really! It’s not like I get injured because I want to, I swear.”

“I should hope not.”

“So I assure you, Lord Giles, I won’t die on you. All right?”

Fiona’s abrupt declaration caught Giles off guard. According to the snippet she heard during her brief dance with Richard at the Earl of Burleigh’s party, Giles had changed when his engagement ended and his dog died. That did not mean those events were the cause of the change, but losing both a fiancée and a beloved pet around the same time was sure to have traumatized him to some degree. An eternal farewell with someone you were close with hurt, even more so when that farewell came from death. Fiona filled a similar role in Giles’s heart as his dog, so she likely stirred up those old memories in him.

Deep in her heart, Fiona thought of her own mother, gone from the world so young. Life was fleeting. Nobody could ever be certain of anything. However…

“I promise you. I will be fine.” Fiona raised their clasped hands, released her fingers from his firm grip, and linked just her pinky finger with his. Giles’s eyes shook briefly with hesitation as he looked down at their entwined fingers, then back up at Fiona’s face—but then his cheeks softened into a smile. Fiona had seen so many emotions from him in one day.

“You promise, eh?”

“I do.”

“Even so… Take care of yourself.”

“Hee hee, I will.” She thought Giles was being a little over protective, but she didn’t mind.

He casually changed the subject then, which Fiona understood to mean that they had reached an understanding. “By the way, the man who gave you that handbag—Reginald?” he began, eyeing the reticule in Fiona’s lap. “What’s your relation?”

“Huh? Oh, um, he’s my uncle.” His question surprised Fiona such that she struggled to reply. Perhaps Hans had told Giles

about the reticule? “He helps me with work… Haven’t I mentioned him?”

“Not by name, no.”



“Oh, well, I’m sorry. That was careless of me.”

The tiny handbag was both a coming-of-age gift and a souvenir. It was made of beautifully dyed silk and intricate embroidery. The base was green, the color of a lush field, and the lovely embroidered flowers evoked the imagery of a fresh bouquet, so it went with everything she wore. It looked delicate, yet it was sturdy and surprisingly spacious. As a result, she carried it with her all the time.

“It’s so lovely and so easy to use, and it goes with everything. It’s my prized possession.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re always carrying that.”

What’s this? I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it seems that the good mood I finally put Giles in has vanished again. Could it be…?

Fiona released his finger and clutched her purse with both hands. “Y-you can’t have it.”

Giles shook his head. “I don’t want it.”

Not long thereafter, the carriage arrived at the Marquess of Heyward’s residence, the location for the day’s appointment.

Fiona stood in the mansion’s spacious entryway, her eyes bulging at its lavish and prestigious structure. Her two previous appraisals were for the Earl of Brook and Viscount Fowler. This was Fiona’s first time in the home of someone as high-ranking as a marquess.

Oh my. What extravagance.

She stepped inside and was greeted by a high ceiling and marble floors. Directly opposite the main entrance was a crystal sculpture, and the handrail on the staircase leading to the second floor was polished and featured ornate carvings of grapevines. The Bancroft home, where Giles resided, was an old family mansion and the most lavish home Fiona had visited until this moment, but Marquess of Heyward’s mansion was a slight cut above.

I think the real surprise here is that the Bancroft home can hold a candle to the home of a marquess. That's beyond incredible.

And the heir of that Bancroft home was standing right beside her. As she gazed up at his chiseled face, she could see why so many women wanted to secure themselves the position of his wife.

"Something the matter?" he asked.

"No, I'm just thinking what a lovely mansion this is." Apparently, she had gawked a little too long at the house. She obscured this with an innocent smile and took Giles's arm again.

A few servants, who had been standing by, led them down the hall to the parlor. Fiona knew it was rude to glance around as they walked, but it was a long-held habit of hers to look at the paintings and art hung on walls. The adornments in the hall leading to the parlor were intended specifically to draw the eyes of guests, so she couldn't help but stare.

Giles, seeing Fiona desperately (and fruitlessly) try to hide her interest, chuckled. "We can have a leisurely look later."

"B-but I couldn't…"

On each visitation thus far, her clients regarded her dubiously at first, but over time, their guardedness melted away, and they liked her in the end. In addition to the painting to be appraised, they showed her other pieces from their collections, and she was treated to old yarns from the retired persons in the homes who no longer went out into high society. They were disappointed that the paintings were fake, but everyone had a lovely time all the same.

However, Fiona was under no delusion that she would receive the same warm welcome every time. What's more, she was visiting a marquess today, a member of the upper crust. Ordinarily, a mere daughter of a baron would not be permitted to so much as set foot in this home. She should consider herself lucky just to bask in its glory now.

They arrived in the parlor to find the marchioness and her steward waiting for them. The marchioness was an elderly woman

with a slight frame, and her face burst into a smile as she stood from the sofa.

"How good it is to see you again, Godmother," said Giles.

"Well, hello there, Giles! It really has been *ages* since I've seen you, you silly boy."

With charming white curls, the marchioness looked like she was made of sugar. Fiona had heard that she was the same age as Fiona's own grandmother, but her facial expressions and clothing were youthful. She turned her perky smile toward Fiona. "And this young lady is going to tell me if my painting is genuine, I assume?"

"That's right. This is Fiona, Baron Clayburn's eldest daughter. Fiona, this is the marchioness: Octavia, Lady Heyward."

"Nice to meet you, Fiona. Thanks for your help."

The marchioness was Giles's godmother. Although Fiona was technically there on business, she felt a little shy about being introduced to a personal relation of his. First impressions were important if she was to build trust as an appraiser, however, so Fiona smiled graciously at Giles's introduction and gave a proper curtsy. "It is an honor to meet you, Marchioness."

Even with her head reverently bowed, Fiona felt the old woman's gaze gravitate toward the ring on her left ring finger. *She…she's staring! She's really staring! I'm sorry, but it's fake!*

Fiona was the first young lady to be courted by her godson after long years in which not even a rumor about his love life could be heard. Of course the marchioness would be curious. Internally, Fiona apologized again to the old woman for not actually being Giles's beloved as she righted herself. The marchioness was short and had to look up at Fiona, who saw not a hint of scorn in her girlish, clear blue eyes. Instead, the marchioness's curiosity was on full display.

With a giggle, the marchioness said, "I see, I see. So this is the lucky lady."

"Godmother, is there something you'd like to say?"

"Oh no, oh *no*. Not a *thing*. Hee hee hee!" she giggled, amused at Giles's discomfort. Fiona exhaled a quiet sigh of relief to

find that there was truth in the rumors of the marchioness's friendly personality. A woman of equal social status would have been preferable for Giles, but the marchioness seemed to welcome their courtship regardless.

Well, I have to remember that courting and marriage are different…

Most marriages within the nobility were arranged by the couple's parents. In romance and courting, they were given comparatively free rein, but when it came to marriage, they settled down with a practical match. The marchioness and the earl's son who stood with Fiona in that moment were people she wasn't supposed to have ever interacted with. She understood that—it was like a law of nature to her—and yet, it gave her an indescribable feeling.

This is strange. As Fiona softly pressed a hand over her turbulent heart, the marchioness, finished with her teasing of Giles, gave Fiona a good looking over.

"My dear, is that dress, by any chance, a Maison de Michele?"

"Yes, my lady."

"I knew it! Young people look good in anything, of course, but you do look a treat in it."

"Th-thank you very much."

Mrs. Bennett's shop had made her not only a party dress but several everyday dresses as well. The first one they finished was the one she was wearing today: a slightly elevated street dress. Depending on how Fiona accessorized it, she could wear it for a stroll in the city or for a formal visit like this. Mrs. Bennett and the designer had worked hard to bring out the luster of her skin and hair with their color choices, and it became Fiona's fast favorite.

Oh no… I ran down a narrow alley in my best new dress, didn't I? Well, the skirt moved well, and it was very easy to run in! Gotta hand it to Mrs. Bennett!

Of course, if Fiona gave Mrs. Bennett her most honest review, Mrs. Bennett would rebuke her and say that dress was not

meant for running in. Only now, well after the fact, was Fiona relieved that her dress had not been soiled or ripped.

"I would love to own a Michele dress myself, but I don't go out much anymore. Seeing it now, however, I'm enthralled. I think I'll order one after all." With a wink at Fiona, the marchioness added, "Their winter gowns are also lovely."

Fiona smiled softly in reply. Seeing that the conversation was veering into fashion, Giles gently steered them back on track. "Godmother, might we get down to business now?"

"Ah, that's right. I get so chatty when youngsters are around. I can't help myself! Once you've finished the appraisal, let's come back here and have some tea. Well then, follow me; the painting is on the second floor."

Her steward led the party to the guest room, which was far bigger than Fiona's own bedroom. On the wall hung one landscape painting. It was not too big for an average woman to carry, and it showed a lakeside vista, lush with green. The unique color scheme brought the artist's name to Fiona's mind in a flash. At a glance, it was genuine.

"That looks like a Lammert," Fiona confirmed. "Did you receive any information as to when it was painted?"

"Yes, it was three years ago."

"Not long before the artist passed away, then. Pardon me," Fiona said apologetically, slipping into a fresh pair of work gloves and readying her loupe.

This definitely looks like the sort of painting Lammert would make. Lakeside views were one of the artist's favorite subjects, and there were many such paintings left behind. Unlike the redpoll painting and the other two paintings she had appraised, she was unable to say at a glance that it was a fake. *I only hope this one is real.*

Even if the recipient obtained a painting out of genuine love for it, discovering their beloved art was a forgery was still a great disappointment. There was the monetary loss, yes, but the memories associated with the painting were also tarnished, and the owner's faith in the painting's authenticity was crushed. At

times, of course, the owner also grappled with self-blame and bitterness over having been duped.

Telling a client, “I’m sorry to inform you, but…” was incredibly painful for Fiona, who became an art dealer out of love for paintings and a desire to build bridges between artists and customers. As she approached the painting, she prayed in her heart that it was genuine even as her mind and eyes stayed cold and impartial.

Lammert was known for his unique color gradation, which was evidenced by pronounced depressions of paint where the brush hit the canvas. It evoked a sense of three-dimensional realism. As Fiona looked carefully for these details, the marchioness watched her hopefully.

“Your expression sure changes when you look at art,” observed the marchioness. She giggled. “Do you love it that much?”

“Godmother.”

“Oh, you silly boy. You turned your nose up at every single lady I introduced you to, and now I find out you’re courting someone out of the blue. Really!” The marchioness’s lighthearted voice did not reach Fiona; she was too focused on the painting. “And then I learn the painting I bought might be a fake. Can you blame an old girl for feeling frisky?”

“You read too many novels, Godmother.”

“Oh, they’re a delight. Want to borrow them?”

“No, thank you.”

Meanwhile, Fiona finished her appraisal and exhaled quietly. The marchioness turned to her eagerly. “Well, what’s the verdict? Is it real or a fake?”

Fiona turned around slowly, and the fervent, starry-eyed marchioness took in her disappointed expression. “I’m so sorry, my lady, but…I cannot give you an answer.”

“Oh dear. What do you mean by that?”

“The painting is rough around the edges, and many parts of it are unlike Lammert, but these anomalies still fall within the

realm of plausible authenticity. In his final months, Lammert spent most of his time in his sickbed."

If Fiona was being entirely honest, she doubted the painting was genuine. The Lammert pieces she had seen from his final days were messier and simpler, yet more unique and powerful for it—qualities this painting lacked. However, illness warped an artist's mind and hand, and with the information she currently had at her disposal, she was unable to say with certainty that the painting was fake.

If Rudolph did paint this, it's quite a feat.

"Will you submit it to the academy for input?" Giles asked.

Fiona ruminated on his question a moment before answering. "No, that won't be necessary. With Lammert paintings, you can tell if they're real or fake by removing them from the frame, so I think we can figure this out at the gallery."

"Oh my. Can you really?" the marchioness asked.

Fiona nodded. "Artists often sign and date their paintings, either on the edge of the canvas or behind it, in a place you can't see. Lammert was one such artist, but he always signed with something unique. If I see the signature, I'll know."

"What's unique about his signature?"

"He writes a love message."

"Oh my!" The marchioness's eyes sparkled even more brightly at this news.

Lammert was a lifelong bachelor, but he was perpetually in love. Because of this, he always wrote a little love note or confession of his feelings for whomever he was involved with at the time of making the painting. Most laymen did not know about this; Fiona only knew about it because somebody at the academy who knew the artist personally had told her.

"His last lover was the actress Antonia, I believe, so he would have written her a message. And even if a forger mimicked the note, there will be more letters to work from besides the signature, so it will be easier to compare the handwriting and brush strokes."

“Lovely. Oh, I want to see that! Morris, take down that painting!”

“As you wish, my lady.”

“Huh? Um, please, my lady, not so fast.”

Paintings could be damaged if their frames were removed incorrectly. This painting wasn’t overlarge, so it wouldn’t be too difficult to unframe, but it was still best to err on the side of caution and have a professional handle it.

“But if you take it to the gallery, then I won’t be able to see it,” the marchioness protested.

“Um, then we could have a craftsman come here.”

“But I can’t wait that long!” With a casual wave of the hand, the starry-eyed marchioness insisted that it was all right to unframe the painting, and with that, her capable and loyal steward, Morris, solemnly set himself the task.

“Wh-what should we do about this?” Fiona asked Giles.

“Nothing. She’s a free spirit.”

Fiona cast a timid look up at Giles and found him smirking cynically down at her. He put a hand on her shoulder. The steward, clearly accustomed to following his mistress’s whims and fancies, carefully removed the nails, one by one.

The marchioness leaned in close enough that Fiona could feel her breath on her ear. “Fiona, be honest. What do you see?”

Fiona’s stomach churned as she worked to match her client’s enthusiasm. Hesitantly, she said, “It’s a fake.”

“And you’re still worried about it?”

“It doesn’t matter who painted it; that’s no excuse to damage a work of art.” Her mind was in the clouds when she said these words, but Giles’s eyes opened wide for a moment before the corners of his mouth quirked up in satisfaction.

There was no love note and no signature. It was blank. Not only that, but the exposed, brand-new wooden frame revealed that the painting was made quite recently. Fiona could only conclude that it had to be a fake.

“Hmm, what a pity,” the marchioness sighed. Then she perked up. “Oh my, what’s that, Morris?”

Fiona followed her gaze to see that an envelope had fluttered from behind the frame just as the steward was about to put the painting back together.

“It’s a letter,” Giles observed. “Fiona?”

Fiona shook her head. “He’s never included a letter before.”

“Might it be a love letter?” The marchioness’s voice squeaked. “Ooh, let’s read it!”

“Godmother,” Giles snapped. Then, after a pause, he gave her a reluctant nod. “Well, we might as well see what it says.”

“Oh, all right, then,” Fiona said. “I’ll open it.”

It was an object of unknown origin, and painting frames sometimes had splinters, so it was a job best done with gloves on. The envelope was not sealed, and it contained a letter. Fiona unfolded it on the table by the bright window.

The marchioness giggled. “What have we here?” Then her voice grew suddenly deeper. “Oh dear.”

Giles, who had read the letter before her, looked very stern. Late to finish the letter, Fiona’s eyes bulged in shock. “…What?”

It was a disturbing plot to force the current crown prince to abdicate the throne.

Chapter 2:
The Unearthed Conspiracy

"I SEE. SO THAT'S what's going on."

"Lord Giles?"

Giles thought for a moment, his chin in his hand, then turned to Fiona and firmly gripped her slender shoulders. "Fiona, I'm going out for a bit. Wait here for me."

"Huh? Um, all right." Caught up in the moment, she nodded in agreement without thinking.

Giles quickly asked his godmother to take care of Fiona, and before Fiona knew it, he was gone.

"Good gracious, that busy bee left without even giving his sweetheart a kiss goodbye! Now, Fiona, let me get you that tea I promised. Morris!"

"Yes, my lady, the tea is ready."

Not a word about the sketchy letter we just found? Or about Giles?

Giles had taken the letter with him, so all that remained in the room was the picture frame and protruding canvas. The marchioness ignored them and smiled as if nothing were amiss, taking Fiona's hand. "Come, dear. Let's have some tea."

"A-all right."

Though she felt a bit intimidated, when the marchioness pulled Fiona by the hand, Fiona had no choice but to comply. With not even a hint of change in the marchioness's mood, Fiona wondered if that eerie scene had all been a dream—but if nothing truly were amiss, then there would have been no reason for Giles to run off with the letter.

"Say, Fiona, I hear the tearoom near Courtney's Cathedral is popular. Have you been?"

"Oh, um, yes. Lord Giles and I went just the other day."

“Oh my, oh my, oh *my*! Every bit as chummy as the rumors say, aren’t we? So, what did you think?”

“Well, I was surprised by the wide selection of teas.”

As they walked down the hall, the marchioness cheerfully steered the conversation to one new topic after another. Fiona answered politely, half in a daze, and when they returned to the parlor, afternoon tea was all laid out, just as the marchioness’s steward had promised.

The silver tea stand was filled with cakes, tarts, scones, and sandwiches, and a beautiful antique tea set sat at the ready on the cart. With the bright sun’s rays filling the room, it was the very picture of a relaxing afternoon tea. The sight was so beautiful, so peaceful, that Fiona found it hard to believe she had read the cryptic message only a few minutes ago.

“Our cook’s specialty is fruit-based desserts.” The marchioness giggled. “Your tastebuds will *sing*.”

They sat across from each other on sofas, and the marchioness poured the tea herself. Fiona took a sip, and the fragrant brew slid smoothly down her throat. *What a lovely aroma.* The tension melted from her shoulders as she took another sip, from which she could finally distinguish the tea’s flavor. *Wow. I must have been really shaken up earlier.*

As Fiona gave a contented sigh, she was offered not a sandwich but a tart.

“Today’s tart is peach. Have one. They’re scrumptious.”

“Thank you very much.”

The marchioness took a tart and held it up tantalizingly to Fiona before taking a bite. The tarts were lustrous and dainty, the cream-colored fruit painted with a faint blush of pink. When Fiona took a piece on her fork and brought it to her lips, the sweet fragrance of freshly picked peaches danced on her nose. She bit softly into it, and the crisp crust crumbled, filling her mouth with fruit juice.

Wow, this is so good!

Neither too sweet nor too tart, it celebrated the peach's natural flavor, and naturally, the crust and pastry cream elevated the fruit to another level of excellence. Cecilia was home most of the time and enjoyed baking, and Fiona often stood beside her in the kitchen, so she had a good idea just how much care had gone into making these little tarts. *I'm sure they were prepared specially for Giles.*

Giles was not a fan of sweets, but he did like fruit. That was something she had picked up about him from the frequent parties and meals they had shared together during their brief courtship. She was certain the marchioness had requested the pastries for her beloved godson, whom she had not seen in a long time. As his fake sweetheart, Fiona felt guilty to be eating them without him.

She swallowed the treat and said simply but earnestly, "This tart is very good."

"Isn't it? I'm so happy you like it. Come, try this one next!" said the marchioness, offering her a berry shortcake.

The soft sponge of the shortcake paired beautifully with the refreshing whipped cream. Fiona could easily have eaten an entire plate. The marchioness grinned, satisfied, as she watched Fiona stuff her cheeks with every sweet she offered.

She's doing this to calm me down, Fiona realized. She had tried to keep her emotions inside, but she probably made a dreadful face over the letter. She didn't do well under pressure, at home or at the gallery, and every pressure Fiona had faced so far was dwarfed by the ominous, nation-shaking conspiracy of the forced abdication of the crown prince.

Though the marchioness was well above Fiona in both class and in age, she was kind enough to distract Fiona with sweets and carry on as though nothing bad had happened. Fiona felt certain that the marchioness had responded similarly to other crises in the past, and she was deeply moved by the petite old lady, who looked like a soft piece of candy, yet possessed the strength and sharpness of a weapon.

Fiona took another sip of tea and quietly returned her cup to its saucer. "Thank you for everything, Marchioness. I'm all right

now."

"Oh?" She giggled. "Whatever are you talking about?" Still with that girlish grin, the marchioness took her cup in a leisurely manner. "Say, Fiona, once we've finished tea, write home and let them know you'll be staying here for a while."

"What?!"

Stay here? "For a while?" She had assumed that Giles would return in an hour or two. Perhaps she was mistaken, but why was Fiona not permitted to return home by herself?

Seeing the questions on Fiona's face, the marchioness smiled harder, letting her know she would not take no for an answer. "I still have some paintings I'd like you to see."

Her steward popped out from behind her and added in a whisper, "We have clothes and toiletries prepared for you. You must stay."

It seemed to Fiona that the matter was already settled, and she had no choice but to accept. In the end, she nodded hesitantly. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Let's have some nice long chats, as well! That *silly boy* wouldn't tell me a thing about you, Fiona. Hmm, then again, he was always one for keeping his precious things shut away rather than sharing them. Hee hee!"

Um, what's with how excited she looks? And, um, does she realize I don't need to be looked after?

The marchioness's eyes twinkled with glee. Fiona prayed silently for Giles to return as soon as possible.

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Putting the Heyward mansion behind him, Giles visited first Viscount Fowler, then Count Brook one after another. In the owners' presence, he removed the paintings Fiona had recently appraised from their frames. Inside, he found the same letter hidden in the same way.

Unbeknownst to Fiona, both paintings had been sold by Gordon. This meant that Giles had grounds to suspect the letters were Gordon's doing.

Giles contacted the Earl of Bancroft, returned to his carriage, and raced to the royal castle. He intercepted Richard, fresh from parliament, and showed him the cryptic letter in the street while he relayed everything that had transpired at the marchioness's estate.

"Well, well. Selling counterfeit paintings exclusively to members of our political party seemed a rather shoddy scam, but now it all makes sense. They weren't doing it for the money but for this letter."

Richard gave the letter a penetrating stare and an indiscreet smile. Richard was present the day Fiona stopped Giles's elder sister, Miranda, from buying a painting from Gordon. When Gordon had paid a call to his own House Molins to sell a painting, Richard had felt the situation too fishy to be a mere con, but this development was beyond anything he could have imagined.

"Yeah. Gordon's backer is Minister Saquille."

They lived in a monarchy. There was an active parliament, but in all disputes, the king had the final say. Conversely, when the king proposed a policy, said policy could not be implemented without parliamentary approval. It was a system of checks and balances that sometimes resulted in gridlock.

The king was revered by most of the populace, and as such, the royal family's influence was immense. The throne was also hereditary, and with the line of succession determined by direct priority, the reigning king's eldest son was, by default, crown prince. There were always dissenting voices, however—this was a law of nature—and this kingdom and its government were no exception.

There existed a faction of the government that wanted not the crown prince but the king's younger brother to inherit the throne. This campaign was spearheaded by the Earl of Saquille. His faction stood in direct opposition to Giles and Richard, who favored the crown prince, but of late, Saquille's faction had been

unusually quiet. They didn't butt in to quibble during policy drafting sessions as they used to, and they had been left disappointed time and time again.

"That must be why they've been feigning confidence. I suppose they plan to submit an urgent proposal first thing at next week's session. What's your take, Gil?"

"I think that's highly likely. If they pass up this chance, another won't come along for some time."

Richard nodded in agreement, then shrugged. "But that second-in-line they keep pushing—doesn't he still hole himself up in the greenhouse all day? Is he even interested in politics?"

"I heard he's been complaining that he can't control his vassals."

"Ah, yes. How simple life would be if complaining could solve problems."

The king's younger brother was widely known as a botanist. He particularly liked raising flowers, but he was also studying selective breeding of edible plants, and the fruits of his research had manifested in improved yields in the kingdom's crops. Mild-mannered in temperament, the younger royal was not at all interested in government and showed no aptitude for the crown. He seemed very self-aware, having said once that he wished to abdicate his ascension rights. His elder brother, the king, and parliament refused to accept this, but since then, his disinterest in everything but botany had only deepened. He hadn't taken a wife either.

"If only His Majesty had accepted his little brother's abdication with grace."

"All that would have done is created another leader elsewhere. Keeping the line of succession close makes it much easier to control."

"I suppose so."

Minister Saquille's original scheme was to field a bride for the king from his own political party. Unfortunately, the king had fallen in love with someone else. Saquille and his faction opposed

her until the bitter end, but the king, who had public opinion on his side, pushed the marriage through.

Saquille backed the king's brother out of a grudge and a desire for a puppet he could control.

"But he came up with a juicy scheme, didn't he? There was no guarantee who would agree to buy the paintings, so at a glance, the plan appears sloppy, but all it takes is two or three houses biting, and he can do some real damage."

"Sending a painting to Heyward was a bold move."

Saquille could falsely accuse Bancroft and Heyward—houses that openly supported the crown prince—of plotting the crown prince's abdication. Of course, the houses could deny it, but if those letters were discovered, they could be counted as evidence of rebellion. It would be tricky to get them tried on treason, but the accusation and "evidence" could still create a rift among allies. That would be enough to weaken the crown prince faction's power.

However, Saquille was the bold, outspoken type—a simple man who told it like it was. He was not the sort of person to burden himself with a complicated strategy. *Whoever did this really took their time and acted methodically. Something's amiss.*

Miranda had wanted a Raymond piece for a long time, and Marchioness of Heyward loved tiny landscapes. Neither fact was hidden, precisely, but it was not easy information to obtain.

To ensure they would buy paintings with letters hidden inside, the mastermind would need to seek out their tastes and have suitable counterfeits made—not the sort of thing Saquille would do. Which meant—

"I know Saquille's name was dropped," Giles said, "but the actual mastermind was probably Gordon."

"You think so too, Gil? Yeah, Gordon certainly isn't a common con man. The shop employees really did seem in the dark about it," Richard mused.

Giles held up a finger in sudden recollection. "I just remembered, we caught one of the counterfeiters."

"What? When did this happen?"

“Don’t get angry, but it was today. On the way to the Heyward estate.”

“Just what have you been up to in the few hours since lunch, man? Packing it a little tight, aren’t we?”

“Like I care. I’m on my way to question him right now.”

When Giles explained that Roche had already gotten Rudolph to confess to working with the counterfeiters, Richard smirked and snapped his fingers. “So that’s why we’re headed to the gallery. Good thing I had them hire Dennis. A great managerial success on my part, eh?”

“You just got lucky.”

“It’s okay, Gil, you can praise my mighty foresight.”

When the gallery where Fiona worked received hate mail, they and Roche had decided to appoint Fiona a bodyguard without telling her, but they struggled to select one. This bodyguard needed to keep close to Fiona, yet not let on to Fiona or anyone else around them that he was watching over her. To achieve this, the bodyguard would need to be privy to detailed information about the parties involved in the counterfeiting scheme. In other words, he needed to be apprised not only of the counterfeit paintings but of Giles’s fake romance with Fiona as well. He had to pass a background check, be good in a fight, and be able to keep a secret—and not many people met those criteria.

Just when Giles was hitting a roadblock, Richard recommended Dennis. Dennis was a relative of Richard’s, and he had been Giles’s subordinate in the military. His visiting Richard after retiring from the military was what landed him on a tiny shortlist for the role. Dennis had stayed in the military longer than most, reasoning that, as a thirdborn son, there wasn’t much for him to do when he got out. His reason for retiring was that staying any longer would mean a promotion—a very Dennis-like rationale.

He worked as a civil official in the military as a scout and intel-gatherer; as such, he was quite skilled. He was more than competent for the position of bodyguard. And Dennis was heading Rudolph’s interrogation. As Giles and Richard spoke, he was surely gleaning some new information from the boy.

“Well then, I guess our next move depends on what the boy tells us. But the Marquess of Colet certainly owes Miss Clayburn for stopping your sister from buying that painting.”

“That’s for sure.”

“You wouldn’t have even found the letters if she hadn’t suggested removing the painting from its frame, right? If the Marchioness of Heyward hadn’t noticed it, she’d have fallen into our conspirator’s trap, and things could have been much worse. Fiona really is becoming more and more of a savior—especially to you.”

Giles paused. “Yeah.” He avoided Richard’s hinting gaze by looking out the carriage window.

“Where is she right now, by the way?” Richard asked.

“With my godmother at the Heyward mansion.”

“Good to hear she’s safe.”

As the person who discovered the letters, Fiona was a nuisance to the faction that favored the king’s brother. Gordon had glared spitefully at Fiona when she unmasked the redpoll painting as a fake, but if he found out she had unearthed the letter as well, Saquille would have something to say about it. He simply could not return her to the Clayburn home, which had virtually no security measures in place.

If Minister Saquille were the only person involved, his next moves would be relatively easy to figure out, and my father could lend a hand… But with Gordon, there are too many unknowns.

If Gordon was under noble protection, Giles found it hard to believe he was absent during these purchases. It wouldn’t be at all surprising if he had another scheme brewing beneath the surface.

When Giles decided to get Fiona a bodyguard, he was worried about abuse from jealous noblewomen and Gordon’s presumed grudge against her for exposing his counterfeit paintings. Now, things had escalated all the way to political factions warring over the line of succession. Giles knew he was right to be proactive.

“I’ll bet she was surprised,” said Richard.

“Yes, very.”

Baron Clayburn was rooted in his community and a centrist in parliament. He had kept a distance from the mess that was politics thus far. He neither sought advancement in life nor wished to be caught up in the mayhem of parliament. For a head of house with a long history of caring only for his own domain, seeing his daughter swept up in a war between political factions and the royal family on the national stage was sure to cause great distress.

Giles clenched a fist in his lap as he remembered how shocked and amazed Fiona had looked. *For crying out loud…*

Between the counterfeit paintings, the letters, and playing the part of his fake sweetheart, he owed her many debts. Meanwhile, the only benefit Giles had given Fiona thus far was getting the announcement of her engagement to Norman *postponed*—he hadn’t even succeeded in stopping it. Their arrangement was supposed to be equitable, but he was the only one benefiting from it. In fact, the arrangement was putting her in danger. He hated himself for being so worthless.

Giving her a few dresses, a ring, and a bodyguard did nothing to compensate her. Even Giles spending more time with her than normal to protect her was not possible, given their fake relationship. And yet, if he asked Fiona how she felt, he was sure she would tell him with guileless eyes that she wanted for nothing. She would also not let herself be passively protected and instead insist on walking on her own two feet.

Life really is unpredictable sometimes.

His former fiancée and all the ladies who had approached him were nothing like her. Fiona Clayburn—how he wished he could have met her much sooner.

“You know, this will actually be my first time meeting Mr. Roche. What’s he like?” Richard asked.

“Well… Let’s just say you don’t want him as an enemy.”

Roche had told Giles that, many years ago, Fiona bounded into his gallery, asking him to teach her his trade. That’s how their partnership began. What a ridiculously lucky man he was.

Richard's face tensed when he heard the truth behind Giles's joking tone. "For *you* to say that about him, he must be a tough guy. Say, isn't she carrying a few too many powerful cards in her hand? Just how many jokers is she hiding?"

"If you asked her, she'd say she has no leverage at all."

Richard burst out laughing. "You kids really are a perfect match. You should just drop the act and court each other for real."

The words were lighthearted, but they shut Giles up. "Stop joking around," he said after a pause. "We're almost there."

"*Oh?* Well, if you say so."

Giles pulled the watch out of his coat pocket and checked the time. The softly clinking chain was the same color as its true owner's hair.

"I promise I won't fall in love with you, Lord Lowell."

She didn't want to marry. She wanted to work and earn her own living. He—no one else—had pressed her to promise she wouldn't change her mind.

They would pretend to be lovers until the end of the season. This pocket watch and the ring that shone on her finger were symbols of their agreement.

We should drop the act, eh? Seriously... Life really is unpredictable.

A look out the carriage window as it came to a stop revealed that the sun was on the brink of setting.

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After dinner and a chat, it was quite dark by the time Fiona retired to the room she'd been given. The maid who drew her bath and did her hair withdrew, and she was alone at last.

"Ah! I'm so tired!" Fiona stretched extravagantly, her thin gown still draped over her nightwear, and dove straight into the four-poster bed.

What an intense day that was.

She tumbled onto the sleek bedsheets and pulled close the soft blanket that seemed to melt under her touch, closing her eyes and reveling in its coziness. Behind her closed eyelids, she saw the countless works of art the marchioness had shown her throughout the day. After Fiona heeded her advice and sent her father a letter via the marchioness's steward, she spent the rest of the day admiring every last painting and sculpture in the mansion as they were shown to her in a breathless succession.

I never dreamed I'd see a Desmond outside a museum…and all to myself, no less. Oh, how spoiled I am!

Unlike the Bancroft family, the Heyward house had not collected art out of a fervent love for it. Still, Heyward was a distinguished family with a long history. Shockingly lavish pieces were on casual display, including family portraits painted by famous artists… Fiona's afternoon spilled over with unexpected discoveries.

During the tour, the marchioness showed Fiona some very old family heirlooms, after which she held dresses up to Fiona, then played dress-up with her like a doll. Fiona stayed in one of those dresses for dinner, which the marquess attended with them. She was sure the food was delicious, but she was so nervous she couldn't taste any of it.

Neither the marquess nor his wife showed a hint of disdain for the baron's daughter on their first meeting. Quite the contrary—they showered Fiona with questions and conversation starters so that she would never feel dispirited. It was clear to Fiona that she was quite welcome in their home. Yet they did not breathe a word of the painting Fiona had originally come to appraise, nor the letter that came from it. Their conversations were unremarkable.

I suppose they don't want me to get involved, Fiona thought. Perhaps they had deemed Fiona an outsider who had no business knowing anything, and they wanted her to forget what she had seen.

Giles did not return even when night fell. All alone now and still in the dark, she couldn't quell her anxiety or keep from speculating wildly. They had probably kept her so busy that day to keep her mind preoccupied—and of course, after the lavish welcome they had given her, it was all the more difficult for her to broach the subject.

She flopped onto her back and looked at the bed's canopy. She beheld the elegant, fringed curtains above, feeling like a princess. Not long before, the marchioness's veteran maids had beautified Fiona without restraint, and now her skin was silky smooth and her hair possessed an unbelievable luster. It raised her spirits even higher, but Fiona knew, of course, that she was neither a princess nor the daughter of a marquess.

"I'm exhausted," she murmured to herself, "but I don't think I can sleep yet." With a sigh, she slid up to sitting, pulled the reading light close, propped a pillow behind her back, and opened her book. The marchioness, who was an avid reader, had let her borrow a novel entitled *Love Is an Eternal Desert*. It was one of the novels Olga had mentioned at the Clayburn party, a popular tale about a foreign prince and a dancer set in a distant desert kingdom.

Gee, I'd love to go there. I want to see the colorful mosaics on the buildings. She wanted to hear, for herself, the language people said sounded like music. She wanted to see the animals and plants that only existed there, the way the people lived, the food… Her heart danced with the visions she had yet to see.

She was more interested in the setting than the story; that's just the kind of person she was. Still, as she envisioned the foreign landscape and read on, the story drew her in. She kept turning the pages, unable to stop reading, until she heard a quiet knock at her door.

Who could that be… Oh! I know.

It was the middle of the night. Sensing she had a visitor, Fiona slipped out of bed. In addition to a water pitcher, each room in the mansion contained plates of fruits and biscuits for late-night snacks. A servant, seeing light spilling through the crack under her

door into the hallway, had probably come to take her empty plate or ask if she needed anything.

Unlike the Clayburn home, servants who worked for the marquess worked late into the night, especially in the busy seasons, when their masters frequently came home either late in the night or the next morning. They slept in shifts so somebody would always be awake. Tonight, the elderly marquess's son and wife were out, representing the marquess at a party. As the carefree daughter of a baron, she felt, in all honesty, that both going out to parties and awaiting someone else's return from one were true ordeals. (And as an overnight guest who had just jumped into bed, she felt a little guilty.)

If her uneaten midnight snack could make a nice meal for someone on the night shift, it would ease her guilty conscience. Fiona opened the door with eager hospitality—"Come on in!"—and saw, before anything else, a well-polished pair of fine leather shoes.

Huh?

The hallway was dimly lit, but from the lustrous shine of the laced shoes and the trousers above them, she could tell at a glance that they were not a servant's clothes. And the observation she should have made first, of course, was that a servant visiting her bedroom late at night would certainly not be a manservant, but a maid.

"S-sorry…it took me so long…"

Fiona timidly looked up to find Giles standing before her, wearing a flustered look she had never before seen on his face.

Chapter 3:
A Late-Night Visitor

THERE WAS A LONG SILENCE. “Lord Giles?” Fiona said finally.

“H-hi.”

When Fiona just stood there, blinking in confusion, Giles covered half his face with his hand and looked down the same way he had back in the carriage.

Huh? Why’s he embarr—oh no! I’m not dressed!

Since Fiona had bathed and was ready for bed, she only wore a thin nightgown and an equally thin dressing gown trimmed with lace. Her hair was down, she wasn’t wearing a corset—she looked downright slovenly. And though the nightgown she wore was a finely made, elegant garment from a shop the marchioness frequented, that did not change the fact that it was skimpy.

As Fiona fumbled to close the front flaps of her dressing gown, she could have sworn the bits of Giles’s face peeking out between the cracks in his fingers were turning red. A similar heat rose to Fiona’s own face.

“Um…so…”

Technically, the dress she wore to Caroline’s party showed more shoulder and was more open at the chest; Giles also did not so much as twitch a facial muscle at the sight of scantily dressed ladies at parties. He was accustomed to the sight, so there was no reason for him to get flustered over a little skin showing, but of course, ballgowns and nightgowns were worlds apart. As for Fiona, letting somebody see her in a nightgown when she wasn’t sick made her anxious.

She panicked, trying to think of something to say, until Giles, the awkwardness catching up to him, began to stammer an apology.

“S-sorry, I thought you’d be wondering about it—you know, about the boy Rudolph—but I didn’t realize how late… I shouldn’t have co—”

“Oh! Yes! That boy! What became of him? Is everything all right?” Fiona cut him off, curiosity getting the better of her embarrassment. She didn’t think Roche would resort to violence, and Hans, who knew how to handle children, was with him, but she was still worried about what had happened afterward. All evening, she was preoccupied with what might happen if Rudolph got desperate.

“Um, it’s all right. I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“No, tell me now, or I won’t be able to sleep.”

The hall was empty, so even their quiet voices carried. It was a large mansion and Fiona had been told she was the only one on this floor, but late-night conversations in the hall were still a nuisance to the rest of the house. As Giles tried to hang a right and leave, Fiona grabbed his hand and coaxed him into her room. After quite a moment’s hesitation, he finally agreed.

Giles was in his formal attire, not the clothes he wore when they parted ways earlier in the day. He had probably popped into a party to say hello. Now, next to him, Fiona felt all the more self-conscious about the disparity in their appearances. Bluntly put, she was embarrassed.

“Sorry I look such a fright. Um, the clothes I was wearing earlier are being cleaned and I have nothing else to wear. I’ll, um, find something to put on…”

Eek, forgive me for hurting your eyes! But I’m dying to know what became of the boy… Oh, I can wear that.

Fiona apologetically glanced around the room for something to cover herself with, and her eyes landed on the blanket on her bed. She was turning to fetch it when Giles, his gaze still averted, removed his jacket. Before Fiona had time to question him, he draped the jacket swiftly over her shoulders.

“I doubt it’ll be comfortable, but you can wear it.”

The stiff, unfamiliar fabric buried any parts exposed by her unreliable sleepwear. “Oh. Thank you very much,” she said, touching the collar. Giles seemed to relax a little then.

Men's clothing…is very big and very heavy. Compared to the thin dresses made to accommodate her frail, sickly mother, and the soft dresses designed by Maison de Michele, Giles's jacket was starkly different. His cedarwood cologne intermingled with the odor of cigars that had wafted onto him from somebody. It was a rather unusual scent for Fiona, whose father did not smoke.

Everything about the jacket reminded Fiona that the man standing before her was a person of the opposite sex who was not her relation. Her cooled cheeks flamed again, surely from the warmth Giles left behind in his jacket. Fortunately, the dim light of the bedroom hid their faces somewhat. Thanking her lucky stars for that, Fiona finally chanced looking Giles in the eye for the first time.

"Um, welcome home, Lord Giles. Sorry, I should have led with that."

"Hm? Oh, um…hello?"

"Why was that a question?"

"Uh, I'm just not sure how I should reply."

The mood was awkward again. This time, however, Giles looked amused, which helped to ease the tension in Fiona's shoulders. They both smiled at each other of their own accord.

After a pause, Giles said, "Sorry I left without giving an explanation."

"Lord Giles, you've done nothing but apologize since you got here. The marquess and his family have been impeccable hosts, I assure you." When she explained that she had gotten to see lots of art and had a great time, Giles was clearly relieved.

"Well, as for me," Giles began, "I checked over a few things at the gallery. After that, I popped in on two parties and the club."

"Sounds like you had a busy evening."

"Yes, and I completely lost track of time."

The parties Fiona attended with Giles were only the ones he deemed important. If she accompanied him to every single party he graced with his presence, she would have no time to even set foot in Roche's gallery. Meanwhile, Giles had not only social

obligations but also his work with parliament. He was a very busy man—even now, he had returned home later than usual.

“Well, since you came all this way to deliver the news to me as quickly as possible, I really should be thanking you.”

“Should you now?”

Giles must have been exhausted, but he had come by just the same because he figured Fiona would be curious. Of course that made her happy. When she assured Giles that he wasn’t imposing, his manner finally returned to normal.

“Did you eat?” she asked him.

“I didn’t have time.”

“You’ll pass out if you aren’t careful…” She sat him down on the sofa with her and urged him to eat her snacks.

Wait a minute. Did the servants leave this food here knowing Giles would stop by?

As she gratefully watched Giles eat, an image of the marchioness giggling in amusement popped into her head. “Is that enough for you?” she asked. “Shall I ask the kitchen staff if there’s more?”

“No, that’s quite all right.” Giles refilled his own glass. After a moment’s pause, he began to talk. “Let me see, where should I start…? With the boy, I suppose. He was difficult to handle at first, but after a bath and something to eat, he calmed down and Roche got him to talk.”

“Oh my goodness.”

“Anyway, for now, his health seems to be of no concern. He’s not injured either.” Fiona sighed in relief, and the corners of Giles’s mouth turned slightly upward. “He has no parents, as expected, but we did find out that he used to work for an art restorer.”

When she heard the words “art restorer,” everything clicked into place. If he was an apprentice for an art restorer, then he had told the truth when he said he could paint.

While Rudolph’s surrogate parent’s skills as an art restorer were top-notch, his business experience and social skills were

severely lacking. There were no other employees; he and Rudolph eked out a living together. Then, about half a year ago, Rudolph's surrogate parent was killed in a freak accident.

Gordon showed up at the funeral and half forced Rudolph to come with him to the capital to make counterfeit paintings. The requests all pertained to famous painters, so it would have done Rudolph no good to pretend he didn't know who they were. Gordon showed him their real paintings in art museums so he could learn other intricacies like how they used color. Sometimes, Rudolph faked existing paintings or shadowgraphs that Gordon somehow got his hands on, but for the most part, he added color to the sketches Gordon had.

"He said he could tell at a glance which colors to mix to get the same color. He boasted that he could replicate any artist if all that was needed was to fool people."

"So that's what happened…"

"He apparently knew that the 'Raymond red' you pointed out wasn't quite right. But Gordon didn't notice, so Rudolph didn't tell him. Just a little revenge."

"Revenge?"

"Yeah. Not even in the most charitable terms could Gordon's treatment of the boy be described as good."

While Gordon had not been violent with the boy, he had shut him in a basement and fed him the bare minimum. If Rudolph resisted, his meals were taken away entirely. Rudolph confessed that the environment had utterly disgusted him.

Once Rudolph had finished all the paintings, Gordon stopped showing up. He was given only a small portion of the reward he was promised, and to make matters worse, Gordon abandoned Rudolph without even bothering to set him free first.

Rudolph was able to get some groceries now and then, but Gordon showed up last week after a long absence and kicked Rudolph out with only the clothes on his back. The more Fiona heard, the more crestfallen she felt.

How awful. Has he no regard for human life? And that boy is a genius—how dare he cast talent like that aside?

Though Rudolph's paintings were forgeries, every one of them was at a level that surpassed a simple print. Not many people could paint like that. Though the boy had been trained, he was clearly a natural.

"Apparently," Giles explained, "Gordon cut Rudolph loose, saying he had no use for counterfeits that can be easily foiled by a common baron's daughter. He got by for a few days with what little money he had, but it didn't last long."

"So that's why he had it out for me." Fiona hung her head in shame. Giles's fingers brushed her cheek, and she lifted her gaze slightly to meet his.

"You did nothing wrong. This is all Gordon's fault. Rudolph's anger was misdirected."

"But in his eyes, I'm no better than Gordon."

To Rudolph, Fiona was just as evil for exposing the counterfeits as Gordon was for exploiting him. It was only natural that he would want swat her like a mosquito that landed on his nose.

But Giles insisted Fiona shouldn't let herself be made into the villain of Rudolph's story. "Even if Rudolph's testimony is true, that was not a good reason for him to lash out at the wrong person, nor did it serve as atonement for Gordon's crimes."

"But Lord Giles—"

"Don't forget, he assaulted you, Fiona. If you still feel the need to help him, it shouldn't be as a lightning rod for his resentment. Help him some other way."

"Some other way? How?"

"Rudolph is a witness. We'll need to see that he's protected until the matter is settled. And if his confession bears out, then I'd like your input on what to do with him after this is over."

Fiona looked up with a start and found Giles gazing back at her earnestly. Though Rudolph was coerced into it, he had committed a crime. A boy like him, without any family, would not

be granted a chance for rehabilitation. This was what Giles had in mind when he asked Fiona what she wanted to do.

What do I think…? Not as a victim or perpetrator but as a connected party.

Though she could do nothing but look at paintings, she might be able to help him. The heaviness in her heart suddenly lifted. Unable to express her feelings in words, Fiona clenched her fists on her lap.

"Depending on how things go, we might need to hand him over to the police or an institution," Giles warned her.

"I know. Um, thank you."

Giles's lips softened as the color returned to Fiona's face. "No rush," he assured her. "Firstly, all we have is the boy's testimony. We have no solid proof, and we haven't carried out a proper investigation. Roche says he'd like to have the boy demonstrate his painting abilities in due time."

"I'd like to see that too."

"I knew you'd say that," Giles said, sounding troubled.

"Is there a problem with that?"

"Well, actually, the situation is a bit precarious." Fiona gave Giles a questioning look. In a strained tone, he explained, "We found other letters like the one you found. At Brook's and Fowler's houses—the two paintings you appraised."

Fiona flinched. "Do you mean…"

"The information was suppressed until now, but Gordon sold them the paintings. And everyone who bought a painting from him is in my party in parliament."

Fiona's breath caught in her throat. It did not take her long to hear the implication behind Giles's words. "You're saying that this goes much deeper than some counterfeit paintings."

"Right. This had to be a plot to weaken the power of the crown prince faction and strengthen the king's brother's ascension rights. Gordon is in league with the latter."

It was all a power play for the throne. *I knew parliament had factions,* Fiona thought, *but do they really go to such criminal lengths for their causes?*

When she saw that cryptic letter regarding the royal succession, it was true that Fiona suspected there was a political dispute at play. Yet Fiona's father belonged to neither faction, and he was completely out of the loop when it came to parliamentary disputes and schemes; it all felt like something from a distant world to Fiona.

"W-wait a minute, Lord Giles," she said. "Are you certain it's all right for you to be telling me these things?" As someone who was present when the letter was discovered, of course she cared about where everything was headed. But now that the subject of the crown prince had come up, she wasn't so sure she should be privy to this news.

Giles gave Fiona a reassuring nod. "Ordinarily, it wouldn't be, but you were the one who found that letter, and I know you aren't the sort to carelessly repeat what you hear to an outsider."

Fiona sat up tall, suddenly self-conscious. For a moment, Giles's ready trust in her rendered Fiona speechless. He could have simply left her in the dark, yet he chose to share with her what he had learned. "Thank you," she said at length.

If they made a fuss over the letters, the faction that favored the king's brother would know their plot had been foiled. Giles explained that he had left Fiona behind that night to attend a few parties and pop into the club so that he could have some discussions off the record.

"All that was written in the letters was an advocation for the crown prince to abdicate. In terms of effectiveness, it's very lacking. But if the letters came to light, the very fact that they were discovered in houses that support the crown prince would be deemed problematic." Doubt was a weakness. Especially in government, it could prove fatal. "But you exposing those paintings as fakes helped quash their plot before it could take off. You really saved us."

“Oh, but that was just dumb luck.” Fiona knew Giles was speaking from the heart, but she did not feel that she had done anything special. Giles’s hand enveloped Fiona’s clenched fist on her lap, stopping her from deflecting any further.

“Supporters of the king’s brother are likely unamused by this. Gordon in particular must hate you for exposing his counterfeit painting right in front of him. Since we don’t know his whereabouts at the moment, I want you to stay here for your safety.”

“Um, well, the marchioness already told me I should stay here for a while…”

“Yes, my godmother really has taken a liking to you. Pardon me for saying so, but the Clayburn residence has virtually no security. And my own home is frequently unoccupied by myself and my parents—there are just too many cracks through which something could slip.”

Hence his request for Fiona to stay at the marquess’s estate. After all, they were up against a con man and a nobleman with significant political power. Fiona’s family could very well be overpowered by class differences or sophistry, and there was only so much Giles could do to keep Fiona safe at her home.

With a strained look on his face, Giles pointed out that things would be much easier if they were up against an out-and-out desperado. As it stood, the Heyward mansion was home to the marquess and marchioness, their son and his wife, and their children; there were plenty of eyes in the house. Moreover, as a mere earl, Saquille couldn’t make demands of anyone in the home of a marquess.

“It would not seem amiss for my godmother to have a daughter of the nobility as her companion. I doubt anybody would connect your presence here to the counterfeit paintings or the political power struggle.”

Despite Giles’s insistence that the mansion would be great camouflage for her, Fiona could not quell her trepidation. “But I wouldn’t want to impose—”

“The Heyward family avoided disaster thanks to you, Fiona. They owe you a debt. You could not possibly impose on them.”

“You’re exaggerating.” All she did was follow the procedure for her appraisal and make the most obvious recommendations. If anyone was a hero, it was Giles for broaching the subject of the counterfeit paintings with the Heywards in the first place.

Fiona knew she was correct, but Giles shook his head. “If not for you, my sister would have happily bought that Raymond painting. That would have put the Marquess of Colet in danger as well.”

There was a letter in that painting too? Fiona thought, before coming to the natural conclusion. *Oh, yes, I suppose there would be.*

As she thought back on that day, a thought popped into Fiona’s mind. “Gordon certainly is brazen, personally selling those fake paintings in so many different locations.”

Paintings bought from the same person, all containing the same letter. It wouldn’t have taken much investigation to identify him as the culprit. Perhaps that was simply how con men worked, but Fiona had a hard time accepting it. What grounds did he have to believe he alone could evade detection?

“Exactly. That Gordon made no attempt to mask his identity was key to us keeping our guard up. When I explained all of this to Hans, he insisted that Miss Fiona be taken somewhere safe.”

“Oh, silly Hans.” Her overprotective and anxious butler likely believed that if Fiona stayed at the marquess’s estate, she could not possibly cause further problems. It made Fiona feel weak that she couldn’t fully rebut that claim.

“I will pay a visit to your father tomorrow to explain everything personally,” Giles promised.

“M-my father?” The word took Fiona by surprise. The marchioness herself had added a line to Fiona’s letter to her father; that should have been enough.

“Baron Clayburn is not the sort of man who would entrust his daughter to someone else after receiving a single letter. I asked

Hans to put a word in, but I must go through the proper channels by speaking to him directly."

Fiona flinched. His tone of voice told her that he was not backing down.

A letter from a marquess alone would be enough of a surprise for her father for one day. Even after all this time, he still acted shifty whenever Giles came to pick up Fiona. She sent out a quiet prayer that this latest development didn't cause him to fall ill.

"Then I'll come with you."

"Fiona, I'm sorry, but you shouldn't go out for a while, no matter the destination. I've already secured Roche's permission for you to do your gallery work from here."

"Oh! Um… You did?" So he had already cut off her escape route. It made her want to laugh and shake her head.

"Word of this scandal has probably already reached the crown prince via my father, and we anticipate His Highness will instruct us to take care of the matter internally without leaking anything to the public. He doesn't like disputes, and we can't guarantee Gordon can be secured."

It was only a theory, based on circumstantial evidence, that the king's brother's supporters were behind this. At present, they had no testimony or any evidence to back up this claim. Giles's voice was strained with bitterness as he explained this to Fiona.

They had Rudolph, but the testimony of an underage orphan was not considered all that trustworthy. Moreover, he only made the paintings, and he said he didn't know who had put the letters in their frames. "Besides," Giles added, "disrupting domestic politics is not their true objective."

"Yes. That much I do know."

At present, there were no major international conflicts, but just before Fiona was born, there was a war. Not all pockets of friction between nations had been eliminated. News of internal discord regarding the royal succession—discord that was not previously made public—should absolutely not reach the ears of

other nations. That meant that the only crimes of Gordon's that could be made public were the sales of counterfeit paintings.

As the person who exposed the counterfeits, Fiona didn't have a big enough name to be sent to the palace for her protection. This was why private security was necessary and why Fiona needed to be held at the marquess's estate for her safety. Everything made perfect sense, yet Fiona still felt something was amiss.

"I do believe Gordon dislikes me," she said, "but I can't see myself as important enough for somebody to worry about me so. Can you?"

Giles pressed his fingers to his temple, dumbfounded as to why Fiona refused to give herself credit for throwing a wrench in the entire conspiracy. After a moment's silence, he said, "We won't touch on your diminished sense of self for now."

Fiona still did not understand it, but when Giles's gaze on her remained as stern as ever, she accepted that she could not brush him off as making a mountain out of a molehill. Instead, she asked, "So…how long am I to stay here?"

"The matter regarding the letters should be resolved by parliament's session at the beginning of next week. I can arrange it so you can go out after that, but as for Gordon… We're doing everything we can, but he surely has a Plan B. I can't give you a definitive timeframe," Giles said apologetically. She appreciated that he didn't try to obfuscate by giving a random date or number of days. It reminded Fiona of his promise to never lie to her. "The rules are different here than in your own home, so I'm afraid it may put a bit of a strain on you, but—"

"A bit of a strain?! More like the mansion and rooms are so grand and so spacious that I—um…"

Fiona faltered. She couldn't tread on his kindness and tell him the house was too extravagant for her. Truth be told, it was too luxurious for her to relax there; she could spend a day there and pretend she was on a lavish vacation, but she knew she would quickly grow homesick for her familiar little Clayburn home.

In the face of Fiona's indirect plea, Giles sympathized with her. "That's right, you said something similar in the carriage at the beginning. Well, if this place is too spacious for you to feel at home, I do have a smaller house for my own personal use."

"B-but that's even further out of the question!"

"True. There are no servants, so it isn't exactly safe."

Wrong takeaway, Giles!

It was Giles's personal home—*that* was the problem.

What he thought of Fiona's flustered panic was anyone's guess. He squeezed her hand harder, looked right into her eyes, and said, "Please, won't you stay here? Fiona…"

All he did was say her name, but his feelings reached her with frightening clarity. He could have made it an order, yet he insisted on posing it as a request to Fiona. What a guy.

Come on. How am I supposed to say no now?!

"W-well, all right, as long as you let me be present when we hear Rudolph's side of the story."

"I'm not so sure…"

Fiona knew it was unfair of her to put a caveat on a suggestion he had only made out of concern for her safety, but she was dying of curiosity about Rudolph. When Giles gave her a stern look, Fiona pointed to the window and said, "If you say no, I might just jump out that window and go there anyway."

Giles's brows knitted together. "You're on the second floor."

"I'm not afraid of heights," she boasted, brimming with confidence. "I climbed trees all the time when I was a child."

"Yes, and you fell from one."

He just had to bring up the past. "I-I'll be fine, I swear! I don't have to carry a cat down with me this time, and there are plants beneath this tree that can cushion my fall!"

"It concerns me that you're dead set on falling. Besides, you're entirely missing the point."

“If I could just walk out the front door, I wouldn’t have to be so reckless.”

Giles mulled it over for quite a while, but in the end, he assented. With a severe look, he said, “All right, you win.”

“Hooray! Thank you so much.” She smiled, relieved, and Giles’s grip on her hand loosened.

“It’s gotten quite late. There are other things I’d like to discuss, but we can do that later.”

Giles stood, having stayed well beyond what was proper, and Fiona followed suit. She took off his jacket and jogged to catch up to him at the door.

“Um, here. Thanks for letting me borrow it.”

“No problem. By the way, Fiona?”

“Yes?”

“Didn’t your parents ever teach you…never to let a man into your bedroom?”

He grabbed not the jacket but her wrist. The jacket fell from her grasp and fluttered to the floor. Then he twirled Fiona around until her back hit the wall next to the door and lifted her wrist as high as his head.

What…?!

“And in the middle of the night, no less.”

Wha—whawhawhawhawhat?!

Fiona froze at this unexpected turn of events, gawking up at him. Giles was backlit by the dim lights of the room, so she couldn’t see the expression on his face. She could have sworn she saw flames in his grayish-blue eyes, but that was probably her exhilaration playing tricks on her.



“This mansion may be safe, but you let me into your room so easily. How can you let yourself be so vulnerable?”

Giles made a show of running his other hand gently along her cheek and taking a lock of hair from her shoulder. His hand softly touched her exposed neck. If he squeezed, he could strangle Fiona’s thin neck easily.

Wh-why? She had opened the door without suspicion, thinking he was a servant. He was right to say that she wasn’t cautious enough, but never in her life had she felt herself to be in danger. Besides, she let Giles in because she wanted to hear the news.

“Um…what?! B-but Giles, I opened the door…because it was you!” After several attempts at opening and closing her mouth, when her voice finally did come, it was cracked and an octave higher than normal. She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed with all her might, but her voice sounded distant, like it wasn’t even hers. Only then did she finally feel the consequences of her imprudence throbbing through her body. “If it had been s-someone else…of course I wouldn’t have let them in!”

His hand flinched on her neck. She timidly opened her eyes to see Giles frozen in place, his face just inches from hers and his eyes wide open.

“Um…hello?”

He gently released her neck and pressed his hand against the wall beside her face. Giles dropped his head, burying it in the crook of Fiona’s neck.

Hi-his lips are on my neck!

Giles’s forehead pressed against her shoulder; his hair brushed her cheek. In their charade as lovers, he had never pressed himself this close to her before. More importantly, Fiona was wearing only a thin nightgown. She wasn’t sure whether to go blue in the face or red, but her face was on fire, her heart was screaming, and she knew her eyes were wet with tears of embarrassment.

After a few seconds that felt like eons, he whispered her name with a throaty gust of breath on her cleavage. “Fiona…”

H-he’s mad at me. Okay, okay, I’ll be more careful! Yes, sir! I swear! So please—wait, what?

When Giles slowly raised his head, his eyes were filled with bewilderment, confusing Fiona in turn. “Lord Giles…?”

“I’m honored that you trust me…but you shouldn’t trust me *too* much,” he muttered sheepishly, running a hand through his hair as he slid away from her.

Fiona had never seen him so fragile before. Seeing him like this calmed the turbulent waves in her heart. As Giles bent over to pick up his fallen jacket, Fiona murmured quietly to his back, “But that’s impossible. If I didn’t trust you, I wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

She would never have obediently stayed where it was safe and waited for the all-clear. If the counterfeit paintings were the only issue, she would have taken it upon herself to act as a decoy to lure Gordon out of hiding and then valiantly save the day. One reason she didn’t do any of this was because Fiona was an outsider when it came to warring political factions, but more than anything, it was because Giles—the concerned party—had begged her not to.

If he wanted to, he could easily use me to get what he wants and toss me aside when he’s finished with me, Fiona thought. He hadn’t needed to go so far as to ask his godmother to personally take care of her—a mere baron’s daughter. And after he had nearly attacked her, why couldn’t she bring herself to say she didn’t trust him?

In the end, that was why she had kept up the act of being his sweetheart all this time: because it was Giles. If not that, then what else?

“I would have run out of here barefoot long ago,” she added.

“Barefoot?”

“Yes. Barefoot. I grew up in the countryside.”

This finally got Giles to crack a smile, and the pent-up tension between them melted away. Slowly, Giles said, “Sorry I scared you.”

“You should be. Talk about over-rehearsing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I was careless.”

“In all seriousness, though, be more careful. And don’t make all the decisions on your own. Let me help you.”

“Will do… Oh! Lord Giles?”

She had certainly learned her lesson, but a part of her still found the situation grossly unfair. Perhaps that was why she stopped Giles before he could leave her room for good. She grabbed his arm from behind just as he was about to touch the doorknob.

“Fiona, why are you—mm!”

As Giles whirled around to look at her, Fiona stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his cheek. There was a light smacking noise, though not an intentional one. “Good night. Sweet dreams.”

Her slender fingers gave him a gentle push, and this was enough to send his thin yet sturdy frame out of her room. She quickly shut the door behind him, turned her back against it, and slid all the way down to the floor.

G-Giles deserves to get a little shock too!

It wasn’t fair that she was always the one being toyed with. Giles didn’t deserve to have a monopoly on sneak attacks.

When she stole a glance at Giles before he left, he was stunned…but he did not, at least, look upset. She liked to think she had gotten him back good.

“I’m…not sure I’ll be able to sleep tonight…”

As Fiona gasped and pressed her hands to her flaming cheeks, Giles’s back was pressed to the other side of the door, his red face peeking out from behind the hand pressed to it.

Chapter 4:
Baron Clayburn's Drawing Room

"ALL RIGHT. You've made the situation quite clear."

In the Clayburn home's small but bright drawing room, Giles and the baron sat opposite each other. Having finished with his explanation and received the baron's approval, Giles felt the tension in his shoulders quietly melt away. "I apologize for delivering the news after the fact," he said. "I take full blame for this."

"Oh, y-you're too kind! It's quite all right; Hans delivered the news to me earlier. Truly, my daughter loses sight of everything else when it comes to paintings."

First, she had publicly humiliated Gordon; yesterday, she chased and caught a boy named Rudolph; then she found the letter inside the painting frame—by chance, but that was beside the point—and, in doing so, entangled herself in a power struggle between political factions over the line of succession. Baron Clayburn's life was a never-ending succession of terror over Fiona, who possessed a boldness unthinkable of a baron's daughter. He wiped the sweat from his brow and bowed deeply to his guest.

"I cannot thank you or the Heywards enough for protecting my daughter in secret."

The hidden letters and the counterfeit paintings were not to be released to the public, so Giles invented a cover story in which the marchioness took a liking to Fiona and detained her at her home as a conversation companion. But it could also be seen as hands-on training—Fiona's presence in the Heyward mansion could just as easily be perceived as Fiona preparing for marriage into the Bancroft family. To the baron, who sought to marry Fiona to Norman, the proposal should have been less than appealing. Giles was prepared to have to argue his case, but to his relief, Fiona's father put his daughter's safety first and readily accepted the proposal.

“This isn’t just for Miss Fiona’s sake,” Giles reminded the baron. “There are politics to consider. We ask that you not breathe a word of the letters to anyone.”

“Oh, of course, my lord! I won’t tell a soul.” The baron nodded vehemently, but then he paused and heaved a deep sigh.

“I know you must have your objections,” Giles said, “but it’s better to act now than to regret our inaction later. Consider it a precautionary measure.”

“Forgive me, my lord, I can’t say I am without reservations regarding the arrangement…I just feel so weak. She’s my own daughter, and I can’t do anything for her. Ha! A little late to notice that now, I suppose.” The self-deprecation in his laugh tugged at Giles’s conscience. The baron averted his eyes from Giles, the corners of his mouth raised in a cynical smirk as he continued, “I am a bad father.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Giles was surprised by this unexpected confession. It was a well-known fact that the Clayburn family was close knit. It showed in the way Fiona spoke about them, and Giles had further proof of it in the warmth he felt in her home every time he came to pick her up. The baron may have lacked some of the social skills required of a nobleman, but as a father, he was unimpeachable.

The baron nodded. “Because my wife and youngest daughter have always been so sickly, I’ve passed the buck to others when it came to Fiona’s care. I have never done a fatherly thing for her. Even when my wife passed, it wasn’t me who comforted her but my brother-in-law.”

With solemnity, Baron Clayburn confessed that, though he had mentally prepared himself for it, the death of his beloved wife left a gaping hole in his heart. With a haggard mind and body, it took everything in him just to tend to his domain and try to keep Cecilia from following her mother.

“My eldest daughter has always been obedient and reasonable, and I took advantage of that. I owe her a huge debt, so I’ve never put my foot down to stop her if there was something she had her heart set on doing. But now…”

“She is not at all responsible for the current crisis,” Giles assured him. “In fact, I’m grateful to her for discovering the letters before somebody else did. I would never vilify her for it.”

“But I doubt the public will see it that way. I truly am grateful that you are keeping this all under wraps.” Though the baron kept heaping on the gratitude, there was a subtle catch in his voice that gave Giles pause. Giles shot him a questioning look, and the baron wiped the sweat off his brow with the already damp and wrinkled handkerchief that he had been wringing in his hands. “She’s a real tomboy, but she’s my daughter. I love her more than anything. I want her to find happiness…for her sake and for my late wife’s.”

The baron squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them with an expression of resolve. His eyes, so similar to Fiona’s, fixed on Giles, and Giles returned his determined look.

“Lord Lowell,” said Baron Clayburn, “I have taught Fiona nothing about what it takes to marry upward. You two are ill-matched, and signs of this will show in time. I just… I don’t want my daughter to suffer.”

Giles searched for words to offer him. His heart protested the news that Fiona’s father did not see a future for them, but his courtship with Fiona was, in every way, a charade. The baron’s worries were needless, but Giles could not tell him so, and as painfully clear as Fiona’s father’s concern was, it felt wrong to simply tell him everything would be all right.

“P-please forgive my imprudence,” the baron stammered. “I cannot find a single fault in you, my lord. I am an unworthy father, but I wish for my daughter to find happiness within her means.”

Giles was quiet for a moment. “I can see that Miss Fiona is deeply loved,” he said finally. When the baron refused to back down even after apologizing for his ill-considered words, Giles saw, for the first time, a strong spirit in him. Though Giles was much younger, he outranked Baron Clayburn, but the baron had stood up to Giles for his daughter’s sake. If that didn’t make him a good father, what did?

If our positions were reversed, he thought, *would my father go so far to protect me?* He shook off the sudden doubt; it was

meaningless. *Giles, why are you being so childish?*

All his life, Giles had been told that he was not enough. To his parents, he was an heir to the earldom, nothing more. Giles had convinced himself that he didn't mind that; Richard and everyone else in his circle faced similar circumstances. But…

In his heart, which had long since given up on hope, a vision of the touching reunion between Prime Minister Talbot and his daughter emerged. Only when Fiona came into Giles's life did he realize that every relationship he had before his fake courtship with her was based on nothing but mutual benefit. This was true of his parents and even his former fiancée.

He never saw his busy father unless he had an appointment. When they did see each other, it was only for the time necessary to conduct business. His mother nagged incessantly that he take a bride, and he had developed a habit of avoiding her because of that.

Fiona approached people and things not with suspicion but with an innocent interest and curiosity. Giles envied her for that. It was not at all aristocratic, but it was proof that she had a healthy upbringing.

At the same time, he could not forget the events of the previous night. *Being too trusting of others is a problem in its own right…*

It tormented him that Fiona, that vulnerable girl, always teetered so close to danger, yet Giles was the only one who was upset by it. He had tried to teach her through example that she should be cautious, but when he backed her into a corner, Fiona, nervous, still chose trust over rejection. When she told Giles she wouldn't have let anyone else into her room but him, there was nothing he could say to argue with her.

Her soft hair, fresh from the bath… Her lustrous, delicate neck… The scent of an unfamiliar soap on her skin…

Her lips brushing his cheek when they parted.

In the past, the ladies at parties shamelessly shoving their exposed skin in his face made him feel nothing but disgust. So why—?

“Um, L-Lord Lowell?”

“Pardon me,” Giles said. He had fallen silent, suppressing the waves of emotion that threatened to resurface. He coughed lightly to throw the flustered baron off the scent. Pulling himself back to the present, Giles stared at the man who sat across from him—the very reason he and Fiona had teamed up in the first place.

Fiona agreed to Rick’s proposal of a fake courtship because she didn’t want to be tied down to her house by marriage or social obligation.

If you clipped a bird’s wings and locked her in a cage so she couldn’t soar free in the sky, you would surely hurt her.

“I understand your concerns, and they’re valid,” Giles said, finally responding to the baron. “That’s all I can say at present.”

To a young lady like Fiona, who expanded both her knowledge and network through her own hard work, Giles bore no greater significance than a rock on the side of the road. If they were ill-matched, it was because Giles did not deserve *her*.

“D-do forgive me, truly,” the baron fumbled.

“Lord Russel and I will lead the charge in settling the matter of the letters. I know you must be concerned, but please trust me when I say that I will do everything in my power to ensure that no harm comes to your family.”

“Thank you. I am in your hands.” Again, Baron Clayburn bowed at the waist.

With a nod, Giles turned and left the drawing room behind him.

He made his way to the entrance hall, where he encountered Hans, who was carrying a small suitcase. It probably contained some personal effects that Fiona had requested. Giles had told her that his godmother would provide everything she needed, but he’d heard that she requested a few sentimental items like her favorite pen and letter set.

“Hans—”

But before Giles could call out to him, he was interrupted by a voice from the opposite end of the hall. “Hans, wait! Bring this to

my sister as well."

It was Fiona's little sister, Cecilia. She entered the hall with a delicate spring in her step. Giles and Cecilia had been introduced during one of his many visits to the house, but she was shy and introverted, so they had yet to exchange any words beyond simple greetings. Fiona once told Giles that Cecilia's hair and eyes—brighter in color than Fiona's—had come from her mother. Fiona and Cecilia's facial structures were different, but they did have a sororal energy about them.

"This, my lady?" Hans asked.

Cecilia was holding out a stuffed white bunny. When Hans hesitated to take it from her, she shoved it even harder in his direction. "I'm sure she'll feel lonely without it."

A young man approached Cecilia then. "Cecilia, you're making Hans uncomfortable."

Norman Hayes. *I didn't know he was here,* Giles thought. Norman was to be Baron Clayburn's heir, and he was also an old friend of Fiona and Cecilia. He was giving Cecilia a friendly smile.

"But Norman—"

"It's not Fiona that's lonely. It's you."

"But I'm not—oh!" Blushing, Cecilia looked up at Norman, then gasped when she caught sight of Giles behind him. She murmured awkwardly, "Um, H-Hans, please."

Without another word, she gave an awkward curtsy and retreated into the back. Fiona had told Giles that her little sister was sturdy despite her young years, but Cecilia's lack of experience around anyone beyond her family was vividly clear.

Norman watched Cecilia scurry away, then turned to Giles. "Do excuse me, Lord Lowell. Allow me to apologize on Cecilia's behalf."

"No matter. I'm sorry I startled her."

"That's very gracious of you. In all honesty, she's been a bit out of sorts since last night."

"Is it her health?"

Hans, exchanging a glance with Norman, filled in the rest. “No, my lord. This was Miss Fiona’s first night away from home, so Miss Cecilia was anxious.”

As Cecilia’s surrogate mother, Fiona had never spent a night away from home, fearing for her frail little sister.

It was not unusual for children of the nobility to have few interactions with family from a very early age, but in a world where many homes left childrearing to wet nurses and tutors, the Clayburn sisters had been brought up close.

With a glance at the door through which Cecilia had retreated, then another at the white stuffed rabbit, Hans murmured, “But Miss Cecilia will come of age next year. This might be just the thing for her. This time next year, Miss Fiona might be… no longer at this house.”

“That’s for sure.”

The lack of hesitation in Norman’s reply demonstrated how close his bond with Fiona was. That Giles’s and Fiona’s courtship was a sham was, of course, a secret to both of these men, so there was no need for Giles to feel alienated—yet for some reason, he found himself unamused.

“Aren’t you going to go after her?” Giles asked, indicating with a glance the door Cecilia had gone through.

“Yes, I believe I shall, if you’ll excuse me,” Norman replied. “Hans, tell Fiona not to worry about Cecilia, okay?”

“As you wish, sir.”

The Clayburn townhouse was not all that spacious, and the voices of Norman and Cecilia drifted through the open window from outside. Norman’s formal tone quickly relaxed into something soft and familiar.

“Guess we should head out as well,” Giles said finally.

“Yes, sir.”

With that, Giles set out to return to the Heyward estate, a suitcase- and bunny-laden Hans in tow.

Chapter 5:
The Opera House

EARLY IN THE morning, Fiona received a knock on her bedroom door. She rubbed her eyes, swollen and deprived of sleep thanks to everything that had happened with Giles the night before, and sat up in bed. She looked at the clock, surmised that the knock was likely an invitation to breakfast, smoothed her hair, and opened her mouth to answer—

Oh, that's right. I'm supposed to be careful. Wait, how do I do that, exactly?

Giles told her not to carelessly let anyone into her room, but the door to her room had no peephole or window. Besides, even if she could see the face of the person calling on her, she didn't recognize any of the servants at that mansion; she wouldn't notice if they were an intruder.

During the few seconds it took her sleepy, sluggish brain to falter, the visitor knocked again, seemingly short on patience. The knock was followed by a woman's beautiful voice.

"Fiona? It's me. It's Miranda!"

Miranda... What?!

She nearly tripped on her way out of bed as she ran to the door. Flustered, she opened it to see Giles's queenly elder sister—Miranda, the Marchioness of Colet. Surrounded by maids, she was beautiful as always, not a hair out of place nor a wrinkle on her dress. She looked as if she had stepped straight out of a fashion catalogue. Miranda flashed a blindingly bright smile at Fiona, who blinked dumbly.

"*So*, they filled me in on a lot of the details, but never mind that. Let's get you ready!"

"Um... Uh... Lady Colet—"

"Call me Miranda, darling. No pleasantries. I'll explain later. Oh dear, have you not slept? Well, I don't blame you after the day

you had yesterday. Ladies, it's time for you to let your talents shine. Do your absolute best!"

"Er—wha—eek!"

As Miranda entered the room, her maids swarmed Fiona. Before Fiona she knew what was happening, she was stripped of her nightgown. As she blinked in confusion, a cold towel wiped her face, her corset was cinched, and she was shoved through every other step in the morning routine.

What in the world is going on here? Fiona thought. She wanted an explanation but sensed that Miranda's mood wouldn't allow for one, so she bit her tongue.

Her day dress, though it did not expose much skin, was of a very womanly design—nothing like the sorts of dresses that Fiona had worn before. It gave her a different flair than anything Mrs. Bennett's shop offered, and Miranda explained in a playful tone that it was from Maison, the shop she patronized.

"It's one of my dresses, but it's been altered and redesigned so thoroughly that nobody would ever know it was a hand-me-down. Ah, yes, I think we can take her waist in another finger's width."

"As you wish, Lady Colet."

The dress was assembled on Fiona as perfectly as if it were tailor-made for her. Miranda, sitting on the sofa and enjoying a cup of tea, commanded her maids to do Fiona's hair and makeup as well. By the time everything was finished, the sun was quite high in the sky.

"Oh my! Not too shabby, if I do say so myself!"

"Ooh, she looks lovely."

As Miranda grinned in approval, the Marchioness of Heyward, who had slipped in at some point without Fiona noticing, clapped her hands and smiled in support.

Since she had been plunged into a vortex of beautification almost the moment she woke up, it was only then that Fiona got her first look in the mirror.

Who... Who in God's name is that?!

She was at a loss for words. Somebody she didn't recognize stared back at her from the mirror, wearing a blue-gray dress made of chiffon that danced down the body in elegant lines. It was accented from the top with delicate lace and embroidery, lending it a striking elegance. But it wasn't only the clothes that made Fiona doubt her eyes; her flawless yet natural-looking makeup hid all traces of her sleepless night, and thanks to the abundant oil that had been rubbed into her hair the night before, her usually flat hair sparkled with a vibrant luster.

What she saw in the mirror was, without a doubt, the daughter of a noble house in the top of the peerage. Even at a palace ball, she would not belong with the other wallflowers.

"Um, can you explain why…"

"Darling, you really shine with makeup, don't you? Took me right by surprise, you did."

Fiona always considered herself rather plain in the face, but when the maids of a marchioness got their hands on her, she could become anything. The maid in charge of her makeup looked thoroughly satisfied with her work, smiling and bobbing her head at Miranda's praise.

"You can learn to do this to yourself, dear," Miranda assured Fiona. "I'll give you all the supplies we used on you today. Heed my advice and use it daily."

"Pardon?"

Fiona looked at the row of cosmetics splayed out on her dresser and panicked. In part, she was horrified to receive such an expensive gift, but she also knew there was no way she could learn how to use it all.

Before she could politely decline, however, Miranda and the Marchioness of Heyward stood up. Miranda said, "If we're all ready, then let us depart!"

The Marchioness of Heyward giggled. "Ooh, the opera! It's been ages. I can't wait."

The opera?

Giles had firmly advised her only hours before not to set foot outside. Thinking that perhaps the ladies did not know about this, Fiona chanced an explanation. “Um, Lady Colet, I’m not supposed to—”

“*Miranda*. I told you to call me Miranda, dear,” said the lady in question, steamrolling Fiona with a gaze that spoke volumes. A beautiful woman’s glare was intimidating on a level no one else could hope to reach. Miranda certainly was Giles’s sister.

Fiona fumbled to reply. “E-excuse me, Miranda, but I’ve been advised to limit my excursions outside, so—”

“Oh, I know about that. It’s all right, though; you’re with me.”

“Yes, but—”

“We must hurry, or it’ll start without us. I’ve so wanted to see the matinee today! Say, Fiona, is it true that you and Giles have been to the opera?”

“Yes, just the other week.”

“The Bancroft family seats give you a great view of the stage, but today we’ll be in the Heyward box, and it’s in the center of the theater.” Fiona gave Miranda a confused look. She smirked. “From there, we will have a nice view of the Lu Lec fresco ceiling painting.”

The ceiling of the opera house was covered in a beautiful painting. The Bancroft seats Giles had taken her to offered her a perfect view of the stage, but due to the walls and the angles of the chandeliers around the seats, her view of the ceiling paintings left much to be desired.

“What’s more, it’s attached to the Heyward exclusive salon,” Miranda said. “I would say the view of the Selene tapestry is not to be missed.” The tapestry in question was a very important piece that had escaped the flaming destruction of the war. It was hung in an area with restricted access, so Fiona had never laid eyes on the real thing.

I get to be up close and personal with a Lu Lec! And the Selene Tapestry!

Fiona's eyes sparkled in spite of herself. Miranda and the Marchioness of Heyward swooped in on either side of her, each taking a hand. "To the opera!" Miranda crowed.

The next thing Fiona knew, she was in a carriage.

The opera house was crowded with guests for the matinee. They parked their carriage in the Heyward spot and stepped out of it as a porter jumped to their side to escort them in. As they walked through the lush lobby with its big marble staircase, everyone around them stopped and stared. Nobody spoke to them directly, though, likely out of respect for the Marchionesses of Heyward and Colet.

Just a hunch… No, it's more than a hunch. They're staring at me.

When a whispered phrase—"It's her!"—and the word "rumors" reached her ears, she knew she wasn't mistaken. Unlike the cruel gossip she had encountered thus far, however, none of the whispered words that reached her ears now contained anything but praise and approval. She was still the same young lady as before; it was shocking how their reactions turned on a dime just because she looked different.

Something about it didn't sit right with her, but once they arrived at their box, Fiona found herself unable to focus on anything but the ornate colors above her head.

"Magnificent view, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes. Incredibly."

"You can have a nice, leisurely look at it after the performance begins. Why don't we all get something to drink first?"

Fiona was breathless, her head in the clouds, but she was given only a fleeting moment to admire the ceiling painting. All too quickly, she was whisked away into the salon that accompanied the box.

Fortunately, the salon was where the beautiful tapestry was kept. As Fiona marveled over the elaborate weaving and partook of a beverage before the performance, Miranda, who had been in a fervor over the matinee, dropped her voice.

“Sorry I was so pushy. I just wanted to thank you. I’ve begged Giles many times, but he wouldn’t introduce us.”

“R-really?”

Fiona had no idea. In all likelihood, Giles was hesitant to introduce Fiona to anyone else so that their fake courtship wouldn’t be discovered. Besides, Fiona herself couldn’t look past the redpoll fiasco with Gordon. But Miranda had brought her out to the opera personally to thank Fiona for saving her the embarrassment of buying a counterfeit painting.

Miranda winked a blue-gray eye that matched Giles’s, the corners of her heart-shaped lips lifting in an elegant smile. “Well, that’s my cover story. If I befriend you, I just might get a chance to own a genuine Raymond, mightn’t I?”

“Ooh, that sounds lovely,” the Marchioness of Heyward chimed in. “I do hope you can share some of your good fortune with me.”

Fiona couldn’t help but smile at the openhearted way in which they spoke. Just as the atmosphere relaxed, Fiona felt a firm tug on her arm.

“Besides, you’re the lady my little brother fancies. Of course I’m curious to see what you’re like.”

“Miranda?”

“I want details! Tell me everything about your romance, from your fated encounter to the present!”

There was nowhere to run or hide in the salon. With an adamant Miranda on one side, and a mirthful Marchioness of Heyward on the other, Fiona had no escape. “Uh… Well…”

“I, too, would love to hear more,” the Marchioness of Heyward chimed in. “Fiona here is so shy, she wouldn’t give me any details.”

“See? Godmother wants to hear it too.”

“Um… Well, you probably…know everything there is to know…” The story of Fiona’s romance with Giles was the talk of the town; that should have been all there was to know. Unfortunately, Fiona’s flustered tone only further tickled Miranda’s curiosity.

“All right then, what about that evening at the celebration of the prince’s birth? Rumor has it that the moment you met in the garden, you ran passionately into each other’s arms. Is that true?”

Um, that’s kind of completely not how it happened?!

Caroline had pushed her, and Giles caught her before she could fall. Fiona supposed one could describe her epic stumble as “passionate,” but it was far from the truth. She knew rumors had a way of mutating, but she was floored by just how much her own rumor had changed.

“Um, it was an accident,” Fiona clarified.

“So it *was* true! So, that next day in the park, what were you two talking about? They say you were so deep in conversation that you didn’t even notice anything else around you.”

“Oh my, oh my, how intimate.”

Fiona couldn’t exactly say they were drawing up their fake courtship scheme. She desperately racked her brain for something that wasn’t technically a lie. “We were talking about…our families and what we did for work.”

“*Oh*. Are you sure you weren’t setting a wedding date?”

“Oh my! When is the happy day?”

“W-wedding date?!” Fiona waved a hand in protest. Miranda grabbed it out of the air and stared critically at Fiona’s ring.

“I mean, just look at this ring. It’s a *Harriet*.”

“Yes, indeed…”

“Now, the Bancroft family patronizes many different jewelers, but Harriet is the best of them all.”

Miranda went on to explain that the earl patronized that shop only when purchasing special, custom-made jewelry for his wife on their anniversaries. When she assured Fiona that Giles would have bought a ring from a simpler store had she been an ordinary sweetheart, Fiona almost had a fainting spell.

“We just happened to walk by,” she explained. “And Lord Giles might not know of any other shops.”

The Marchioness of Heyward giggled.

“Good. Nice one,” Miranda said. “That’s the story we’ll go with. Now, what about the rumor of the two of you feeding each other at the tearoom?”

Miranda’s avalanche of questions was ruthless, and the Marchioness of Heyward’s eyes gleamed with anticipation. Fiona felt her consciousness slipping into the ether.

“W-we did no such thing…”

“I heard you two were having quite a fun time together.”

Fiona opened her mouth to deny it ever happened, then abruptly remembered something.

Wait a minute…

No, we didn’t do it. We would never do something as embarrassing as feed each other.

However…

“There…was a moment when I removed some pastry crumbs from his cheek. Perhaps it merely *looked* like I was feeding him?”

The dessert, which was recommended to them by the tearoom staff, had a name Fiona had never heard of before. It was a tart with soft, crumbly crust; its delicate flavor paired well with tea, but it made an awful mess. Fiona assumed the tarts were ordinarily made smaller so they could be consumed in one bite. She smirked as she remembered how silly she felt, sitting before the beautiful plate filled with elegantly arranged tarts and destroying them with her fork.

Without knowing what the tarts even were, Giles had copied Fiona and ordered some for himself, but as expected, they proved difficult to eat cleanly. There were crumbs stuck to the corners of his mouth. Fiona could have just told him so, but instead, she had innocently reached out to his mouth, like she would have done for Cecilia or Norman.

I think I remember Giles was startled by that. Huh, I guess people would assume I was feeding him. Lesson learned—wait, wrong takeaway!

Thinking back even harder, she remembered the sound of cutlery clanking to the tables around them in that moment. Realizing those other patrons were likely all under the same misapprehension as Miranda, Fiona was so mortified that her face whitened rather than blushed.

“Are you sure?” Miranda pressed her.

“O-of course I’m sure!”

“Oh *my*. You don’t need to be ashamed, dear. I often fed my husband by hand when we were young. I would say, ‘Here, darling, say ahh.’”

“Oh, Godmother, you scamp.”

“Hee hee hee! I just loved the way he frowned at me when I did that.”

Fiona had met the marquess for the first time the previous night. He was a dignified man with a stern face. The idea of teasing such an intimidating man horrified Fiona, but she had no trouble imagining the marchioness doing it.



“Let’s see, what *else*…”

They’re not finished?!

As their interrogation pushed Fiona’s heart closer to out-and-out panic, the salon door opened without a knock, bringing the terrifying yet cheerful conversation to an abrupt halt. Fiona whirled around in surprise to find Giles, out of breath by the door.

“Sister! What is the meaning of this?!” Giles marched right up to Miranda—he didn’t even seem to register Fiona and his godmother—and stood menacingly before her.

He… He’s really angry! Fiona thought.

His chiseled face was so puffed with rage that it scared her a little, but Miranda seemed completely unperturbed.

“You’re late. I thought the opera would start without you.”

Having caught his breath, he demanded, “Where’s Fiona?”

“Right there.”

“Huh?” Giles whirled around and looked at the seats he had just walked past. Finally noticing Fiona there, beautified and adorned by Miranda and her professionals, Giles was clearly stunned and at a loss for what to say or do. “Fiona…?”

“S-sorry.” Fiona’s first priority was to apologize for getting him out of the house so early after keeping him up so late the previous night. As she looked down and stammered an apology, however, Giles offered a fumbling response.

“Oh, um, it’s all right,” he said awkwardly, apparently searching for the right words. “You…startled me.”

He exhaled deeply in what was surely relief to find her safe. He was a man of duty. When Fiona looked up, she found that Giles had walked quite close to her—now it was her turn to be startled. She opened her mouth, knowing she had to say something, but Miranda cut her off.

“Well, if you need us, we’ll be in the Colet box. You two should stay here for the opera.”

“Sister?”

“We’ll share a carriage home. Fiona, dear, we shall see you later.”

Fiona jumped to her feet. “L-Lady Miranda!”

With a coy smile at Fiona, Miranda took the Marchioness of Heyward’s hand and whisked her away. Fiona stared dumbly at them as they disappeared behind the door. Then, sensing eyes on her, she turned around to meet Giles’s hard gaze.

“Um, Lord Gi—”

“Fiona—”

We spoke at the same time! She felt like something similar had happened before, but this wasn’t exactly the sort of atmosphere that encouraged laughing it off. Instead, they both awkwardly yielded the floor.

“G-go ahead,” Fiona said.

“No, you first…”

H-how am I supposed to talk in these conditions?! Fiona thought. Where had all this tension come from? There were so many possibilities, Fiona was taxed to pick just one.

Fearing that she would run her mouth and say something strange, Fiona elected to begin with what was clearly the most difficult topic. “I made you a promise not to go out, and I broke it.”

“No, that’s all right,” he assured her. “There was no way you could have refused my sister and godmother.”

“But I…got seduced by the ceiling painting.”

“Did you, now?” Giles chuckled under his breath; Fiona’s remorseful honesty was so like her. “I remember you were upset last time because the ceiling was too far away.”

“It was a v-very lovely opera.”

“But you wanted a better look at the painting.”

“Well, I… Yes, sir.”

The Bancroft box was close to the stage. Fiona could see the expressions of the performers without opera glasses, and the music and performance were lovely. It was a luxury for Fiona, who

seldom had the opportunity to see live theater, and she had no complaints. She had let her true feelings slip at one point, however, and Giles had picked up on that.

As Fiona hung her head in shame, Giles reached out a hand. “Well, since we’re here, let’s have a look.”

“Lord Giles, aren’t you too busy for this?”

“Well… I’ll be fine.”

Fiona knew just how many irons Giles had in the fire. She also knew that he was too chivalrous to take the out she offered him.

The bell rang beyond the door, letting the patrons know it was almost time for curtains. She obediently laid her hand in his, and they left the salon together.

The seating in the box was not spacious. Not unlike balcony seating, it was tucked behind a railing parallel to the stage and contained three one-person seats with no spaces between them, plus a small sofa behind them. The seats and sofa were all upholstered in the same smooth, wine-red velvet, and they looked cozy to sit in. Fiona sat in neither, though, instead heading straight for the railing to look up at the painting on the ceiling. Giles watched her from the side, satisfied, as her eyes sparkled and she sighed in awe.

“I had a little glance at it when we first got here, but…oh, it truly is magnificent.”

The vibrantly colorful painting expanded in a circular pattern with the gigantic chandelier at its center. It was a painting of the heavens. Upon clouds floating in the blue sky, goddesses and angels strummed their harps, sang, and danced in a peaceful reverie. She could almost hear the music they played; it was the perfect piece for an opera house.

She clasped her hands at her chest in prayer and gazed dreamily up at the painting, blissfully unaware of all the attention she was attracting from the other guests in the opera house. Giles warded off their meddlesome gazes by putting an arm around Fiona’s shoulder and steering her away as the overture began to echo through the house.

“Let’s sit.”

“All right. I know where I’m going!” Fiona twirled on her heel and headed not for the seats up front but for the sofa in the back.

Giles’s expression grew perplexed. “But you can’t see the stage from there.”

Fiona smiled angelically. “But I can see the ceiling. And while I do feel bad for ignoring the performers, I already saw this opera recently. I also think it would be best not to draw attention to myself from the stage or the house.” Fiona lowered her voice and explained, “It would be rude to nod off in plain sight.”

“Are you sleepy?”

“I thought *you* might appreciate a little nap.”

“Me?”

“You seem tired.”

He must have raced his carriage here, she thought, *then run up that long flight of stairs to catch up with us.* Giles was up late every night, not just the night before. His schedule was packed right down to the minute, and between dealing with Fiona and those letters, she knew he had to be even busier than usual.

“But…I didn’t come here to take a nap,” he protested.

“I know. You came here out of worry for me, and I appreciate that.” She sat on the sofa and patted the spot beside her.

With a sheepish smirk, Giles sat. The sofa was barely suitable for two, so by necessity, they sat close to one another. When the opera began, they lowered their voices to talk.

“Still, I think you deserve a little rest,” Fiona insisted.

“But—”

“Come, nobody can see us.”

When they sank into the low-set sofa, they couldn’t see the stage very well, but that meant nobody in the audience could see them either. Miranda had insisted to her maids and the opera house staff that the trio of ladies would be just fine watching the

opera alone, so the box was unattended. They could nap, play cards, or do whatever they pleased, and nobody would bat an eye.

The surprise was likely distressing for Giles, but Fiona wanted to help him use the unexpected reprieve he had been given wisely.

"It's not often that you get to fall asleep to the soothing sounds of a live orchestra. Shall I join in and sing with them?"

"Sing an aria?"

"I often sang to my little sister." When she was burning up with a fever and couldn't get out of bed, Fiona had sung a number of arias at Cecilia's request. He may not have looked it, but their father was a music lover who had taught his daughters a wealth of songs from an early age. Fiona's voice was not as polished as a professional's, but singing someone a lullaby was a piece of cake for her. "You won't be able to lie down, but just closing your eyes for a while will make a huge difference, I promise."

There was a pause, and then Giles said, "All right."

Yes! I win!

Fiona cheered silently. It was not often that she succeeded in convincing anyone of anything. With a resigned smile, Giles filled Fiona in on what had happened before he came to the opera house. When Fiona heard that he had met with her father at the Clayburn estate first, she was anxious.

"Don't worry, your father graciously agreed to leave you in the marchioness's care."

"Oh, good. Thank you for everything."

"Then when Hans and I arrived at the Marchioness of Heyward's home, we heard that my sister had been there and whisked you off somewhere. Ah, yes—Hans brought the things you asked for, then I sent him back home. What about you, Fiona?"

"I spent all morning getting dressed. Um, I should give the credit to the maids—they did all the work."

It was a very chaotic affair. When Fiona complained to Giles that she had never been cinched so tightly in a corset before, he

chuckled and nodded. “I didn’t recognize you at first, but you are definitely still Fiona inside.”

Um… How am I supposed to interpret that?

In her current beautified and adorned state, even Fiona felt she was a hundred times worthier of walking beside Giles, but that didn’t seem to be quite what Giles was saying. “Do you prefer me like this?”

Her current appearance was an exception. Her lips and eyelids were not darkly colored, nor her face powdered white, but she looked noticeably different—a true testament to the skills of a professional. If anyone demanded her hair and dress be the same tomorrow, she would find it a difficult feat to accomplish. *But if he says I seem more like a proper sweetheart for him this way,* she thought, *I’ll have no choice but to try…*

“It was startling to see you like this, and you do look pretty.”

“Oh! Oh, um… I look pretty?”

That was not the answer she was expecting. She wasn’t accustomed to receiving such compliments, and it made her feel funny inside. Suddenly, just sitting beside him on a sofa felt uncomfortable.

She awkwardly turned her head away from him, but she soon felt Giles’s fingers slide through her cloud of pompadoured hair. Next to her trembling shoulder, a pair of grayish-blue eyes gazed softly at her. Only then did she notice her dress was the same color as his eyes.

“I like you as you are, Fiona,” Giles said.

There was a tentativeness in his tone, as if something were left unspoken, but then the first aria of the opera drowned his voice out. Silence fell between them, and flashbacks of the night prior bombarded Fiona’s mind.

The two of them in the dimly-lit bedroom—alone.

Her hand pinned to the wall but not gripped hard enough to cause pain or leave a mark. Yet she couldn’t push it away…because she was overwhelmed.

Neither of them had breathed a word about Giles's hair brushing against her cheek, nor her lips against his cheek. His hand left her hair and he draped his arm along the back of the sofa. Then, just as he did the night before, Giles brought his face close to Fiona's neck.

"Um, Lord Gi—"

"New perfume?"

His voice was barely above a rumbling whisper, but hearing it at her ear sent shivers down her spine. She wasn't afraid, but her heartbeat was oddly tumultuous. "Y-yes. It's Miranda's."

Giles inhaled deeply, then exhaled long and hard. "That is the only thing I want you to change back."

With a quiet moan, Fiona stammered, "Oh. All right." She felt the floral scent paired well with her ensemble that day, but still, even Fiona felt more like herself in her usual daily scent. Breathless, she added, "In the care package from Hans…there should be an eau de toilette that smells of flowers that bloom near the snowmelt…"

Giles turned his attention back to the stage and retrieved the pocket watch from his jacket. The watch, which fit perfectly in the palm in his hand, originally belonged to Fiona. He checked the time, snapped the lid shut, and tucked it back into his pocket. Fiona watched every move intently, right down to the way he patted the pocket to ensure it was there.

"My watch… You carry it everywhere you go?"

Fiona's eyes were wide with surprise, but when Giles replied, his tone was matter of fact. "Yes."

But doesn't he have much finer watches he could carry?

She had given Giles the watch and he had given her a ring in lieu of a contract, but he didn't have to trouble himself by carrying it around. Fiona, by contrast, had to wear her ring every day so that others could see it; in a way, it was a prop for their little show.

Miranda's words popped into her mind: "I mean, just look at this ring. It's a Harriet." A heavy weight on her shoulder, however, quickly dispelled the thought. She looked to see Giles's head

resting there. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing quietly and evenly. *I knew it,* she thought. *He's exhausted.*

He fell asleep much more quickly than she had anticipated. It made her feel both guilty and giddy—a bizarre feeling. She watched his chest rise and fall peacefully several times before a yawn escaped her own mouth.

That's right. I didn't sleep much last night either.

She closed her eyes for what was meant to be a short while, but sleep wasted no time in waving its hand over her. With the beautiful ceiling painting floating behind closed eyelids, and the soothing sounds of the orchestra blanketing them, the couple cuddled up close and fell into dreamland.

Fiona's eyes shot open to the soprano's shrill solo. *Ah! Uh-oh, was I out for a long time?*

She blinked her eyes open and focused on the music. The aria she was listening to closed the first act. Relieved that not much time had passed, she looked to her side…and found Giles fast asleep with his head on her shoulder. She worried the position might give him a stiff neck, but he didn't look uncomfortable.

The first act is almost over, she thought. *Maybe I should wake him.* But even when she gently brushed the fringe of hair out of Giles's eyes, he didn't so much as flinch.

People were expected to get up at intermission to socialize, but he looked so cozy that Fiona thought she might let him stay asleep. Deciding this, she returned her focus to the stage. This was an aria Cecilia loved, one that Fiona knew well and sang often. The melody was so nostalgic that she absentmindedly hummed along.

As she sang quietly, she felt the weight lift from her shoulder.

"…Mmm…"

Oh no. Did I wake him?

Giles sleepily pawed at her left shoulder, as if in search of something, and Fiona cupped his hand in hers. "That song," he

mumbled eventually.

“I’m sorry. My singing must have bothered you.”

“No… You…”

Giles was probably not completely awake. He was murmuring with his eyes closed, and the orchestra muffled his words, though Fiona thought she was more than close enough to hear what he was saying.

She sat there, uncertain what to do, when her ears managed to catch him saying her name. “Yes?” she said. “I’m here.”

Giles’s hand slid down her cheek to around her neck and gripped her firmly. The space between them, already minuscule, became even tinier. Giles leaned in close to her, his mouth gravitating toward her voice and then pressing softly to the lips from which it had emerged.

It lasted only a few seconds. Giles’s lips pressed tenderly to Fiona’s, then pulled away reluctantly. His eyelids trembled, then slowly opened. Deep in the box, safe from the prying eyes of everyone around them, his grayish-blue eyes softened as he smiled.

In that moment, he looked more fulfilled, more blissful than anyone Fiona had ever seen. His earnest gaze reflected Fiona—only her.

Then his eyelids fell shut again, and his head landed on Fiona’s shoulder with a thud. His hand flopped down from her cheek, and his quiet, even breathing resumed.

Wh… Why did he…?!

Her heart clamored along with the aria’s climax. It was deafening. She could not comprehend the weight on her shoulder, nor the warmth of the hand that had fallen into her lap. Unable to bear looking at him, her gaze fled to the ceiling for refuge, where it was greeted by the goddesses—but all the awe and wonder she had felt gazing up at the painting before was now gone without a trace.

“Oh no…”

Her heart tormented with confusion, she dropped her gaze. The gleaming ring on her clutched hand shone at her.

Uh-oh… I'm in trouble…

Those eyes… That smile… They were sinful. They spoke with more eloquence than words ever could.

All this time, she had turned a blind eye—to his heat, pressed against her in that moment; to his weight; to his breath. To the fluttering in her heart.

I can't, she thought. *This is all a charade, and it must end eventually.*



They were to pretend to be lovers until the end of the season. That was their arrangement. Someday, Giles would meet a good match, and Fiona had her own dreams. Dreams that were now almost within her reach.

She returned her gaze to the stage, where the first act was reaching to its climax: the lovers breaking apart.

Giles fell asleep right after he kissed me, so I'm sure he won't remember anything. Everything will be all right. I can pretend it never happened.

It…never happened. As long as Fiona acted that way.

With uncertain fingers, she touched her tightly pressed lips and made herself relax them. The sigh that escaped her mouth when she did so was bafflingly sultry, and she felt pressure at the backs of her eyes.

I have to forget about it, she thought. To calm her trembling lips, she sang the final line of the aria along with the soprano. The tune was sweet and sorrowful, soaring gently through the air.

A mere moment's respite—that was the only gift her tem porary lover gave her. During the matinee, the door to the Heyward box did not open once.

Giles finally woke near the end of the final act. He righted himself, lifting his head from Fiona's shoulder, and batted his eyes open.

"Sorry. I must've been heavy. Please don't tell me I slept through the whole thing?" Giles sat up to his full height and looked at the stage. "You've got to be kidding me," he muttered.

Fiona answered him crisply. "Yes, you were fast asleep the whole time."

"I didn't wake up once?"

"Not once."

Giles scrutinized Fiona's face to determine if she was telling the truth. For a moment, whether out of puzzlement or anxiety, Fiona thought she saw his gaze fall to her lips, but she mustered

every bit of will she had to convince herself she had imagined it. *It's all right,* she told herself, *nothing happened. We're all right!*

When Giles fell asleep for the second time, she had carefully wiped her lipstick off his mouth without waking him from his deep slumber. Even had he been faintly conscious, his memory would have been so hazy that he would think it was a dream. She would make sure of that; if she didn't, their relationship would cease to be an act.

"Actually, I dozed off myself," Fiona said, smiling with everything she had. She intended to close the sale by saying what a luxurious nap it was, but Giles softly nodded, as if to strike all doubts away.

"Yes. So you did."

"I suppose this sofa was a bit too small for you," Fiona said apologetically. "Your neck doesn't hurt, I hope?"

"I'm all right." Giles touched his shoulder and exhaled deeply from his chest. The opera had just ended, and the house echoed with raucous applause and cheers. "I didn't intend to sleep, but I feel quite refreshed now."

"Glad to hear it. Are you going back to work after this?"

"I suppose so. Maybe I'll swing by parliament…"

As Giles talked through his afternoon plans, he stood and offered Fiona his hand. If they stayed until the curtain call, the lobby would be dreadfully crowded, so they would leave early to avoid that. Knowing that she would receive just as much attention as she had when she arrived—more, in fact, now that Giles was with her—Fiona had no reason to argue. She took his hand and turned to get one last look.

Maybe it was because of the relentless cheering and applause, but the lush, heavenly scene above them had regained its former magic. *It's beautiful again,* Fiona thought. *Thank goodness.* Deep in her heart, she was grateful to see its beauty restored.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Giles asked her.

"Yes. I experienced a lifetime's worth of joy today."

“Oh, there’s no need to exaggerate.”

Giles chuckled, but unlike him, Fiona could not come to the opera whenever she pleased. She could attend the performance itself, of course, but this was her first and last opportunity to view it from the luxury box.

“Right,” Giles said, “about Rudolph—he’s going to demonstrate his painting skills in the gallery tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll have to be there.”

“Yes. I’ll drive you. Wait for me at my godmother’s.” This was said in a tone a parent might use to deliver a stern warning to a rambunctious little child. His eyes narrowed, filling with their former mischievous gleam. “Try not to jump out the second-floor window, please.”

“I-I’ll do no such thing!” She would never do something so reckless in a house where she was allowed to walk out the front door.

Oh, Fiona, you have only yourself to blame for this! Beautified though she was, she was still the same Fiona inside. For some reason, it made her happy that Giles was treating her no differently for her makeover.

Giles, mirthful, led her out of the box. He opened the door to find Miranda and the Marchioness of Heyward waiting for them. As he and Fiona emerged, Miranda wagged her fan menacingly at Giles.

“Giles, you silly boy! Come out at least *once* during the performance, for goodness’ sake!”

“Sister—”

“And don’t try to convince me you don’t understand how your actions are perceived by others.” Even as Miranda complained about the prying questions she had to answer on his behalf during the intermissions, however, there was a twinkle in her eye.

Why’s she—oh, no!

The box was, in essence, a secret room. When a man and woman behind its closed door failed to emerge, a few people would invariably assume that they were up to all sorts of

scandalous behavior. Such a rumor was not very welcome for Giles—and even less so for Fiona, an unmarried young lady. However, although it was her head on the social chopping block, Fiona failed to worry about that.

Oh God, she thought instead, *they think we did something steamy. Well, I can't say we didn't, but I'm not allowed to acknowledge that, and Giles was asleep anyway.* Of course, when it came to proper decorum at the opera house, one wouldn't exactly call napping through the entire show commendable either.

Miranda's fists shot to her hips in an aggravated huff. "Good gracious! Here I was hoping you two were sharing an intimate canoodle, and now I discover you were only *napping*?"

Giles shot her a warning glare. "Peeping? That's fine behavior for a lady, *dear sister*."

The door that connected the box to the salon was inlaid with a round glass window, the sort you might find on a ship. From there, people could see the pair of them on the sofa from behind.

"Every intermission, I came to this salon to help cover for you. You should thank me."

"Let them talk."

"*You* may be fine with it, but Fiona needed our help."

"Um, excuse me!" Fiona piped up.

Giles might have been displeased by the whole affair, but it wasn't his fault he fell asleep. Fiona cowered at the thought of Miranda keeping watch over them, but when Fiona attempted to thank her and apologize, she received only a sympathetic look.

"Sorry about that, Fiona. This big lug must have been heavy."

"Uh, actually, I also—"

"Well, it couldn't be helped. You couldn't move him, so your only recourse was to take a nap with him."

Her embarrassing behavior exposed, Fiona could do nothing but blush. She apologized again, feeling horrible that she had behaved so poorly after they'd graciously invited her, but the

marchioness just gave a leisurely laugh. “You did have an awfully early start this morning, Fiona.”

“I’m so sorry.” Fiona covered her face with her hands, feeling it redden further. She was grateful to have witnesses to her chastity, but as a daughter of nobility, this was a mortifying turn of events.

“And Giles, you naughty boy, your complexion is much improved. You must’ve had a *really* good dream.”

The marchioness’s words made Fiona’s heart jump in her rib cage, but Giles merely replied, “It’s a nightmare now.” He looked discomfited by the whole exchange, but that was all. Realizing that he truly did remember nothing, Fiona sighed, her body finally releasing its anxiety.

“Gil,” Miranda said, “my debt to you is paid now.”

“You never owed me any debt.”

“Oh my, why can’t you always be this sweet?”

“I don’t need your advice, thank you.”

Miranda glared at her little brother. “I take it back, you’re not at all sweet,” she said, and then the hall rang with her bell-like laughter.

This talk of debts and repayment confused Fiona, but the brother and sister appeared to have a good relationship. It was a relief to see them playfully jab at each other with a healthy helping of sarcasm.

Ah, that’s right. Olga told me that before Miranda married, she and Giles attended parties together. Both Giles and Miranda had attracted scores of marriage-hungry suitors; they had probably attended the parties together to avoid any hassle or misunderstandings. *I suppose his only relationships that aren’t going well are the ones with his parents.*

Giles never talked about his family. Fiona never brought up the subject, since it wasn’t her business, but on the occasions when their conversations had steered close to his parents, she was given the sense that they did not have a good relationship with their son. That was not to say that she sensed any hatred, of

course; shallow relationships between parent and child were common among the nobility.

“All right,” Miranda said, “Let’s get out of here before this place gets crowded.”

At her urging, they left the salon. They had already sent word to the porter and knew their carriage would arrive shortly. Giles intended to head straight to parliament, so this was where they would part ways.

Sensing eyes on her, Fiona looked up. Giles was looking back at her as if he wanted to say something.

“Lord Giles?”

His lips parted, hesitant, but before he could speak, a voice rang out behind him.

“Gil! There you are! Hellooo!”

“Rick?”

He turned to find Richard running toward them. Next to the carriage he’d emerged from stood a gentleman with hair much like Giles and Miranda’s. Even from a distance, his imposing air reached Fiona loud and clear. Without thinking, she straightened her posture.

A guarded look came over Giles’s face. “Father…”

“What?!”

That’s the Earl of Bancroft? Fiona thought. And unless she was mistaken, Richard, who had arrived at the same moment as the earl, looked a little apprehensive.

“Something happen, Rick?” Giles asked.

“*Weeeell*, just a little unanticipated happenstance. Oh, is that you, Miss Clayburn? My, what a surprise! How did you become such an accidental beauty while I wasn’t looking?”

“Hello, Lord Russel. Long time no—”

“Rick,” Miranda cut in with a dissatisfied stomp and a flourish of her fan, “what do you mean by accidental? Do you have c omplaints about my fashion sense?”

“Oh, uh, no. Do pardon me, Lady Colet, Lady Heyward. Um, beautiful as *always*, I see, Miss Fiona. What a pity; if you and Giles weren’t courting, I’d wine and dine you this very minute.”

Richard gracefully swooped in and kissed Fiona’s hand, offering her his customary wink. His impeccable social graces never ceased to amaze Fiona. When Richard showed no signs of releasing Fiona’s hand, however, Giles butted in between them.

“Rick. What do you want?”

“Ha ha! Easy, tiger. I still haven’t heard the details myself. The earl says he wishes to speak with you directly.”

“My father?” Giles asked dubiously.

Richard gave him a dry smirk and shrugged his shoulders. “Hey, I’m with you, man. I’d much rather share a carriage with a lovely lady than with two other men. Come on, let’s go.”

Giles sighed in resignation. “Very well. If you’ll excuse me, Godmother. And Miranda, no more headstrong nonsense from you today, please.”

“Don’t worry, we have a bodyguard.”

“That’s not the issue.”

“Oh, you worrywart. I understand what you’re getting at, so be off with you!”

As Miranda waved her fan at him, Giles turned to Fiona and said, “I’ll come pick you up tomorrow.”

“All right. I’ll be waiting.”

Fiona sensed that Giles hadn’t told her what he really wanted to say, but she smiled sweetly at him all the same. As she watched the two men hurry off, she gave a polite curtsy to Giles’s father, who had been staring at her ever since he arrived, and in time, the marchioness’s carriage rolled to a stop in front of Fiona.

This “unanticipated happenstance” business must mean the letters, Fiona mused. She’d been told that Giles’s father would inform the crown prince of her discovery. Having never participated directly in the affairs of the nobility, Fiona didn’t quite

understand political factions or relationships, and in that moment, she started to regret not studying up on it all.

Fiona sat in the smooth carriage, mulling over what had just transpired, until Miranda's voice jolted her back to reality. "It's been a while since I've seen my father. And as usual, he gave me, his beloved daughter, the cold shoulder."

"Yes, indeed."

"He had the gall to snub you too, Godmother!"

The marchioness giggled. "Well, he's always been that way." Miranda proceeded to gripe about how she had never seen her father so much as smile at home, and the marchioness nodded and responded appropriately.

"Fiona, don't you mind my father. He's always like that," Miranda assured her.

"Oh? Why, I'd say that boy is much softer than he was ten years ago."

In the eyes of the marchioness, even the Earl of Bancroft, who cut a figure so imposing it could intimidate people across the street, was reduced to "that boy." Fiona knew it wasn't appropriate, but she wanted to laugh.

"Ah, you may be right," Miranda said thoughtfully. "I think he did change a little after Gil's engagement was broken off."

"Yes, that was it. Though it is difficult to tell."

"By the way, Fiona, have you heard about Gil's former fiancée?"

"Not in detail, no." Richard had told Fiona that Giles had been engaged once, but she didn't know the reason the engagement ended, nor anything about the young lady involved.

"Well, it's ancient history now, so I don't know all the particulars either, but—"

"Um, sorry, Lady Miranda, but would you mind leaving it there?"

"Huh?" Miranda shot her a surprised look.

“I wouldn’t feel right hearing any information about Lord Giles that he did not volunteer himself.”

“I see… Hee hee! What a stickler you are.”

“I’m so sorry, my lady, but I simply can’t.” She would be lying if she said she wasn’t curious, but she couldn’t help but feel that the news would mean nothing unless she heard it from Giles himself.

It would mean nothing? Wait a minute, what would it mean if I did hear it from him?

A feeling was welling up inside her, but she couldn’t name it. Many nobles married for political reasons. As such, the majority of broken engagements did not occur by the will of those engaged, especially if they were underage when the engagement ended. Fiona knew it shouldn’t be a big deal, yet she could not calm the unease in her heart. She squirmed in her seat, and as she did, she caught a scent from her right shoulder that made her heart jump.

Cedarwood. Giles’s scent.

The kiss she was supposed to have forgotten flooded back to her, and her cheeks flushed. When she looked away, feeling awkward, Miranda smirked suggestively.

“Very well, forget I said anything,” Miranda said. “Godmother, where would you like to go shopping?”

The conversation shifted to fashionable shops, and the two marchionesses let themselves cut loose. They dragged Fiona around the capital with such fervor, she almost forgot that Giles had advised her to keep her outings short.

Chapter 6:
The Earl of Bancroft

THE CARRIAGE INTERIOR, which would have been spacious for just Giles and Fiona, was indeed cramped with three grown men inside.

No, that's not it. It's the mood in here that's making the carriage feel cramped.

The Earl of Bancroft sat mute across from Richard and Giles, not batting an eye. The carriage interior was heavy with a painful silence.

By nature, Giles was a quiet man who disliked small talk. He could engage in it for business dealings, but his primary objective in those scenarios was to gather information. To Giles, as the earl's son, and his friend Richard, this was an unnecessary endeavor.

The earl had a tidy appearance, and his slicked-back hair was the same dark blond as Giles's. At a glance, it was obvious they were father and son, but the earl's deep grayish-blue eyes held a sharpness a hundred times keener than his son's, and the images they each projected suggested entirely different levels of toughness.

Earls of Bancroft were ministers of foreign affairs; they negotiated with officials from neighboring states. As the current head of the house, Giles's father traveled frequently for surveys and international councils. Sometimes he was away for long periods without returning home, even during the off-season. He never spoke to anyone unless they had an appointment, and even with his children, he maintained a relationship of superior and subordinates. Giles had never thought much of it until he saw Baron Clayburn interact with Fiona and Prime Minister Talbot with his daughter. Now, the emptiness he thought he had long forgotten was back to haunt him.

You should be over it by now, Giles thought. He chided himself internally for always dwelling on the past when his father was near. He had more important things to worry about. Richard, who

was suffocating beside him, shot him a pleading look that plainly said Giles had better start a conversation.

Setting aside the past and Fiona, Giles opened his mouth to speak. He didn't need to bother with greetings or pleasantries. "Father, what is this unanticipated happenstance?"

"I informed the crown prince about the letters…and he said we must catch the mastermind immediately and give him a public trial."

Giles could not hide his surprise. Even Richard's eyes went wide. "Did His Highness really say that?" Richard blurted.

The earl eyed him icily. "Are you suggesting, Lord Russel, that I have something to gain by lying?"

"N-no, my lord," Richard replied. "I don't doubt what you said. It's just, I assumed His Highness would prefer to handle the matter internally."

The crown prince was a centrist who valued peace and harmony, but his critics accused him of playing it safe. Giles and Richard had assumed that the prince would wish to handle the matter of the counterfeits in his name discreetly.

"The birth of his son changed the crown prince," the earl explained. "It seems he wants to nip the last remnants of dissent in the bud before his son grows up. And it's about damn time." He left unspoken the implication that if the crown prince had grown a spine sooner and quashed the faction that favored the king's brother, they wouldn't have been in this mess in the first place. "It's late, but not too late. Giles, you and Richard are ordered to find proof of those letters."

"Proof… In other words, proof that Otto Gordon or Minister Saquille had a hand in writing them."

"Precisely. This matter must be settled by the next session of parliament." The earl slowly crossed his legs as he calmly relayed these disturbing words. "That includes both Saquille and the distrust in our ranks."

In every session of parliament, Saquille and his cronies did everything they could to hinder progress. This was a point of

embarrassment not only for the Earl of Bancroft but also for Richard and Giles. With internal affairs, if even the most minute decisions were delayed, they could grow over time into huge blunders. For example, factional disputes had significantly delayed reconstruction of the lands that had been battlegrounds in the war with the surrounding states. Giles could not count the number of times parliament had found itself in a deadlock over the superficial lip service line, “We must put king and country first.”

“There’s nothing inherently evil about desiring power,” said the earl, “but power is a flaccid tool in the hands of the talentless. I wish they would do us all a favor and retire already.”

It was only by Saquille’s forceful leadership that the faction favoring the king’s brother had managed to consolidate any sort of power. Saquille also had no capable successor in line, so once his coalition’s nucleus vanished, it would dissolve into a mess of tiny factions once more. This would be the best outcome, not merely for the crown prince’s supporters but for the kingdom as a whole.

“But, my lord,” Richard tried, “Gordon’s whereabouts are currently unknown. There’s no evidence he traveled outside the kingdom, but if he hopped the border illegally without leaving any records, we won’t have enough time to find him.” He was flustered by the short deadline and the small number of leads he had to work with.

The earl, however, stood his ground. “We have guards watching Minister Saquille and Gordon’s gallery. If there’s any suspicious activity or visitors, we’ll know.”

“Meaning that our most important clue will be Rudolph’s testimony,” Giles muttered under his breath. “And as for Minister Saquille, the order is to stand by.”

As he took stock of their short list of clues, their carriage rolled to a stop. He glanced outside and discovered that they had arrived at parliament. The Earl of Bancroft would return to the palace, but Giles and Richard would go straight to the session.

“Inform me of every update,” the earl told them.

“Understood, my lord.”

No sooner did they respond than their attendant opened the door to the carriage. The conversation over, Richard hurried out of the carriage, but when Giles tried to follow him, he was stopped by the earl's voice.

"Giles. What are your intentions with that girl?"

"What girl…?"

Giles turned around and stared. His father's expression was, as always, impossible to read. He gestured for Giles to sit, so Giles told Richard to go on ahead without him, shut the door, and returned to his seat. He and his father faced each other, tension prickling between them.

"Don't play dumb. Clayburn's daughter."

"And why are you asking in such a roundabout manner, Father?"

The earl paused. "No matter. I hear she's in the care of the Marchioness of Heyward."

"Yes. I knew Fiona would be safe there."

As the one who exposed the counterfeit paintings and discovered the letters inside them, Fiona was a key witness. Their side needed her, and their opposition needed her silenced. If they only had Gordon to watch out for, that would be one thing, but with a nobleman like Minister Saquille involved, a higher level of security was a necessary measure.

Giles felt responsible for getting Fiona caught up in the scandal. Even without that guilt, though, he would have had a duty to protect her.

"Just get her testimony and there won't be any problems. Why are you letting her take over your life?"

Giles stared at him. "That's not a very nice way of phrasing it."

"I will turn a blind eye to your courtship, but I will not approve a marriage."

"Father, that's none of your bus—"

"It is my business." Cut off, Giles finally returned his gaze to his father. His eyes met the earl's cold, steadfast glare. "I am the

head of House Bancroft. We are not so naive as to think a baron's daughter with no backing could be a suitable match."

"But she's of noble blood, just like us."

"Her noble blood is nothing like ours. If you insist on having your way, you'll need grit and power, and I do not see a mite of either in you right now."

Giles knew all too well how powerless he was. His suppressed emotions made a rare trip to the surface, escaping through his clenched teeth in an obvious sigh of frustration.

It's that day all over again…

The memory he kept locked deep inside his heart was yanked to the surface. Ten years ago…

The girl he was arranged to marry was an older, spirited, and determined daughter of the nobility. With a feminine physique and a queenly disposition, she had many admirers, and Giles had heard that there were others besides him who wanted to marry her. They had not been particularly friendly before their betrothal, but their families got along, and the marriage would benefit both; these were common reasons to betroth one's children.

Giles had just turned thirteen and still considered a wife a matter for the distant future. Still, if he was going to spend the rest of his life with her, he felt duty bound to learn to be a good husband. She had come of age well before Giles, though, and in her view, an underage fiancé left much to be desired. While she welcomed her role as future countess, her indifference and dissatisfaction were obvious in her eyes when she looked at Giles.

And yet, though she showed no interest in Giles himself, she regularly visited his home. He was put off by her sudden, unannounced visits at first, but he kept telling himself that was just how courting worked.

The servant in charge of Giles's room was the first one to notice that things tended to go missing after her visits. At first, it was little things like pens and silverware. Later, it escalated to silk and jewelry that had been shut away in chests. The servant brought his concerns to Giles, then suddenly quit the following week. Thinking that suspicious, Giles developed a vigilant eye…

which was when the true extent of his fiancée's duplicity came to light.

She acted nice in front of Giles and his parents, but behind closed doors, she hurled insults at the servants and drove them like cattle. It wasn't unusual for the nobility to look down on those of lower station, to be sure, but his fiancée's prejudice was entirely different in scale. Resenting Giles's dog for not liking her, she kicked and hit it in the name of discipline.

Upon investigation, it became clear that she was stealing items from the Bancroft home. She was still involved with a lover she had before her engagement to Giles, and she gave these stolen items to him to sell. When the servant found her out, she threatened to ruin him and forced him to quit—and when Giles caught her red-handed and accused her of stealing, not only did she not apologize, she insisted she had done nothing wrong.

"I am to be countess," she said. "Everything in this house is mine. Its jewels and its servants are mine to do with as I please."

Giles was exasperated beyond words.

Stealing, it transpired, had been a habit of hers since childhood. Her parents knew about it, but they turned a blind eye to their daughter's crimes and did nothing to punish her. She would not repent, and when Giles pressed her parents about it and received evasive, wishy-washy excuses, he realized that she was beyond redemption.

He decided to break off the engagement, but before he could tell their parents, his fiancée retaliated. Suspecting her future as Giles's wife was threatened, she sneaked into his father's room in a state of near undress to seduce him.

She was summarily shoved into a carriage and sent home, wailing, "This house is *mine*!" as she went. The Earl of Bancroft severed ties with her, her house, and her relatives. And when the ordeal was over, he only had three words to say:

"What a nuisance."

He had no use for an heir who couldn't manage to keep a fiancée. That was what Giles read in those eyes that were the same color as his.

I thought I wanted him to accept me. How I prayed to someday catch up to him. Then he would see me not as the heir to her earldom but as Giles.

But that day, Giles felt viscerally that such a moment would never come.

The morning after his fiancée was kicked out, Giles's dog turned up dead. The dog was recovering from his injuries in a stable away from the house, but the stable wasn't far from the house in which Giles's former fiancée met her lover to give him the stolen goods. An eyewitness mentioned seeing a man who fit her lover's description, but there was no proof beyond that, so it was ruled that the dog had died eating poisoned bait that somebody had thrown out.

Giles was not engaged for long, but even now, ten years later, the wound in his heart remained fresh. He never saw his former fiancée again, and he heard later that she had been married off into a noble family far away from the royal capital. Giles learned to let his guard down to nobody and to notice anything suspicious as quickly as possible. As a result, he became adept at investigating a person's true motives. When he realized that even the eyes of younger women betrayed schemes and calculations, he came to think of any association with the opposite sex as nothing more than an annoyance.

Until he met Fiona.

"You seem to have matured a little, but the belief that hiding her will protect her is shortsighted. Are you fine with losing this one too?"

His father's beratement continued, adding insult to memory's injury. It was as if his father believed Giles's feelings were immaterial. Remembering the coldness of the earth beneath his knees as he knelt over the corpse of his precious dog, he gritted his teeth to calm himself.

"It's different this time," Giles muttered.

"From where I'm standing, it looks like you're poised to make the same mistake again."

Unless Giles's ears deceived him, his father's exasperated tone was colored with a hint of worry. Giles looked up at him—*Father?*—but the earl averted his eyes, clasped his hands in his lap, and let out a long sigh.

"Miranda has better sense than you. If a girl nobody recognizes goes missing, who would notice? If eyewitnesses only describe her as the type of plain girl you'd see anywhere, how exactly do you intend to find her?"

"Well, I—"

"Keeping her shut up in one room makes her an easier target, if you ask me."

Giles's breath caught in his throat. His father had struck a nerve. Overprotectiveness was a bad strategy—that was what he meant.

"To a sex with no upper-body strength, the most valuable weapon is social connections. If you can't understand that, there's just no talking to you."

This is a first, Giles thought. Never before had a conversation between them lasted beyond giving orders and delivering news. Never before had Giles fallen silent while his father spoke to him at length.

Fiona was with both marchionesses. They had bodyguards. Yet a part of him still felt ill at ease, and there could only be one reason why.

"Ease off on the possessiveness. Otherwise, you'll lose her."

The earl's omnipresent poker face made it difficult to tell whether he said those words in earnest or in jest. But one thing was clear to Giles: The air about his father was different now than at the beginning of their conversation.

"Father..." Giles gave him a searching look.

"Go. This conversation is over." His father waved dismissively at him, gesturing for him to leave the carriage. Resigning himself, Giles opened the carriage door, and as he walked out, he heard his father's voice behind him add, "I'll say this just one more time: If you insist on having your way, you'll need power. Find the evidence

and get the crown prince in your debt. That is the best and fastest way."

Giles's eyes shot wide open.

"And that bitch I betrothed you to... I'm sorry."

Giles turned around, surprised, but his father was looking out the opposite window; Giles couldn't see his expression. His own look of dazed astonishment remained as the earl's driver bowed reverently and drove the carriage away.

Chapter 7:
Searching for the Hideout

GALLERY ROCHE came into view after a short walk alongside the Bay Street Plaza. Its glass-paned door opened to a relaxing space laden from corner to corner with art. An assortment of furnishings deemed fashionable by the owner, Roche, adorned the space. It was a gallery that made patrons forget the hustle and bustle on the other side of the door. The sizes and prices of the paintings varied such that even commoners could buy some of the pieces. In fact, about half of Gallery Roche's patronage were of common birth.

Fiona was there as usual, but today, she entered the shop with Giles rather than with Hans. A few patrons were surprised when they recognized the Earl of Bancroft's son, but with only a glance at the clerks, the pair of them disappeared into the back of the gallery. They climbed up the flight of stairs in front of the office where Fiona usually worked, up to the second floor that contained Mr. Roche's personal living quarters and served as a production space for the gallery.

They were there to hear Rudolph's testimony. Was this boy truly the artist behind the counterfeits? Watching him paint was the fastest way to tell—and the only way, besides. Giles was also there to glean what he could from Rudolph about the elusive Gordon's whereabouts. He intended to question the boy about the place in which he was confined, its location, and any other people who might have been around.

They opened the door to find Roche, Dennis, and Richard already assembled. Rudolph stood by the window facing a canvas, brush in hand. He looked up when he heard the door open, and Fiona couldn't believe her eyes: He looked like an entirely different boy.

"Huh?" she said, stunned. "Is that you, Rudolph?"

Roche and the others shared mischievous smirks over their successful prank. Rudolph's filthy, matted hair had been restored

to its lustrous blond, and in place of his dirty clothes he wore the shirt, vest, and trousers that comprised the gallery employee uniform. He had eaten his fill and slept well; his complexion was much improved, and his former thorny aura was nowhere to be seen. This was a far cry from the hissing stray cat of a boy Fiona had met the day before, and she was so glad to see him doing well.

Seeing her surprised smile, Rudolph scowled. “Wh-what gives? You got somethin’ to say? Spit it out.”

“No, no. I was just thinking that you look lovely.”

“L-lovely?!” Ah, perhaps “lovely” was an embarrassing compliment for a thirteen-year-old boy to receive. “Y-you witch, what’re you say—mmph!”

Dennis pinched Rudolph’s red cheeks. “Rudolph, don’t snap at a lady. You promised you’d clean up your language, remember?”

“Ho hloody hay!”

“It’s all right, Dennis. Let him go. Sorry I stared, Rudolph; that was rude of me.”

Rudolph froze. It seemed that an apology from a noblewoman was the last thing he expected to hear. “Hut he hell?!”

“Thank you for doing this, Mr. Roche.”

“It was no trouble at all. Dennis took care of most of it.”

“Oh, did he now?”

Tousling Rudolph’s hair, Dennis explained that he had a lot of experience taking care of his younger nieces and nephews. Rudolph, still in a headlock, scowled, but there was a relaxed twinkle of mirth in his eye.

I’m sure he’ll tame himself before long, Fiona thought. Aloud, she said, “So sorry we interrupted your painting. Do continue.”

“Oh, um, sure.” Rudolph obediently returned to his canvas. When he gripped the brush, his entire demeanor changed. He was still a child, but now he gave off traces of a craftsman’s sensibility.

Richard, who stood behind Rudolph and to the side, beckoned to Giles and Fiona. They sneaked behind him to peek at

the canvas.

This painting…!

She and Giles exchanged a look. On Rudolph's canvas was the same painting Fiona had, at a glance, debunked as counterfeit—it was a replica of the redpoll painting.

Roche had probably asked Rudolph to paint it. Aside from Fiona and her party, not many people were permitted to see unreleased new works. It was impossible for a boy like Rudolph to have had a chance to see it unless he was the artist who painted it. Moreover, Gallery Roche was the sole gallery to which Raymond entrusted his art, and determining authenticity was their specialty; this was the perfect assignment to test Rudolph's talents as a counterfeiter.

"So the boy really can paint," Giles marveled. His eyes were transfixed on the brush, which danced along the canvas without falter.

"Lord Russel said it looks quite similar to the one Gordon brought in," said Roche. "What do you two think?"

Fiona nodded. "Yes, it's exactly the same."

The painting was only partly finished, but its composition and use of color were identical to the painting she saw in the drawing room of the earl's home. It would be a far greater leap to argue that the two were *not* connected. There was no mistaking it: Rudolph was involved in the counterfeiting.

"His brush strokes and use of color look similar to present-day Raymond," Roche mused. "It's no wonder people were fooled."

Hearing this, Rudolph smirked confidently without slowing his brush strokes. He looked happy to have his talents recognized, not guilty for having aided in a crime. "Now do you believe I painted them?"

"It's not that we didn't believe you before," Fiona assured him, "but you're very good. Did you commit all the paintings you were assigned to memory?"

"'Course not, lady. The ones I just copied, it's not like I could remember every single detail. But with this one, I thought up the

colors myself. And yeah, Gordon gave me the sketches, but every other choice came from me."

"I see."

"But I'm surprised you came all this way to watch me paint. You rich snoots must be bored—argh!" Dennis gave Rudolph's sassy cheeks another tug to their full extent. "H-hat hurts!"

"Mr. Roche, are you sure I can't drown him in a bucket?" Dennis asked politely.

"Nope. Not yet."

Dennis cursed under his breath. "Watch your mouth, boy." He glared and slowly released Rudolph's cheeks, but his threat seemed to have little effect on the boy. They looked, more than anything, like they were playing.

After everything that had transpired since the day before, they had surely become fast friends.

"I am terribly sorry for that. I will have a firm word with him later." Roche glanced at Fiona, then bowed slickly to Richard and Giles. With sons of an earl and a marquess in the room, Rudolph's behavior posed a danger to him.

"As long as you're taking care of him, it's not my place to complain," said Giles. "However, I do recommend he mind his manners during the official questioning."

"Fair point. Judges and lawyers aren't as forgiving as we are."

"Precisely. Thank you."

Meanwhile, Rudolph was rubbing his pink cheeks and cursing under his breath. His insolence was a form of bravado, however, and he did seem genuinely remorseful that Roche had to apologize on his behalf.

"Hey, kid, you should learn to kiss up a little more," Dennis told him.

"What?"

"I'm saying, if you want to plead extenuating circumstances, it wouldn't hurt to *act* a little. If you don't change something about

your behavior, you'll leave a bad impression on the council and land yourself a harsher sentence."

This was valuable advice. It was nice that Rudolph had made a recovery, but if he gave the prosecutor sass, he was doomed.

Dennis returned to the questioning. "Now, leaving that aside, did your surrogate father and Gordon know each other before all this happened?"

Rudolph shook his head. "Hell if I know—uh, I mean, I don't know, sir. The funeral was the first time he ever came to the studio, so maybe he met my mentor in a tavern or out in the capital somewhere."

Under Roche's smile and critical gaze, Rudolph softened his tone a little and explained to the group that he didn't know all of his mentor's associates. His mentor did venture into the capital at times to do contract work, but Rudolph never accompanied him, so he didn't know what happened then. He sounded disinterested as he relayed the information.

I suppose this makes sense. Even if his mentor wasn't much of a social butterfly, it would still stand to reason that he had acquaintances Rudolph never met.

Rudolph did not offer speculations, and if he didn't know something, he was honest about that. But would his testimony be believed by the ones whose judgment mattered most?

Giles tried a different angle. "Did you ever correspond with Gordon by letter?"

"Nope, no letters."

"So *that's* something you're sure of?"

"My mentor wasn't one for letters. He could read a little, but he couldn't write at all. He said it was too late for him to learn, so he made me learn for him. Reading letters and responding to them was my job. Anyway, I never got any letters from a guy named Gordon."

This surprised everyone. Literacy was comparatively high in their kingdom, but it was still unexpected in an orphan who had been forced to work from an early age. It was a grim reality that

while most kids like Rudolph could read a little, they could seldom write more than their own name.

When they asked Rudolph to read something random and write it down on a piece of paper, he surprised them again with his adult-level penmanship.

“Gee, you’re really talented, kid,” Dennis marveled.

With an icy smile beyond his years, Rudolph replied, “Unlike you rich snoots, *I’ve* gotta earn my keep.”

Dennis raised an eyebrow and tousled his hair. Fiona kept a watchful eye over them as they scuffled.

Artistic technique was drilled into him, and he was taught to read and write… She did not know the circumstances under which Rudolph’s mentor took him in, but it was clear that his surrogate father had taken the boy’s future into consideration.

The rowdy boys continued to wrestle until Richard asked the next question. “Did you get any jobs from nobles?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, lots. My mentor didn’t care who our clients were as long as they paid up. We had plenty of higher-ups sneaking in to place orders, and a lot of servants from big-name mansions too. Sometimes we’d restore some crazy high-end pieces.”

His mentor’s business was known as a refuge where the art restorer was both skilled and discreet and didn’t ask your name as long as you paid up front. Art was easy to damage by accident while cleaning, and improper storage could also damage it. That happened a lot.

Sometimes, people wanted their art restored so they could sell it for cash. That might have been how Gordon first set his sights on Rudolph.

Giles pressed further. “Now, do you know the location of the place where Gordon confined you?”

“Nah. I was locked up the whole time, wasn’t I?”

“But I thought you said he took you to art museums.”

“Well, I guess I would’ve seen where we were goin’ if they hadn’t shuttered the carriage windows.”

The only glimpse Rudolph got of the exterior of the house he was held in came during the few seconds it took Gordon to shove him into the carriage parked in front of it. While Richard and Giles scowled at this dead end, Fiona asked the next question.

“Tell me, Rudolph. When they put you in the carriage, I doubt you were blindfolded. What could you see?”

“What d’ya mean?”

“For example, what was the ground like? Did you walk on a stone walkway from the front door to the carriage? Or was it a dirt path?”

“Huh? Um… It was dirt.”

“Dirt. All right, now, where was the carriage parked?”

“In front of the house.”

“Like, snug against the door, or a bit away?”

“Oh, that’s what you mean. Hmm… Yeah, there was a half-broken fence outside the front door. That’s where they parked the carriage.” Guided by Fiona’s questions, his vague memories gradually took shape.

Rudolph looked out the second-floor gallery window. The street of the capital was lined with rows of buildings and paved with stones. Ornately attired passersby, numerous carriages navigating the street—this was not the sort of scenery he witnessed at the house in which he was confined.

“It wasn’t in the forest, and I don’t think it was in a small village either,” Rudolph offered. “And while I was there, no peddlers came by neither.” He added that there wasn’t a single other house in the immediate vicinity.

“If you went to art museums, I doubt you left at night,” Fiona suggested.

“Yeah, it was in the daytime. It was cloudy, though. And the winds were humid.”

“Did it feel like it was going to rain?”

“No, it felt like we were close to a pond or river or somethin’.”

As Rudolph crossed his arms and craned his neck, Fiona coaxed him along with some more detailed questions. “There may have been an aqueduct nearby. When you got into the carriage, could you see anything else besides the fence?”

“Anything else… Oh, there was a church. I saw its steeple.”

“Oh! What did it look like?”

“I dunno…”

“Is it difficult to express in words? Could you draw it for us?” Fiona handed him a fresh sheet of paper. Rudolph scratched his head and grabbed the pen.

“Okay, there were trees here…then on the other side of ’em…”

His pen wandered at first, but once he started drawing, the image came together faster and faster. Watching him, Fiona sensed eyes on her from the side. She turned to see all the men staring at her in astonishment.

She pressed an index finger quietly to her lips to telegraph to them not to disturb Rudolph. “Artists sometimes recall lost memories when they draw them,” she whispered.

“Oh, that was a smart idea.”

“Just a lucky guess, Lord Russel,” Fiona insisted. “But I’m glad it worked on Rudolph.”

In the end, Rudolph had several finished sketches for them. “There, I drew ’em.”

“Thanks, Rudolph.”

Giles took the papers and squinted at the church steeple’s many distinctive details. “The long, vertical diamond in the cross means it’s an Orthodox church. Rudolph, the stained glass beneath this steeple is broken; is the church building itself damaged?”

“I dunno. I could only see the top part. Ah, but now that you mention it, I never heard church bells ringing.”

“Not once during your entire stay at that house?” Richard asked. “You were there nearly half a year.”

Rudolph nodded. His answer seemed to inspire Giles. “An abandoned church… Well, Orthodox churches *were* consolidated with the other churches in the kingdom after the war.”

Some churches were demolished, but others were left as is. Another question to Rudolph revealed that when Gordon was finished with him, he had left Rudolph in front of an art museum in the capital—and that they had gone all the way there by carriage.

“Do you have a map?” Giles asked Roche. Roche nodded and spread a map on the table, and everyone crowded around it. “Considering the amount of time you spent in the carriage, the house can’t be too far from the capital. Now, within that range, I’m fairly certain there’s a church near the hunting grounds in the west.”

“Hunting grounds… That would be right here,” Roche said, pointing.

Giles marked one of the villages near the area. It wasn’t very large, and there was a river not too far away.

“Gil, are we going there?” Richard asked.

“Of course.”

“Then I’m coming with you,” Fiona said.

“No, Fiona, you’re staying home.”

“*Really*, now?”

After their excursion to the opera the day prior, Giles had relaxed Fiona’s terms of confinement. As long as she was with Giles, Miranda, or another trustworthy person, she was permitted to go out. But not this time, apparently.

Rudolph gasped and pointed at himself. “Wait, am I supposed to take you there?”

“No, Rudolph, we’re not bringing you or Fiona with us,” Giles replied. “Gordon might be hiding out at that house.”

Fiona protested, “But, Lord Giles—”

"*Fiona*. No."

While Rudolph looked relieved, Fiona looked displeased, but Giles was not going to yield an inch on the matter. Richard threw his hands in the air, knowing intercession was futile, and Roche nodded his stoic approval. Nobody was going to take Fiona's side.

Well, sure, I can see why they'd want me to be a good girl and stay with the marchioness, but still!

Fiona was dying to see the environment in which Rudolph had made those paintings. She wanted to know what led Gordon to request the redpoll counterfeit and why he had chosen Raymond. She thought she would go crazy until she found out—and she just knew that if she went there in person, she would find some sort of clue.

She understood why they would worry about her; Giles's desire to keep Fiona out of danger was every bit as strong as Fiona's desire to find the truth. But Giles cast Fiona's feelings aside, turning to Dennis and instructing him to go to Gordon's gallery.

"You want me to go, my lord?"

"You're the only one here whose face he wouldn't recognize," Richard explained. "But we don't mean for you to barge in and search the place. Right, Gil?"

"Right. I doubt he would keep anything incriminating in his gallery."

Since Gordon was still at large, his gallery was not open to the public, but a person who stopped by when staff were there could see the paintings and bargain over their prices.

"What exactly would you like me to look for?" Dennis asked. Fiona was just as curious about this as he was.

Giles's gaze fell on Rudolph. "Go with Rudolph and see if there are any counterfeit paintings there."

Rudolph's jaw dropped. "Uh, I'm going with him?"

Armed with every piece of information about the hideout that Rudolph could remember, Fiona, Giles, and Richard left the gallery. The men were to head straight to the abandoned church near the hunting grounds by the forest to look for Rudolph's

hideout. As for Fiona, Miranda had been called and she was to return with her to the Marchioness of Heyward's mansion.

Once again, Fiona found herself impressed by how efficiently Giles had made all the arrangements. *I know he's just worried about me,* she thought. *I know that. But…*

All her life, Fiona had solved her own problems. Sitting still and waiting made her anxious. While Richard went to hire a rental carriage, Giles and Fiona waited in the lively plaza of Bay Street.

"Richard and I will take care of everything from this point on. Don't burden yourself with any more responsibilities relating to Rudolph."

"But I—ah!" A carriage cut recklessly in front of her, driving at a high speed.

"Crazy driver. Come closer." Smoothly, Giles whipped a protective arm around her shoulder, but it only made her turn stiff as a statue. "Fiona?"

Being with him alone like this, and with his arm around her besides, brought the memory of what happened back at the opera to Fiona's mind against her will. *It's not fair,* she thought. *I have to remember it, but Giles doesn't!* She slipped quietly out of his embrace before he could see her blushing and, without looking at him, asked, "P-please, isn't there any way I can come with you?"

"Gordon might not be there, but his friends could be. What if you butted heads with them?"

"I'd be in no more danger than you or Lord Russel. And you sent Rudolph off to Gordon's shop. Isn't that a bit hypocritical of you?"



“But we know Gordon isn’t at the gallery, and even if he were, he wouldn’t recognize Rudolph after that transformation. Besides, Richard and I have some combat training under our belts. Can you say the same for yourself?”

“Well, I…” Fiona knew she was a fast runner, but when it came to self-defense, she could not say with confidence that she could hold her own.

“There you have it. Gordon’s gallery is even more off-limits. You’re infamous in the art world; the staff there are sure to recognize you.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m infamous.”

“You’re the only person I know who gets approached by gallery employees in art museums or on the street.”

It was unusual for a daughter of nobility to work, so it stood to reason that many people knew of Fiona. The way Giles phrased it, though, Fiona felt that he was giving her too much credit.

As she stood there, wondering what to say, Richard arrived in the driver’s seat of the hired carriage. The Marchioness of Colet’s carriage arrived in the plaza at the same moment, and Miranda stepped out of her carriage and approached Fiona with a grim look in her eye.

“Fiona! Why are you wearing that *dull* dress again!”

“L-Lady Miranda! Well, today, I was just…”

All that panic and it was just about her dress. Miranda, it transpired, did not like that Fiona had worn her everyday work dress to a gallery. “You have such lovely features. What a shame to hide them! You could at least put a clip in your hair here…”

She proceeded to criticize various aspects of Fiona’s appearance one after the other, but there was no hint of scorn for Fiona in her tone. Giles, meanwhile, climbed into Richard’s carriage before Fiona could say another word.

“Well, lovely ladies, ta-ta!” Richard crooned.

“Fiona, go straight home,” Giles instructed. “Miranda, take care of her.”

“Yes, yes. See you later.”

“Um, but I—” Fiona tried, but without another word, the gentlemen dashed away.

Aaand they’re gone.

A tiny sigh escaped Fiona’s lips as she watched the carriage recede into the distance. Miranda whirled around, scrutinized Fiona’s expression, and raised her perfectly sculpted eyebrows.

“All right, what did he do to you?” she asked with a knowing wink. Fiona blinked in confusion. “I’ll bet he put his foot down when you wanted to do something *again*. My baby brother can be so pigheaded.”

Lady Miranda…

“I’ll lend an ear if you want to vent. Come on, let’s go.”

“A-all right!”

Miranda shot her a mischievous glance that reminded her of Giles, and Fiona ambled into the carriage behind her.

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Cantering at a leisurely pace so as not to arouse suspicion as they left the city, Richard gripped the reins and spoke to Giles. “You know, I really was surprised to hear the crown prince gave us a direct order to arrest him.”

The two men had been brought up as friends alongside the crown prince since their early childhood. In more recent years, they had understandably seen much less of the crown prince, but it remained difficult to hide their surprise over how their old friend had changed.

“I don’t think he meant anything bad by it,” Giles said.

“Yeah, I’m just saying that it doesn’t seem like him. Don’t you feel the same way, Gil?”

“I suppose so.”

Though he was brought up as the heir to the king, the crown prince had always had a mild-mannered temperament. According to his joking comments, there was a reason for this: It was because he looked an awful lot like his grandfather, the former king.

The former king was ruthlessly bloodthirsty. During his reign, he waged war on nearly all the surrounding states. It wasn't until the current king ascended the throne that the wars ended and tensions settled both inside and outside the kingdom's borders. If the crown prince were to take after his grandfather in personality as well as physical appearance, the delicate balance of peace would be threatened once more. Sensing a clear and present danger in him, those in the crown prince's circle gave him a rigorous emotional education. It was no coincidence, then, that the king's younger brother, who should have been his rival for the throne, showed not a lick of interest in succeeding the current king. There was not the slightest hint of bloodthirsty bickering on the horizon.

But the Earl of Bancroft said that the crown prince's mindset had been changed by his wife and newborn son. It was no secret that the crown prince and his wife had a loving marriage, but the crown princess, who did not come from a powerful family, had little pull in the palace. The birth of her son had granted her a foothold, but her situation was still precarious. That was why the formerly easygoing prince felt it necessary to buckle down and see that his wife and son were well protected.

A few weeks ago, Giles may have indicated that he understood the prince's change of heart, but he would've still held some suspicions. Now, however, he could empathize with the crown prince. And his father had advised him to get the crown prince in his debt. Even with Fiona out of the picture, the crown prince was Giles's old friend; of course Giles would do anything for him. He just never expected to hear his father give him even a single word of helpful advice rather than a command. *Regardless, what we need most right now is evidence.*

The king's younger brother's role was solely to be a fallback in case of emergency; that was his public position on the matter.

Nobody could be sure how he truly felt, but the fact remained that he enjoyed his life of botany and bachelorhood. He made heavy use of scientists in his greenhouse, so all his plant varieties were growing healthy, which was a boon for the kingdom as well. And perhaps because they associated him with vegetables and flowers—things they encountered every day—the king's younger brother was beloved among the people. If he were to ascend the throne instead of the crown prince, they would probably accept it with no resistance.

That was exactly why Minister Saquille supported the king's brother. If he were to become king, he would need a regent to help him govern. Saquille likely intended to secure that position for himself.

Saquille's recent insolence against the crown prince could not be overlooked. For better or worse, the minster was a simple man. He probably believed he had everything in place for him to usurp.

He even made sure that Gordon didn't let Rudolph know the house where he was being confined, Giles thought. That meant there was a high possibility that the hideout contained some manner of damning evidence or clue. Whether that evidence tied Gordon to Saquille or pointed to Gordon's whereabouts, they won.

Neither Gordon nor Saquille knew yet that the letters they concealed in the counterfeit paintings had been discovered, but it was almost certainly a race against time. Giles suppressed his exhilaration as they arrived in the tiny village that was their destination, parked the carriage at the abandoned church, and got out.

"Look at that, Gil. It's just like Rudolph's drawing," Richard exclaimed in awe as he compared the sketch in his hand with the actual church. The elongated diamond on the cross at the steeple, the empty space beneath it that should have contained a bell, and the broken stained glass all matched up perfectly. Giles looked at the sketch and nodded. This was the place.

"So, judging by the angle of the sketch, I'd say the hideout must be on the other side, over...there... Huh?"

"What is it, Rick?"

“A carriage is coming.”

Giles looked and saw that he was right. It seemed unlikely that tourists ever visited this tiny village; they quickly tucked the sketch away and assumed a defensive stance.

That carriage. It couldn’t be…

The carriage was inconspicuous, but it looked familiar to Giles. The woman who descended the carriage after it parked beside the church’s ancient front gate was also painfully familiar.

“Of all the crazy…” Giles muttered under his breath.

Richard whistled. “Woo, she’s got spunk.”

The first person to descend the carriage was a man. He looked a little uncomfortable, but when he spotted Giles and Richard, a relief filled his face and he jogged over to them. “Thank goodness we’ve caught up to you.”

It was a servant of the Marquess of Colet. He had been a servant of the Bancroft family before Miranda took him with her when she was married away, so Giles knew and trusted him. The woman with him was Fiona, who was supposed to be with Miranda—and it was easy to guess why she wasn’t.

“Fiona…” Giles frowned, picturing Miranda waving her fan in his face. “You weren’t supposed to come here. How many times did I tell you—”

“S-sorry! But I just couldn’t—”

“Ha ha ha! Well, the more the merrier, I say,” Richard guffawed. “If something happens you can protect her, Gil.”

“Um, I’m a fast runner, I swear!” Fiona piped up.

Richard spat out another laugh. “See? You heard Miss Clayburn.”

Of course Giles would protect her, and he knew she was a fast runner. Fiona’s fists were clenched in determination to prove herself, but that was not the issue. “But, Fiona—”

“We don’t have time to bicker,” Richard interrupted Giles. “Our escorts have arrived.”

Richard was right; villagers had begun to gather around the church. Resigned, Giles shut his mouth.

Apparently, it was rare to see visitors to the hunting grounds during the offseason. Most of the villagers stole glances at them from a distance without attempting to approach them, but a middle-aged man burst through the crowd in a fluster. He introduced himself as the village mayor and then, before he could even catch his breath, began to interrogate them. “Um, p-pardon me, but is there trouble at our village?”

“No. There’s no need to worry,” Richard assured him. “We heard there was an abandoned church here, so we came by to see if it was worth restoring or if it should be demolished.”

The mayor, who had assumed the sudden arrival of nobility could only mean bad news, was visibly relieved to hear this. “I-is that so! Well, in that case”—he huffed—“thank you so much!”

Ownership rights for the land the church stood on were murky, so work—even a simple repair job—could not be carried out by just anyone. If anything was to be done, government officials had to get involved. Moreover, Fiona was dressed plainly enough that day to receive Miranda’s harsh criticism, and her hair was done up. The reserved manner in which she stood probably got her mistaken for a palace lady of the court, a suitable companion for a survey; the villagers saw nothing amiss about her presence.

With a bright smile, Richard made a show of looking at the land around them. “That’s where you come in, mayor. If we do decide to do construction here, we will need space to store our materials and temporary lodging for the builders and their overseer.” He opened his map and directed the mayor’s attention to the area in which they suspected they might find Gordon’s hideout. “Are there any empty houses around here that might suffice?”

The mayor obediently followed his gaze and named a few properties that fell in their target area.

“...and then there’s this house. The first owner was a nobleman, but it has changed hands several times, and its current

owner is unknown. If you check the ledger, you should be able to find out."

"Understood. We'll use our own channels to identify the owners, so there is no need to worry on that front. Now, it would be particularly helpful if this house had a water supply nearby."

"Oh, there is a water supply! There's a small pond that flows off the river right around here."

"All right. While we have a look around, we'll want to rest our horses. Can you take care of that for us, please?"

Richard placed a large handful of coins in the mayor's hand as payment, and the mayor beamed widely, thumped his chest, and accepted. "Yes, yes, it would be my honor, my lords!"

Richard told the mayor that they would return before the sun set, and with that, the trio left the church behind. None of the villagers followed them, not wanting to disturb distinguished gentlemen of the nobility. When Richard whispered to Fiona that they weren't being followed, she turned to him with a relieved smile.

"Lord Russel, you certainly have a knack for getting information out of people."

"Do I? Well, that mayor was much more forthcoming than the ladies of the royal capital. It was easy."

"Terrifying talent you've got there. But it suits you, Rick." Giles sounded half exasperated, half impressed, and Richard gave him a light poke in the shoulder in reply. The levity ended there, however, and Giles's mood quickly darkened. "Now, Fiona."

From the look in his eye, she knew she was about to get an earful, but Fiona held her ground. "Y-yes?"

"On second thought, my sister is to blame."

"No, Lady Miranda had nothing—"

"Excuuuse me, lovebirds, could you maybe leave me out of this?"

Fiona and Giles were walking on either side of Richard, who took a big step forward, not wanting to be caught in the middle of

their argument. Now that she was beside Giles again, Fiona's shoulders shrank in discomfort.

"Um, I asked Lady Miranda for advice," Fiona said. Giles gestured for her to go on, so she pleaded her case: She had acted entirely of her own will, and Miranda was not at fault. "She let me borrow an inconspicuous carriage and a capable driver. I did all of this knowing you would worry and that it was dangerous."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because I couldn't stand just sitting by all alone. Besides, Rudolph said the hideout was a sort of studio. If there's anything to do with art, I might be able to help a little."

"Well, be that as it may…"

Fiona wasn't wrong, and they did not have the luxury of time. Giles and Richard might not have noticed clues involving art, but Fiona would. Besides, they believed the chances of Gordon or any of his accomplices lying in wait for them at the hideout were slim.

Intellectually, Giles knew all of this, but in his heart, something didn't feel right. He knew what it all came down to: "No man wants to put his beloved in danger."

"B-but it's just an act."

"My point stands," he snapped.

Fiona averted her gaze, discomfited and with a distinct pinkness about her cheeks. Truthfully, though, Giles had known in his heart that Fiona would find a way to come. It was Fiona's proactive spunk that had put them in the relationship they were in at this moment.

"However…you're here now."

Sensing forgiveness in his tone, Fiona's eyes lit up. Among all the smiles he had seen recently from her, this was the most unabashed, and he couldn't look away. *Funny time to smile,* he thought.

"I will do my utmost to serve you!" she promised.

Giles was smiling now too. Hearing her proudly retort that she was well aware of the danger and had made peace with it left

him no choice but to relent. “Just, *please* be vigilant,” he commanded.

“I will!”

“And don’t run off alone.”

Giles offered his hand. Fiona dumbly batted her eyes at it for a few seconds, then smiled and took it. “I promise.”

Now that he’d vowed to protect her in person, the rest of the walk was peaceful.

The houses were clustered in the center of the village. As they followed the path that led to the village outskirts, housing became sparse, with fields and grasslands between each home. Using Rudolph’s information, they were able to rule out the first two houses the mayor had told them about, and they passed them by and wandered for a while along the idyllic country road.

“Gil, look. There’s a fence,” said Richard, who was leading the way. He’d turned around and was pointing at a dilapidated fence up ahead.

They jogged eagerly over to it and looked at the house that was set deep within the property. It wasn’t large enough to call a mansion, but the old two-story dwelling was rather ornately built for a farmer. There were no traces of fresh carriage tracks on the path in front of it, and although it was daytime, the windows were shuttered, indicating that nobody lived there. It looked as though the home hadn’t received visitors in quite some time either.

When they reached the front door, they turned around and saw it: the fence and church were visible at exactly the same angles as Rudolph’s drawing. This was the house.

“We found it,” Giles remarked.

“Rudy, my boy, you’re a genius!” Richard crowed.

It was astonishing that Rudolph could draw such an accurate sketch from only a few brief memories of the place. His sketch was so accurately detailed that anyone who hadn’t seen him draw it would assume he had done so while standing right there looking at the scene.

They tried to open the door, but as expected, it was locked. Fiona glanced around them, then turned a perplexed look up at Giles. “What shall we do?”

“Break it down?” Richard suggested.

Ignoring him, Giles pulled a thin tool out of his bag. “We’ll open it,” he said matter-of-factly. In a matter of minutes, the three of them were inside the dimly lit house.

“I can’t believe we broke in,” Fiona whispered.

Giles shrugged. “Oh, that was easy.”

“Easy, my foot,” Richard scoffed. “Gil, sometimes your special skills terrify me.”

The house was dark inside. So as not to draw attention, they opened the shutters only on the windows facing the backyard. A gust of wind that came in with the light and stirred up the dust, giving Richard a mighty coughing fit.

“Ack! Yeah, it’s definitely dusty in here.”

“Oh, I see stairs in the back,” Fiona said.

“They must lead to the basement. Wait, Fiona.” Giles stopped her. “Don’t take the lead.”

Rudolph had said that Gordon locked him up in the basement. Richard, Giles, and Fiona climbed down the stairs. The underground studio was cluttered but much cleaner than they had imagined. Natural light spilled in from the fixed window at the top of the wall, illuminating a meager bed. Fiona was a little relieved to see that the prison wasn’t inhumane.

“Well, I don’t see anything that stands out as strange,” Fiona observed.

The only things that had been left behind were an empty easel, a white canvas, and numerous art supplies such as paints and brushes. Fiona pointed out that the careless way they were scattered about implied that their owner expected to return.

“Then if they are hiding something, it won’t be in here,” Giles decided.

“Um, wait. Please don’t just take my word for it,” Fiona protested.

But Richard agreed. “I don’t think they’d keep anything incriminating in the room where they imprisoned Rudolph, but we might be able to find some clues about the counterfeits here.”

“The counterfeits…”

“Fiona?”

Fiona had the same look in her eye as when she appraised a painting. Her gaze landed on the pile of sketchbooks on the table and, after a nod from Giles, she picked one up and flipped through the pages, holding it so the men could see it with her.

“Aha! This is the rough sketch for the counterfeit painting they sold to the Heywards.”

The book displayed a sketch of the Lammert-style landscape she had seen at Giles’s godmother’s house. As she flipped the pages further, Fiona’s brow furrowed. “It’s that redpoll,” Richard remarked.

“Yes, the Raymond they tried to sell to Lady Miranda,” Fiona said stiffly, nodding to Richard. It seemed that Fiona’s thoughts still dwelled on that painting for some reason.

The sketchbooks contained not only rough sketches and tracings but also rows of artist autographs somebody had practiced. It was more than enough proof that counterfeiting had happened there. Fiona went on to select a few art supplies that could also serve as evidence, and then they returned to the main floor.

“All right, let’s quickly search the other rooms, shall we?” Richard suggested. “I’ll take the second floor, you and Miss Fiona take the first.”

“All right.”

They had previously decided they would spend a half hour at the house; with a supposed land survey as their excuse to be there, they thought the villagers might grow suspicious if they stayed too long, and they did not want to waste too much time on a potential dead end when they should have been thinking up

other strategies instead. Fiona and Giles parted ways with Richard and began a swift search of the first floor.

The living room furniture was covered in cloth, and the chests and closets were empty. They couldn't find any hidden cupboards, and all the kitchen contained was a few broken dishes. *Is this just going to be a complete dead end?* Giles mused.

The red light from the setting sun illuminated footprints on the dusty floor beneath them. "I don't see any evidence that anyone lived up here," Fiona remarked.

"Yeah, it looks like this house's sole purpose was as a place where Gordon could lock up Rudolph and make him paint."

The only part of the first floor that looked like it had seen use was the chaise positioned beside the stairs. Whoever guarded Rudolph was probably stationed there.

The sun began to sink beyond the window. As it set further, its rays grew longer, and things in the house became more difficult to see. Giles and Fiona were pushing back their fears and focusing on finding clues when Richard's startled cry boomed from upstairs. Based on the scurrying sound that followed, he had probably encountered a mouse.

"Fiona, you afraid of mice?"

"Not really, no, though I wouldn't like to encounter a swarm of them—" Fiona, who had turned around at the opposite end of the room, stopped abruptly. "Wait, what's this?"

"Find something?"

"The floor by your feet. That part of the floor, and just that part, is strangely lit."

She meant that one small area of the floor looked unnatural in the light of the setting sun. Giles glanced down but failed to see it right away, so he crouched and strained his eyes. That was when he noticed some thin notches etched along the space between the wooden boards.

Could this be...

He pulled out a knife and inserted it into the narrow crack, using it as a lever to lift the floorboard. After a moment's

resistance, part of the floorboard ripped off.

Fiona's eyes shot open, and Giles yelled up to the second floor. "Rick!"

Richard hurried down the stairs, asking, "Did you find something?" Then his gaze landed on the tiny space that Giles had revealed in the floor. There was a small box tucked inside, and inside the box was a letter. "Is that…"

It was addressed to Otto Gordon, but the sender's name and address were not disclosed. "Blast it," Giles said. "If only there were a return address, we'd know who sent it."

The envelope and the card within were both thick and made of the finest materials. Only a nobleman or another person of great wealth could have sent it to Gordon. The sender's name did not appear inside the card either, but what it did say was illuminating: *"I'm enclosing an invitation to the nighttime soirée at my house. In the antechamber where the black lily painting hangs, you will find Minister Saquille."*

The three of them looked at each other, nodded, and put the hideout behind them.

Chapter 8:
Real and Fake

THE MOMENT HE RECEIVED the order from Giles to search Gordon's gallery, Dennis changed his clothes and had Rudolph change as well.

"Wh-why do I have to wear such frilly clothes?!" Rudolph demanded. He had a nice facial structure, and when his bright golden hair was combed back and he wore a frilled white blouse with an embroidered vest and trousers, he looked like a boy from a well-to-do family.

As Rudolph squirmed and paced in the uncomfortable clothes, Roche observed him gleefully. "It suits you, my boy. Dressed like that, anyone could mistake you for a capital-raised… Well, maybe not that far, but you could certainly pass for a son of a baronet on an incognito excursion."

"Didn't understand a word ya said, old man. C'mon, I could've worn my other clothes!"

"We can't have you dressed as a servant on a secret investigation, can we?"

"Listen, Rudy," Dennis put in, "Gordon won't be at the gallery, but somebody who knows what you look like might be. You have to disguise yourself just in case. Unless you'd like to be locked up in that basement again?"

Rudolph scrunched his face up at Roche, but Dennis's explanation seemed to placate him, if reluctantly. Scowling, he muttered, "If I hafta…"

"Come, let's go," Dennis told him. "And don't even think about making a run for it."

"Like hell I'd run away dressed like a dandy."

"Aww, but I think you look great."

"Sh-shut up!"

“Well, Mr. Roche, we’ll be off. Rudolph, once we arrive at Gordon’s gallery, keep that filthy mouth of yours shut.”

“I bloody know that!”

Gordon’s gallery was a distance from Roche’s but not far enough to warrant a carriage. Continuing to jab each other with light insults, Dennis and Rudolph walked down the streets of the royal capital. Once they left the street on which Roche’s gallery stood, they began to see more and more working-class establishments. A turn onto Low Street, and Gordon’s gallery would be a stone’s throw away.

“Let’s review. You’re a rich boy from out of town. I’m your cousin who works in the capital, and I’m taking you sightseeing.”

“G-gotcha.” Rudolph stared at his unfamiliar, shiny leather shoes as they walked, and Dennis filled him in.

“Next, Rudol—oh, we shouldn’t call you that. Hmm, well, just for today, you’ll be Rufus. And I’ll be Dean.” Their mission was, in a word, reconnaissance. They couldn’t take too many precautions in order to protect their identities.

“Uh, Dean?”

“Uncle Dean is fine with me.”

“Y-you’d never be my *uncle*!”

“Aww, no need to be shy about it.” Dennis chuckled softly.

Rudolph’s eyes wandered dramatically, his freckled cheeks flushing. The way he kept snapping at Dennis was a desperate act of bravado. Though he was out of touch with the world, he was still only thirteen, and he had lost the only person he could call family just half a year prior. And then Gordon had kidnapped him and treated him like a slave. The way he fought and struggled before his first bath rendered even Dennis speechless, but Dennis understood why Rudolph had put up such a fight.

Rudolph knew the name of the village he used to live in, but he had neither the means nor the money to return to it. Besides, even if he were to return, he had no family, and as a minor, it was unrealistic of him to try to make it on his own as a craftsman. Though he was certainly angry with Gordon, his present

circumstances were undoubtably a source of constant worry. In all honesty, the fact that he could cope with his fears by taking them out on Dennis was remarkable.

“Oh! There it is,” Dennis said as the gallery sign came into view. Rudolph, formerly courageous, shrank back. “Don’t worry, son.”

“Worry? I ain’t worried.”

Dennis felt the urge to pat Rudolph on the head, but he stopped himself, not wanting to mess up the boy’s hair. Instead, he gave Rudolph’s skinny back a couple of light pats. “Don’t overlook a single painting you made, you hear?”

“O-of course I won’t.”

“Okay, we’re going in.”

Dennis opened the door, which had a boldly lettered sign above it, and found a salesperson helping a middle-aged couple. The young male clerk turned to look at Dennis and Rudolph and gave them a friendly smile.

“May we see some paintings?” Dennis asked.

“Yes, of course. Take your time.”

All Dennis had done was change his work jacket and tie, but if he acted like the son of a baron, the world would perceive him as one. Rudolph looked a bit annoyed by Dennis’s behavior, but the paintings quickly distracted him into shutting his mouth and turning his focus to the inside of the gallery. The walls of the small space were replete with a menagerie of paintings by all sorts of artists. Unlike Roche’s gallery, there wasn’t a single point of unity among the pieces. The effect was rather cramped and chaotic.

“Rufus, if you see anything you like, be sure to let your old Uncle Dean know.”

“But…” Rudolph realized that Dennis was asking him to tell him if he found any of the counterfeits he had painted. He nodded tentatively. “Uh, s-sure. This one…and this one.”

“Okay.”

“Also this one…”

They acted as naturally as they could, walking slowly around the space and admiring the art. They stopped when they reached a point far away from the clerk, and Dennis crouched down, put his face close to Rudolph's, and whispered, "Oy…did you paint *every single piece* we've passed?"

"That's right."

Though he had only recently started working in Roche's gallery, and some ignorance could be excused, when it came to art, Dennis still could not distinguish between real, fake, or even good or bad. Regardless, he struggled to believe that all the pieces of fine art on display in the gallery had been painted by the boy next to him.

"What about the rest of the paintings?"

"I painted 'em all except the one at the end."

"What? You even painted the one that couple is debating whether to buy?" The middle-aged couple who had entered the gallery before Dennis and Rudolph stood several paintings away from them, discussing a piece with the clerk. Rudolph had claimed to have painted that one too. "Just how many paintings did you make, boy?"

"I never told ya that, did I?" Rudolph pouted.

Dennis pressed a hand to his forehead. They had been tasked with seeing whether there were any counterfeit paintings, and here he'd discovered that they were *all* counterfeit. "This can't be," he muttered. "So, only the one at the end isn't yours? Is it a counterfeit somebody else painted?"

"Dunno. I ain't seen it before."

In the midst of this hushed conversation, the clerk approached them, a wide smile on his face. "Pardon me, gentlemen. Have you found anything you like?"

Dennis looked up at the friendly man and put on his most polite expression. "You have quite the collection."

"You humble me, sir. All the pieces in the gallery were sold to us directly by the artists themselves or their families."

"That's a lie—"

Dennis put an arm around Rudolph's shoulder and shot him a silencing look. "Oh, the owner of your gallery must be popular." He nodded at Rudolph, who was still scowling, and smiled at the clerk. "By the way, are all the pieces here originals?"

"Oh yes, of course! They are each one of a kind, so if you don't buy one now, you'll never have a chance again."

"Is that also true of the flower painting in the corner?"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, sir, but that one is not for sale."

"That so? What a pity. Would you mind if I got a closer look, at least?"

"Of course, sir. Right this way."

The smiling clerk led them past the middle-aged couple to the painting Rudolph had not recognized. It was a beautifully colored portrait of flowers with roses as the main focus.

"That's a very nice painting. Are you sure it isn't for sale?"

The clerk treated Dennis to a sympathetic frown. "I'm afraid not. This is from the gallery owner's personal collection."

With an air of regret, Dennis approached the painting and squinted at the tiny signature on the left-hand side. "Justine Poiret...?"

"She was an artist from a neighboring kingdom before the war. For a time, she was a court painter here in the capital." To be sure, as a painter from an enemy nation, most of her paintings would have been destroyed during the war. The clerk explained that few had survived. "Not many know of her anymore. You might call her a phantom artist."

"Huh. A phantom, you say."

The clerk went on to tell them, proudly, that the painting was quite rare. But the gallery contained only paintings by famous artists. For what purpose would it display exactly one painting that was not for sale and was not only rare but from an unknown artist? Dennis pondered this and came up blank.

"Sir, if you like this flower painting, then perhaps you might like this piece overs here. If you wish to buy it immediately, I can

offer you a discount…”

Dennis let the sales pitch go in one ear and out the other. He was straining his ears to hear the middle-aged couple’s discussion.

“Darling, it’s just too expensive.”

“I know, but—”

It seemed they had been torn over the price this whole time. The painting they were considering was a landscape piece that portrayed a town illuminated by the setting sun. It was the sort of pastoral scene you could have found anywhere, but the gentle brushstrokes captured the beautiful moment perfectly, and the artist it mimicked was so famous that even Dennis, ignorant of art as he was, knew the name.

Dennis’s glanced down at Rudolph, the painting’s true artist, who was watching the arguing couple with discomfort plain on his face. “Do you think that couple will buy?” Dennis asked the clerk.

“Well, they’ve come here many times, but they can’t seem to make up their minds.” Judging by their attire and their unsophisticated manner, the middle-aged couple were commoners. As such, the clerk was cruder with them than he was with Dennis. “They run a shop and are looking for a painting to display at the till.”

“Ah, I see.” Displaying a painting by a famous artist would certainly increase traffic to their shop, and the more valuable the painting, the further word would spread. From the look of them, however, the couple had no experience buying expensive art. Dennis asked, “Incidentally, how much is it?”

“One hundred fifty,” the clerk murmured discreetly.

“What the—?! That’s boll—oomf!”

The price was the average middle class person’s yearly salary. It was a hundred times what most prints would sell for. Dennis clamped a hand over Rudolph’s mouth before he could scream in shock. Keeping his own dignified manner intact, he said, “Well, that sounds about right.”

“It’s small, but it’s a Lammert. That’s a steal.”

Dennis suppressed every urge to add, “Were it an original…”

The fact that the couple had been there many times indicated that they meant to withdraw their meager savings to buy the perfect painting for themselves and their shop. Instead, all they would get was a fake that Rudolph had painted.

"But they can't," Rudolph muttered bitterly when Dennis's hand left his mouth.

As Rudolph and Dennis watched, the husband gently shoved his worried wife aside and turned to face the salesclerk. When Dennis saw the clear panic in Rudolph's eyes, he whisked him behind his elbow to obscure him from the clerk's view.

"Have we made a decision?" the clerk asked.

"Y-yes. We'd like to buy—"

"No! Don't do it!"

As Rudolph's dam of patience finally burst, Dennis casually slipped over to the wife of the couple, pretended to trip, and collided with her. As luck would have it, a button from Dennis's jacket caught on the lace adorning her shawl. "Whoa there, pardon me! Oh dear, look at what I've done, I've ripped your lace!"

"Huh?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Please, you must let me make it up to you." Dennis turned to the clerk. "Sorry to cut our chat short. We'll come again later."

Then Dennis nudged the couple out of the gallery, Rudolph scurrying after them. Once they were a distance from Gordon's gallery, Dennis led them straight to a ladies' clothing shop. The boutique door opened with a jingling bell, and Dennis murmured something into the clerk's ear and turned back to the couple.

"I truly am sorry. I'd like to make it up to you. Please select any shawl from this shop that you'd like."

"Um, s-sir?!"

"One more thing, don't buy art from that gallery."

"Huh?!"

The couple's jaws dropped. Dennis put on his most congenial smile and lowered his voice. "Go to a shop that sells originals, not

fakes."

"Th-that was a fake?"

Dennis lowered his tone even further and said somberly, "I advise you stay away from that gallery for your safety. Got it?"

After a moment's bewildered hesitation, the couple nodded. Then Dennis pushed them, still dazed, into the boutique, assumed an innocent expression, and left with Rudolph. "Satisfied?"

By way of reply, Rudolph stuck out his tongue. Dennis smirked and seized his chance to give Rudolph's hair a good tussle. "Agh!" Rudolph cried. "C-cut it out!"

"You're a real softie, you know?"

"What gives? You saying this is *my* fault?!" Rudolph's eyes glistened faintly with tears. He looked angry but relieved.

He'd been ordered to paint, so he painted. He didn't know what his paintings would be used for, nor did he care to find out. Of course he had no idea what to do when he encountered that couple looking to buy one of his counterfeits.

All he knew was that his heart hurt like hell.

Rudolph shuddered. "Son of a bitch..." Even if nobody ever found out the painting was counterfeit, they still would have paid a ridiculous sum for a fake. It wasn't real. That made Rudolph feel so bitter, so frustrated.

"Effectively, you almost conned that poor couple," Dennis told him.

Rudolph stood in silence. The couple's fondness for the painting was undoubtedly genuine, but if they learned that what they thought was a genuine painting was in fact a counterfeit, every glimpse of the painting would serve as a reminder that they had been conned.

"What's more, not a penny of what they would have paid for that painting would have gone to you or the original artist. Worse, if people discovered that it was a fake, that would negatively impact further sales or events by the artist. Do you understand what all of that means?"

Rudolph clenched his fists. They felt dirty to him. It was all Gordon's fault...but Gordon's con would not have succeeded without Rudolph's paintings.

"I know it's cruel of me to say this, but you are partially at fault for this."

There was a long pause. "I know that," Rudolph said finally.

A big hand landed softly on his matted hair. Rudolph scowled and complained that it hurt. Dennis led him, wiping his eyes on his sleeves, back to Roche's gallery.

Chapter 9:
Roses at the Estate Garden

FIONA LOOKED OVER the letters from the gallery that had been delivered to her room at the marquess's estate as Dennis debriefed her on what had happened at Gordon's gallery.

"Oh dear," she said. "Poor Rudolph."

"Yes, he seemed quite distraught. Then again, he was only teary for a moment there, and by the time we returned to Gallery Roche, he was back to his normal self."

While Dennis's reassuring tone did console her, Fiona was gutted to hear that nearly every painting at Gordon's gallery was a fake. *I took him for a man who belittled art,* she thought, *but the truth is, he couldn't care less.*

As it turned out, she had been correct in her suspicion that Gordon did not possess a mite of respect for art or artists. Some art collectors thought of art as only a commodity to be traded for money—and even that would have been preferable to the truth.

Deep in her heart, however, Fiona still felt that something was amiss.

Given that he had the skills of a con man, Fiona supposed that it should all make sense. Making counterfeits required knowledge as well as time. The counterfeiter needed to first familiarize themselves with an artist's favored motifs and themes, then select the proper tools for the job.

That redpoll painting really had looked like something Raymond would have painted, and similar things could be said for the other paintings Fiona had appraised. Gordon seemed strangely well researched for a man who thought nothing of art. By Rudolph's account, Gordon had drawn most of the sketches for the counterfeits, and even when he gave Rudolph free rein, he still personally scrutinized the composition thoroughly. Was it possible for someone to have such a deep understanding of something they disliked or had no interest in?

Everything he's done seems very inconsistent, to boot. Most con men would go into hiding if their counterfeits were exposed, yet Gordon's shop was still open. It was unlikely that his employees would keep the shop running without him of their own accord, so Gordon must have given his people some orders, even if only a few. That was strange, because if anyone followed the lines of communication, they might discover his whereabouts.

It feels like he's leaving too much of this to chance. Something just isn't right.

Selling paintings to nobles who might like them was one thing, but there was no guarantee the nobles would buy them. For example, the painting he brought to the Marquess of Molins—Richard's family—was not sold. That left the possibility of the entire con operation amounting to a waste of time.

It was half a year ago that Rudolph was taken to the abandoned house they had searched. On the one hand, Gordon took time and care meticulously setting things in motion; on the other, his actions were irresponsible. That dissonance just didn't sit right with Fiona. What's more, his objective in selling the paintings was not money but to sow discord between the feuding factions in parliament.

And he looked at me with such contempt. When Fiona exposed Gordon's painting as a forgery, Hans described the way he looked at her as resentful, but to Fiona, it looked less like resentment and more like hatred. *At the end of the day, what is Gordon really trying to do?*

They didn't know Gordon's true intentions and consequently couldn't take preventative measures against them, hence Giles's insistence that Fiona be kept in a safe place. Fiona needed to do what digging she could on her end as well. She had forced her way into the abandoned house search, but that wasn't a strategy she could rely on. All Fiona could do now was warn people against counterfeit paintings whenever the marchioness took her on social outings. It drove her crazy that she couldn't be more helpful.

"Fiona, is something the matter?" Dennis asked.

“Uh, well, how should I put it… I was just coming to a belated understanding of how crazy it was for you to take Rudolph with you to Gordon’s gallery.”

Fiona understood that it was the fastest way to apprise themselves of the current situation and look for clues regarding the counterfeits and that they knew Gordon himself would not be there. But the fact remained that they had marched into enemy territory.

Of course, I must admit that Rudolph looks like a completely different person now. The big eyes that glared at her; the rough, straw-colored hair that stood wild as he was dragged, kicking and screaming, to the second floor for a bath—those details remained vivid in her memory. The Rudolph she saw the other day was someone else, different both in overall appearance and in his face. He looked so mature as he stood before the canvas, utterly unlike the dirty street urchin they had encountered in the alley.

People could change so drastically, and in such a short span of time. Fiona only hoped, for his sake and the sake of everyone in his life, that the change in Rudolph would bring about something good.

“Yes, that was a rather daring tactic,” Dennis agreed with a sheepish grin. “But not at all surprising, coming from Lord Lowell. He can be quite aggressive. Never to the point of recklessness, but let’s just say he’s thorough.”

“Thorough… Yes, I think that’s a great word for him.”

For some reason, it felt like a perfect fit. One could also describe Giles as *thorough* when it came to his performance as Fiona’s lover. The ring on her finger was evidence of that, as was the tone in his voice when he told her, “No man wants to put his beloved in danger.” These details, along with the memory at the opera house, flooded Fiona’s mind, and she looked away from the sparkling gemstone in a panic.

D-didn’t happen! This thing, that thing, none of the things happened, Fiona!

Those words, those actions, had just spilled out of Giles on a whim. He did not even remember them, so Fiona convinced

herself that there was no point in getting worked up over any of it.

Oh dear, I'm a mess. I need to calm down.

"He does have that 'if you're going to do something, commit to it fully' quality to him, yes," Dennis agreed. "Well, he's always been like that. Wait, Miss Fiona? Are you blush—"

"D-Dennis, you sure know Lord Giles well, don't you?" Fiona fired back, hiding her hot face with some papers. "I heard that you didn't know Lord Giles before you started working at the gallery, but was that incorrect?"

Her suspicion that Giles and Dennis were old acquaintances became a conviction with the words "He's always been like that."

"Uh… Oh! Um, well, the thing is… W-well, he's famous, isn't he!"

"That so?" she asked playfully.

"Miss Fiona…" he groaned uncomfortably.

Fiona felt guilty for what she had just done, even though it was to distract from her own rising emotions. Really, though, she had been wanting to see if her suspicion was correct. "I feel kind of guilty now," she admitted.

"Wh-whatever for?"

"Dennis, you've been my bodyguard, haven't you?"

"What?!"

"Though I'm sure you were ordered to keep it a secret from me."

Dennis slapped his cheek. "How long have you known?"

"Umm…probably since day one."

"Argh, are you serious?"

As Dennis hung his head, Fiona thought she could almost hear the droning dirge of embarrassment fill the air around him. She felt bad about it, yes, but she couldn't help but giggle. "I'm sorry, but the timing was just too perfect."

"Ah, right. Yes, I suppose it was rather obvious."

At times, out of concern for her safety, Giles had recommended getting Fiona a bodyguard. It was just around that time that Roche hired an incompetent employee who happened to be a recent military retiree—and conveniently worked right under Fiona. She wasn't so dense as to miss all that.

"I didn't say anything because I figured you all wanted me not to know about it," Fiona explained.

"I'm so sorry. I let my guard slip just now, but Miss Fiona, I promise you, they were only—"

"I know. They were only doing this to help me, and they would only have arranged for me to have a bodyguard if there was a good reason for it first." She smiled at him. "Am I wrong?"

Dennis threw up his hands in defeat. "You're right. Yes, part of it was they were worried about what move Gordon might make next, but somebody has also been scheming against you, Miss Fiona."

"Really?" *No way. That's news to me!*

Fiona encouraged Dennis, wide-eyed, to elaborate. With a grim look in his eye, he finally opened up. "They've sent threatening letters, had somebody waiting for you, that sort of thing."

"Ah. So that's why Mr. Roche started sending you to the post office and bank instead of me." Now that Fiona finally knew why she was no longer sent out on errands, even though her ankle had healed, everything began to make a great deal of sense.

Dennis's expression darkened further. Slowly and with evident discomfort, he said, "Yes. And it wasn't only the noblewoman who was waiting for you. We discovered people who appeared to be hired men snooping around the gallery."

"Goodness, that's obstruction of business!"

"It's all right. They were stationed on the street opposite ours and didn't affect customers coming and going, so—wait a minute. *That's* what you're worried about?!"

"Well, we don't want our customers harmed, do we?"

“Of course not, and they’re fine—*no*, I mean, worry about yourself, woman!”

“Um…okay.”

“Seriously, please be more careful. If you wait until something bad happens to you, it will be too late.”

Fiona paused and took this in. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” This time, she scrunched into a little ball under Dennis’s intimidation.

Now that she knew the whole story, Giles’s fear and Hans’s distress when she ran off into the alley to chase Rudolph seemed perfectly reasonable to Fiona. No, she didn’t know she was under protection at the time, but that was still not something she should have done. Only now did she understand why she had been ordered time and time again not to go out alone. It seemed too late to apologize, but she felt horrible.

Dennis gave Fiona another push for good measure before he continued his explanation. The threatening letters were thought to have come from jealous ladies with their sights set on Giles, but the sketchy men who had, on more than one occasion, lurked around the gallery waiting for her were hired thugs, and their descriptions of the person who hired them fit Gordon to a T.

“Does Gordon really detest me so?” Fiona mused.

“Yet we couldn’t get a word of news on Gordon. That was why we were extra cautious.”

One of the goons thought to have been hired by Gordon testified, with a thin smirk on his face, “He seemed obsessed with that plain Jane of a noblewoman.” The flash of subzero malice in Giles’s eyes when he heard those words froze Dennis’s spine. The grim reality that Gordon was trying to harm Fiona was something Giles took very seriously. Then they’d discovered that Gordon was not only after revenge for Fiona busting his counterfeit painting scheme but also conspiring to start a faction war in parliament and get the royal family involved.

With all of this in play, it was only natural that simply assigning Dennis as Fiona’s bodyguard was insufficient to ease Giles’s worries. In Dennis’s opinion, making Fiona stay at the Marchioness of Heyward’s house (albeit a bit forcefully) and

restricting her movement outside was the most optimal countermeasure.

“The jealous noblewomen stopped sending so many letters; perhaps they finally gave up. And ever since Mr. Roche proposed a private security force for the League of Shopkeepers, Bay Street has become notoriously one of the safest streets in the capital.”

“Now it all makes sense.” It seemed that a lot of changes had taken place during the period in which Roche kept Fiona in the back of the shop.

Dennis, who had Fiona’s rapt attention as he stood before her, gave Fiona a doe-like look. “We kept the fact that I’m your bodyguard a secret so as not to worry you, Miss Fiona, so your reaction is not what I expected. Um, aren’t you afraid?”

“It’s not that I’m not afraid, but…Lord Giles is popular, you know? I figured involving myself with someone like him was bound to earn me some ire, so I was mentally prepared for it from the start.” If anything, she had found it unsettling that people *weren’t* sending her threats. She had been on the receiving end of some evil eyes and foul gossip in passing at parties, but nothing more; the peace had felt anticlimactic. But it wasn’t that nothing was happening, merely that she was sheltered from it all.

Even after she surmised that Dennis was her bodyguard, she remained unaware of and indifferent to the hatred directed at her. But she was only able to remain blissfully ignorant because she was sheltered in a place where no harm could reach her.

Once again, Fiona was in awe of Giles, who went to such great lengths for a person he was only courting on a contract with an expiration date. She felt a great appreciation for Dennis now, as well, for protecting her in secret.

“Everything about Gordon took me by surprise, but I never once felt afraid,” she assured Dennis, looking him right in the eye. “I have all of you to thank for that. Thank you, Dennis.”

To be thanked from the bottom of Fiona’s heart seemed to catch Dennis off guard. For a moment, his cheeks flushed red. “But I, uh, don’t deserve your gratitude. How do I say this…? Miss Fiona,

you have nerves of steel. I think you would do fine as a countess, so you should just drop the act and make it real."

He muttered these words so softly Fiona couldn't quite make out what he said. "Huh? Come again?"

Dennis waved both hands, flustered. "N-nothing, Miss! Um, what were we talking about? Oh, r-right! Rudolph! Anyway, it turned out that bringing him with me to Gordon's gallery was no problem." He was forcing a change of subject, but Fiona already had most of the answers she was looking for, so she decided to let Dennis speak. "All it took was the right clothes and he really looked like a well-bred son of an aristocrat. Pity he ripped off those clothes the minute we returned to the gallery."

Fiona giggled, imagining Rudolph all dolled up. "I wish I could have seen that." Dennis gave her a critical look.

"But, Miss Fiona, you also look terribly different."

"I do?"

"You've gotten very pretty all of a sudden. It startled me. Well, not that you weren't pretty before, of course!"

That morning, Fiona had again been pampered, beautified, and immaculately dressed at the insistence of the marchioness's staff. All she had to do that day was work, so she would have been fine to wear her everyday clothes, but instead she was cinched into another tight corset and adorned in an elegant dress.

"I suppose when you're pretty to begin with, that only makes people want to polish you to an even greater shine," Dennis added.

Nobody was made more uncomfortable by Fiona's transformation than Fiona herself. All the praise from the maids and Dennis made her feel quite antsy. "D-Dennis, don't make fun of me."

"No, no, no! I can flatter people out of kindness when necessary, yes, but I'm not a liar."

"Ha ha! What's that supposed to mean?" She laughed off his difficult-to-accept compliment, then changed the subject again. "So what is Rudolph up to now?"

“We’ve put him to work on simple tasks in the back of the gallery. There’s no need to appraise his skills as an artist anymore, but we can’t exactly put him to work restoring art. That being said, idle hands are the devil’s workshop; we had to give him something to do.”

Rudolph had said that when he worked for the art restorer, he did simple tasks around the studio. Comparatively, grunt work at the gallery was much easier, so Rudolph was rather enjoying himself. This was a relief for Fiona to hear.

“He really does have deft fingers,” Dennis continued. Fiona could see the fondness in his eyes as he spoke about Rudolph. “He repaired the ill-fitting drawers, and that’s enough to make him a treasured asset here. He’s showing no signs of running away either—he even demanded that Mr. Roche pay him a salary. He’s a strong boy, that one. Though he did seem greatly bothered by the fact that there are people out there who bought the counterfeit paintings he made.”

“I can understand that. If only he could refund them…”

Gordon, of course, wouldn’t follow up with anyone who bought paintings from him. It was honestly doubtful that he even kept customer records. In a perfect world, they would send the police and an investigation team from the academy to Gordon’s gallery immediately and shut them down—but if they pulled the curtain then, with the mastermind still at large, Gordon would only repeat the same scheme wherever it was he ran off to.

To prevent future crimes, their only recourse was to let the current crimes slide. What a frustrating situation. But if they wanted to keep more people like Rudolph from being used and cast aside, they really did need to find Gordon.

As Fiona pondered all of this, Dennis’s eyes lit up in a sudden recollection. “That’s right! I just remembered. Fiona, have you heard of an artist named Justine Poiret?”

“Poiret… You mean the court painter? I haven’t seen any of her work in person, but I have heard of her.”

“Gee, that’s impressive. So you do know of her. Well, we saw one of her paintings in Gordon’s gallery.” He explained to Fiona

that it was the only painting in the gallery not made by Rudolph.

The only original painting in a collection of counterfeits, Fiona thought. *That seems significant.* She pondered the matter even more deeply, but Dennis looked at the clock, panicked, and jumped back to work.

"Uh, anyway, that ought to be all the documents you requested."

"Yes, they're all here. Thank you."

"I'll come again tomorrow. If there's anything else you need, let me know then. Come to think of it, I don't see Lord Lowell. Is he not here yet?"

"Huh? Um, that's right."

"Then he'll be here any minute, I assume."

"But I made no such appointment—"

"Ha ha ha! You don't need an appointment. Mark my words, he'll be here."

The cheery confidence in Dennis's voice made Fiona's heart sing. Giles did sometimes carve time out of his busy schedule to pop in at the gallery. If he did so today, it would go a long way toward putting Fiona at ease in her new living arrangement, which was so far above her means. And though present circumstances were far from those she originally anticipated, to Fiona, who felt she was nothing more than a lover-by-contract, Giles's behavior did seem excessive.

Even on my first night here, he came to see me and—ack! I wasn't supposed to remember that!

Fiona stood up quickly to see Dennis off (and obscure the flush in her face). A knock came at the cracked-open door across from where she stood, and one of the marchioness's servants poked his head in. "Pardon me. Lord Lowell is here to see you."

Wh-what are the odds?!

Dennis assumed a smug, victorious expression, and Fiona glared at him in bitter defeat. He said, "See, what did I tell you? Well, I'll be on my way."

“No, wait!”

“Huh?”

I just can’t do this! Fiona was incapable of acting normal with all these unwanted memories bombarding her, so who could blame her for not wanting to be alone with Giles? Her hand shot out and grabbed Dennis by the sleeve to keep him from leaving.

“I just want you to stay a little longer. Won’t you?”

“Um, what?! Miss Fiona—”

“Dennis, please.”

“But I can’t! I’ll get in trouble—argh!”

“…What are you doing?”

A sudden chill set over the room. In his haste to get away from Fiona, Dennis had thrown the hand she had on his sleeve high into the air—as if he was trying to pin her to the wall.

“F-forgive me, Lieutenant Commander! The jig is up!”

“What?”

“I’ll take my punishment later! Excuse meeeee!” Seeing his opening, Dennis tossed Fiona’s hand away and flew from the room like a gust of wind.

“Ah!” Fiona stood there dumbly, staring after him with an outstretched arm. “Dennis?”

It was only when somebody took her hand that she returned to her senses. Her gaze followed her hand until her eyes met Giles’s, which were looking down at her, filled with some indescribable emotion. “Fiona…”

His voice sounded different to her. His hand felt unnaturally cold. Fiona blinked in confusion at the faint lines of nervousness on his face.

Nervous? Why? That was the last emotion Giles needed to feel around Fiona. It came as such a surprise to her that the waves of terror in her own heart came to a standstill.

She waited a good ten seconds for him to say something.

Wait a minute, didn’t Dennis just call Giles—

“‘Lieutenant Commander?’”

“What were you and Dennis—”

Argh! We spoke at the same time!

How many times had they done that? Fiona looked at him, cursing their bad timing, and an impatient giggle finally escaped her. Giles followed suit, an awkward smile forming on his lips.

“We seem to speak over each other a lot,” she remarked.

“We do. So, ‘Lieutenant Commander’—that’s what Dennis meant when he said the jig was up?”

“Oh! Um, no, I found out that he’s my bodyguard.” *It must also be true, then, that Giles and Dennis served in the same platoon,* Fiona thought, *but that’s news to me.*

She hadn’t planned to chastise Giles, but he awkwardly averted his gaze all the same. “I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you.”

“Oh, no, I should apologize to you,” she insisted. “I didn’t know about the threatening letters or the strange men stalking me. Um, I’m sorry. I needed to stay put more than anyone, and I caused you so much aggravation.”



As Fiona's shoulders slumped in shame, Giles's grip on her hand tightened. "But I kept you in the dark. And besides…"

"Lord Giles?"

It was unusual for Giles to struggle to speak. She peered into his eyes, but he just swallowed his words and looked away. It was clear he didn't do so out of hate or resentment, but it still hurt a little to be ignored like that.

Feeling deflated, Fiona looked down and noticed the bag Giles was carrying. "What's in the bag?"

"O-oh, right. There's something I want to show you."

Something for me? But he didn't have to…

Giles was a busy man. If he needed to give something to Fiona, he could have easily entrusted the task to a servant. Perhaps he had more time to spare than she thought.

Fiona adjusted her hand, still in his steadfast grip, and squeezed his. "Um, Lord Giles, if you're free, would you like to go out into the garden?"

"The garden?"

"I was informed that there's a gazebo out there, but I haven't seen it yet."

The garden overflowed with flowers. Many generations past, a marquess had sectioned off the spacious land with hedges, creating many smaller gardens that each possessed its own unique elegance. The beautiful garden had since been passed down through the generations. It was the pride and joy of the Heyward family, who had told Fiona to spend as much time there as she wished during her stay. However, between looking at the art in the mansion on some days and traveling on others, she had not yet paid the garden a visit.

A change of scenery is sure to lighten the mood, she thought. Alone in a room with Giles, she was prone to remembering all sorts of things she shouldn't, and Giles seemed uncomfortable as well now that his secret had been exposed. It would be much less stressful for both of them to speak in an open place like the

garden rather than in a room where they had nothing to look at but each other's faces.

"It's a lovely day too. I think it will be quite cozy."

"You're right," Giles said at last. Seeing the relief on his face made Fiona's eyes sparkle. She quickly put away the letters and documents Dennis had brought for her, and they headed outside.

Intersecting brick paths overlaid the Heyward garden, and flowers grew between them like patchwork. Partitioned with hedges, each section boasted its own theme, decorated with complementary colors and flower varieties in an exquisite composition. Letting Giles lead the way, Fiona took in the magnificent scene as she walked.

"The gazebo's over there," Giles said.

"All right."

Giles had been visiting the Heyward mansion since he was a boy, but being interested in neither flowers nor gardens, he hadn't played in the garden often. He chuckled sheepishly, recounting a time when he broke a branch with a stray ball and felt extra remorseful about it because the gardeners, who were not allowed to yell at the child of a guest, could only look on in sorrow.

Fiona smiled, picturing a young, impish Giles. "I still think you were more polite and well-behaved than I was as a child."

"True; I never fell into a river or out of a tree."

"Hey! Is it really fair to bring that up?" Fiona turned her red face away in a huff. It was foul play for Giles to bring up something from her past that he had only learned about the other day.

"Ha ha! Sorry." The merry sound of Giles's laughter was music to her ears.

"Lord Giles, I doubt you feel at *all* sorry."

With a mischievous gleam in his eye, Giles pointed up at Fiona's second-floor window. "Not to rehash an old argument, but I still don't want you jumping out that window."

"I-I most certainly won't!" She injected an angry edge into her voice, but in truth, Fiona's heart felt much lighter now. *Oh, thank*

goodness. Going outside was a good call.

The rift between them had blown away on a gust of wind. Their eyes met, and they each cracked a smile. What a relief it was to have their old dynamic back.

As they chatted casually, traversing the garden, the six-cornered gazebo finally came into view. “Wow!” Fiona breathed. The walls were built of chestnut-colored wood, the roof was shingled, and it was surrounded by red roses and daylilies in full bloom.

Giles’s gaze softened as Fiona let out an unbridled gasp of joy. “Nothing but red flowers here,” he remarked. That meant the dahlia buds would bloom red as well.

He led Fiona by the hand into the gazebo. It looked tiny from the outside, but inside, it was quite spacious; four or even five people could sit comfortably. Colorful glass lanterns hung from the ceiling, and a bench ran in a circle along the walls. Flowers that had come off in that morning’s pruning were arranged on a ceramic plate on the center table.

“Lovely, isn’t it,” Fiona sighed as she sat. All she could see were red flowers and blue sky. All she could hear was the quiet chirping of birds and the distant snipping sounds of the gardener’s shears. What a dreamlike space.

“You seem to like it.”

Fiona beamed as brightly as the roses. “Well,” she said earnestly, “the barony is in the countryside, so we do have lots of greenery and flowers, but none of our property is as well manicured as this.” When Giles turned around and she saw him, standing before her with the garden as a backdrop, that fateful night came back to her. “That’s right… You and I met in a garden.”

A tiny, brightly lit palace garden. It felt like ages since that gloomy night when she had been so desperate to find a way to stop her engagement to Norman. Not so much time had passed, really, but each day was packed so full that it felt like much longer.

“Ah yes, the party for the prince. That was quite some time ago.”

“It feels that way to you too?” Fiona asked, amused that they had felt the same thing. Giles took a seat next to her. He could have sat across from her to talk, yet he sat beside her. Fiona giggled. “I’ve grown accustomed to sitting beside you.”

“Seems like it.” Thanks to the rigorous conditioning of their association, Fiona wasn’t nervous in his presence anymore. Giles gave her relaxed smile and a satisfied nod, which put a question in Fiona’s mind.

“We managed to pause my engagement announcement to Norman, but how are things on your end, Lord Giles?”

He had been receiving fewer pushy advances since that party. Fiona herself could have attested to that, having attended numerous parties with him. *Though it doesn’t seem like Lady Caroline has given up yet…* Giles was an impeccable escort, but although Fiona never spoke directly with Lady Caroline, she still felt the woman’s sharp gaze piercing her at times. There were other possessive noble ladies in Giles’s periphery, of course, but they now watched him from a greater distance.

Giles answered that he could get much more work done now that he didn’t have to waste so much time dodging women. That being said, Fiona knew nothing of the official proposals sent to the earl directly. She had heard that there weren’t as many, but she never pressed for further details.

She asked him about it now, and Giles’s eyes rounded in surprise at Fiona’s timid curiosity, then quickly softened. “The offers sent straight to my parents haven’t trickled to a complete halt, but nobody brings their daughters over unannounced anymore. Most notably, it’s much easier to turn them down now. You’re really saving me.”

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear that!” It was true; she really was relieved. She wondered what she would have done if her efforts as a fake lover had no effect.

“Were you worried? But you could tell that much just by looking.”

“Perhaps, but you’re good at hiding things, Lord Giles. I thought maybe you were sparing my feelings.” Giles fell silent; she

had struck a nerve. Anxious not to be misunderstood, Fiona shook her head. “Oh! No! I wasn’t chastising you, honest! It really doesn’t bother me that you kept Dennis’s assignment as my bodyguard a secret. I mean, I’ve had a secret or two of my own, like Uncle Talbot; I never told you about him.”

Despite her best efforts to explain, Giles’s expression remained unpleasant. He didn’t seem angry, however—he seemed like he was sulking.

You know…I’m kind of flattered he feels that way. It was an ironclad rule in noble society: Hide your true intentions and interact superficially with others. Only family and close friends tended to know one’s true nature.

Had they remained inside, they wouldn’t have found themselves discussing this. Getting to see that look on Giles’s face alone made coming outside worth it. Fiona silently gave her past self a pat on the back for asking him out to the garden.

“I was just worried,” Fiona elaborated. “If everything I’ve been doing wasn’t working, I wasn’t sure how I could fix that.”

“I see. And how might you fix it?”

“I arrived at the conclusion that we’d have to get new fake lovers.”

“Wait. Slow down, Fiona. Why that?”

“Well, if we’re putting on our best act and yet nobody else believes us, what’s the point?”

If the problem lay in who they’d chosen as their partner in crime, they should recast the roles. That ought to have been self-evident to Giles, yet he looked displeased.

“So let’s say I find some other lady—who would you choose as your fake lover, Fiona?”

“Who would I choose?” Fiona repeated, wide-eyed. The question was so unexpected that for a moment that she didn’t under stand it. Finally, though, she caught his meaning. “I wouldn’t choose anyone. All I’d have to do is crawl in bed and cry, ‘My heart is freshly broken, I can’t possibly think of marriage!’ and I’d be golden.” Knowing her father, if she acted truly depressed, he

would postpone her engagement announcement until the following season.

Somehow, Giles still didn't seem convinced. He leaned forward and faced Fiona. Their gazes locked in the tight space; there was nowhere else to look. "All right, then," he said, his low voice sweeping over Fiona along with a chilly early summer breeze. "Who do you think would be a suitable match for me?"

"Um… Well, that's a good question…"

Which lady would be a suitable, equal match to Giles? A score of faces entered her mind, including Caroline's. Each was beautiful in her own way, and each seemed a better match for Giles than Fiona. To distract herself from the stinging pain in her heart, she pressed her slightly tense hand to her chin thoughtfully.

A pair of grayish-blue eyes stared unrelentingly at her, demanding an answer. A storm surged in her heart again.

"It's hard to offer specifics. Um, if I had to say, perhaps somebody like Lady Miranda? Someone pretty and with grace."

"Please, anyone but my sister."

Giles's face fell into his palm, though even he had to admit that he and his sister made a lovely tableau standing side by side. If Miranda were a large rose, Fiona would be the oxalis or buttercup growing beneath it. When she told Giles this, however, he retorted that he didn't know what oxalises or buttercups were, and he couldn't have cared less about roses.

"Aw, but it's such a lovely flower," she sighed.

"They have thorns. See? Like that one right next to you."

Fiona turned to look where he was pointing. A beautiful flower was poking its little head through a slit in the gazebo wall. It did, of course, have thorns. She moved her hand away and shifted her sitting position to avoid it, but this only put her in even closer proximity to Giles.

"Anyway, I don't need a rose," Giles said.

"Is that so? Well, if you don't want a rose, then I think a cattleya or another kind of orchid would suit you," she said. Giles only frowned dubiously at her—and it suddenly hit Fiona. "Lord

Giles…correct me if I'm wrong, but is rose the only flower whose name you know?"

He looked like the perfect nobleman—and indeed he was—but he did seem to have a blind spot for flower names. She supposed that, having actively avoided interacting with women all his life, he never would have sent anyone else a bouquet.

"I know…a few flowers. Like…lilies."

The way he scowled and looked away reminded Fiona of the impish little boy she had imagined him to be in childhood. Suddenly, she was overwhelmed with the urge to take little Giles by the hand and walk him through the garden, telling him the names of every flower they passed.

He would hate that. He'd rather climb trees. Then he would scold Fiona for being too reckless. The fantasy was so comical, even to her, that she couldn't help but chuckle.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Well, Lord Giles—ha ha!—you're just so adorable."

"I'm a-ador—?!"

Giles's eyes swam uncomfortably over the unexpected adjective. That candid display of emotion warmed Fiona's heart.

This seems a strange observation for me to make after all this time, but Giles is just a typical man, isn't he? Fiona thought. In work, in marriage, in his entire way of life, he was a man of duty. But that aside, he didn't prioritize his own needs; that was what it meant to be the heir to a historic and renowned family.

He was blessed, yet his life was restricted in so many ways. Fiona wished that he would at least let himself relax a little when he was with her, but she feared her wish could not be granted. *This is only temporary…until the end of the season.*

Giles's vulnerability with Fiona was just like their fake relationship: temporary. His feelings had an expiration date, and that was how things had to be.

When Fiona's laughter finally subsided, Giles sullenly said, "I've never asked you your favorite flower…"

“I love all flowers. Every bouquet you’ve given me was beautiful.” When Giles gave her a displeased look that implied that he did not believe her, Fiona thought of all the colorful flowers of the seasons. “If I had to pick one…I’d say bluebells are my favorite.”

“Ah, yes, I know that one. They’re just as the name implies, right? I’ve gone to see them before.”

“Yes, they look magnificent when you find them blooming in a field. They smell nice too.” The tiny, blue, bell-shaped flowers bloomed only for a short period in early spring, deep in the forest. The part of the barony where a carpet of bluebells bloomed was one of Fiona’s most treasured spots. “Oh! But they’re poisonous, so you mustn’t eat them.”

Giles frowned. “When most people see a flower, I doubt their first impulse is to eat it.”

“I-it happened when I was little! People make candied violets, you know, so I thought that since bluebells were the same color, I could eat them.”

Fiona had innocently thought that candied bluebells would be pretty and that making them would bring out the flowers’ sweet fragrance. Hans caught onto her scheme and put a stop to it, thankfully.

“I’ll bet you got in trouble.”

“Oh yes, very much so.”

“You really were a danger to yourself when you were little.”

“I know. I think so too.”

Giles took on a solemn tone. “I can feel poor Hans’s pain.”

They both burst into chuckles. Nobody else seemed to be around, but there was no telling when someone might be watching, so they were speaking quite close, as they always did. That way, only they could hear each other. They sat there for a while, keeping up their relaxed yet ever vigilant lovers’ facade. Eventually, Giles reached into his bag and brought out what appeared to be several notebooks; they were the sketchbooks they’d found at the hideout.

“Fiona, these are for you.” They had only skimmed through them at Gordon’s hideout, having been pressed for time, and nobody had examined them since. Giles handed them over to Fiona along with the letter he had unearthed from beneath the floorboard. “The academy is going to look over everything, but before they do, I want you to have another look.”

“Why me?”

“I had Roche look over them before I came here too. Many of the sketches are of pieces from contemporary artists, so he said you would know them better than he would.”

Roche was incredibly knowledgeable, but his expertise was in ancient art. When it came to modern art, Fiona’s scope of knowledge was broader.

“I asked Rudolph,” Giles continued, “and he confirmed it: Gordon drew these sketches.”

“All of them?”

“Yes, he does seem quite versatile.”

Those words fell heavily on her heart. Part of Fiona could absolutely see Gordon as somebody who grabbed a paintbrush not to learn about art for a con, but out of personal love for the medium. “All right. I’ll have a look.”

She flipped again through the sketchbook she had only gotten a brief look at back at the hideout, looking at each page one at a time. *What’s this…?*

All the counterfeits Fiona had appraised thus far were mere copies of the original artist; none had any sense of the individual behind them. But the sketches in this book were different. The drawings staring up at her from the pages showed hidden traces of the artist’s ego. Especially the drawings of flowers—they were done in such excessive detail that they felt like an obsession.

“What’s your read?” Giles asked her.

“They’re technically very good, but they’re… How do I say it tactfully…”

“Yes, you don’t get the sense they were drawn in good spirits.”

Even the beautiful rose blooming right beside Fiona would be tarnished in ominous colors if Gordon drew it.

Rose… Flowers… That gives me a thought. "In Gordon's gallery, he keeps a piece by Poiret, the court painter."

"Did Dennis tell you?"

"Yes, when he was here earlier." He had said that it was the one painting in the gallery not created by Rudolph.

As Fiona flipped through the sketchbook, she recalled a conversation she once had with an examiner from the Royal Art Academy. Justine Poiret was a tragic artist forgotten in the war. She was welcomed to the palace with open arms and promised an important role as the court painter, yet she was suspected of espionage and exiled, only to be branded a traitor in her home country. Her very existence deemed a scourge on the earth, her name was stricken from the art world in both kingdoms she had called home, and all her works were destroyed. Neither her self-portraits nor portraits of her painted by other artists survived.

Poiret died of a broken heart, and it was only recently that her achievements were receiving renewed recognition. As not many of her works had survived, however, scholarly work on her had made little progress.

Where in the world did Gordon get his Poiret original?

It wasn't uncommon for undiscovered paintings to be unearthed after an artist's passing. That was, in fact, how Roche had acquired many of his rarer paintings, so it stood to reason that the opportunity would have eventually come to an art dealer like Gordon as well. Still, something about it didn't add up for Fiona.

I guess thinking in circles won't get me anywhere…

Fiona gave her head a light shake and returned to the drawings in her hand. "Poiret had a talent for drawing plants," she told Giles. "And many of the drawings in this sketchbook are of flowers."

"You think there's a connection?"

“I’ve never seen a Poiret original myself, so I can’t say, but it seems unlikely to be mere coincidence. There must be some meaning behind it.”

Giles joined Fiona in pondering for a moment—but just then, one of the servants ran over to them in a panic. “Pardon me, Lord Lowell, but you have an urgent guest.”

“Who is it?”

“Lord Russel’s carriage is waiting. He instructed that you leave with him.”

“Understood. I’ll be right there.”

When Giles heard that his guest was Richard and that it was urgent, his mood instantly changed. Fiona knew something had happened, and as if to drive that point home, Giles took the sketchbooks back from Fiona and turned a grave eye on her.

“Fiona, I’ll explain everything later, but for now, go straight back to your room and don’t set a foot outside until you hear from me again.”

“What?!”

“I simply can’t tell you today. And you don’t need to see me to the door. Please understand.”

His voice was stern, and Fiona found it impossible to protest. She happened to have a large stack of paperwork to do anyway; she should have welcomed the opportunity to work. However...

“Don’t worry about me,” Giles added in a soft, reassuring tone that tugged at Fiona’s heartstrings. He had seen the worry in her eyes. “I promise I’ll come back.”

But I...

Something had happened. Either Gordon had made a move, or it had to do with the letters. The harshness with which Giles commanded Fiona to stay away suggested danger.

Fiona felt powerless. All she could do was wait at home and pray for their safe return. She stood with Giles, wanting to at least send him off with a smile. “Well, um, good luck,” she said to Giles’s back as he started to walk out of the gazebo.

He stopped in his tracks. Then he turned on his heel, took one step…two steps…until he was standing in front of Fiona. Had he forgotten something? Fiona turned to look back at the bench, but she could see nothing he'd forgotten.

Two big hands cupped Fiona's cheeks, sharply turning her head back to face him, and Giles pressed his chilly lips to Fiona's forehead.

Her eyes blinked closed in shock, and he planted a kiss on each eyelid as well. Her shoulders trembled as though an electric shock had gone through them. Slowly, timidly, she opened her eyes as she sensed him leaning away, and she was greeted by Giles's daring smile.

As he pulled back, his hands lingered on her cheeks. Her lips were still parted, and his thumb delicately traced them.

"Um," Fiona said, "I…"

"Payback for the other night. I'll see you soon."

With that, Giles turned and marched away, this time determined to leave.

"See that she gets to her room," he told a servant on his way out.

"Y-yes, my lord!"

Fiona watched him go until his silhouette vanished into the flowers' shadows.

P-payback? What does he mean, payback?!

Fiona sank to the bench like a thin blade of grass in the wind.

Chapter 10:
Saquille Manor

THE CARRIAGE WAITING for Giles contained not only Richard but also the police inspector who had been asked to assist in the matter. When Giles saw them both, his suspicion as to why he was being summoned was confirmed.

I knew it. He made a move earlier than I anticipated, though.

The inspector and Giles nodded silently at each other in greeting as the carriage took off. Then Giles turned to Richard. "Did our guard send word to you?"

"Yeah. Not just from the watcher on the outside; the servant we put inside Minister Saquille's mansion also gave the signal." Separate from the guard assigned to the mansion by the Earl of Bancroft, Giles's team had sent a spy to infiltrate the inside as well. If there was any suspicious activity or visitors, one or both of these individuals were to contact them—and they had received word from both.

After a nod from Richard, the inspector explained the rest. "A man going by the name of Otto Gordon has arrived to visit and is awaiting Minister Saquille's return. Our man on the outside says he's sure it's the real Gordon."

"He's *awaiting* Saquille's return?" Giles asked. "So Saquille's not home yet?"

"Word is that he hasn't returned from this evening's soirée yet."

Many tended to stay the night at the hosting house of these nighttime soirées. Saquille loved his drink, so it was possible that he was among them.

"A little flippant, isn't the minister? Well, good thing he is. Now we've got more time to catch up to him." If they caught the two suspects together red-handed, then combined with their other evidence, they'd actually have the grounds to accuse Saquille and Gordon of a crime.

Giles could just feel his goal in reach…yet a doubt still lingered in his mind: *Did this breakthrough really just fall into our laps by chance?* For Giles and his team, the circumstances were too good to be true.

If Gordon popped over while Saquille was away, that meant he had not been summoned there, nor did he have an appointment; Gordon went of his own volition. The purpose of his visit could be a last-minute briefing before a joint session with the House of Lords, or to deal with some unexpected mishap. In truth, it could be a number of things.

But something felt amiss.

At the heart of the matter was that if a move was to be made, they had not expected it to come from Gordon himself.

He knows he's suspected of art fraud. What could he possibly have to gain from strutting around in the open? To send a letter or a messenger in his place would be the safer move. Gordon had employees at his gallery, and according to Roche, he did have some sketchy-looking characters there as well. He must have had many pawns at his disposal, yet he visited Saquille's mansion in broad daylight. What's more, he had done so just after Giles's team sent a man on the inside. It was almost as if he had planned it that way.

Either he believes his connection to Saquille hasn't been discovered yet, or there's something we're missing.

"Giles, we're almost there."

Richard's voice brought Giles back to the present. They parked the carriage and got out at a spot not too close to the mansion. The inspector sent a signal over to the men he had stationed in hiding outside the mansion, and the signal carried from man to man like dominos until it reached the back of the mansion, where the maid who was sweeping up at the back entrance received it. It was their insider, a servant of the Marquess of Molins.

"How's it looking?" Richard asked.

"The visitor went into the drawing room and hasn't budged since," the maid replied succinctly. "Minister Saquille is expected to

return any minute.” With a light bow to Giles and the inspector, she escorted them inside.

They walked down a deserted hallway and arrived in a room adjacent to the drawing room where Gordon was waiting. Before long, they heard loud voices at the front door.

“The minister appears to be home,” said the maid. “Well, then, I’ll just head to the waiting area.” This time, she gave them a proper curtsy.

“Thank you. Keep up the good work.” Richard, her true master, sent her away, leaving the three men alone in the room.

They peered out into the hallway through a crack in the door. In no time at all, Minister Saquille’s erratic footsteps and irritated voice drew closer. His ample body jiggled as he marched past the room in which Giles’s party hid, and he slammed the door to the adjoining room open and bellowed, “Gordon! I told you not to come here! What the hell do you want?!”

“What do I want? That’s a funny question to ask. Minister Saquille, I’ve come to receive the reward I was promised.”

“Not until *the deed* has been completed on my end!”

The door to the drawing room had been left ajar, so they could hear both Saquille’s and Gordon’s voices with perfect clarity.

“Oh, it’s as good as complete, my lord. Besides, you promised compensation up front.”

“Oh, shut up, you bloody peasant.”

Saquille being arrogant was nothing new, but there was a hint of panic in his voice that made Gordon, who was of lower status, sound like the more confident of the two. It was crystal clear just who held all the cards.

“Without the aid of this bloody peasant, your hands would be completely tied, *Your Excellency*.”

“How dare you! That’s some lip, coming from the man who failed to sell to Colet or Molins!”

“Which houses fall for it and which don’t is immaterial. All that matters is that they support the crown prince—that was the

agreement. Besides, since House Heyward fell for it, wouldn't you say phase one of our plan was a success?"

"Ha! I heard that a baron's little bitch of a daughter exposed your painting as a fake."

Saquille's smooth-flowing retort put a faint clog in theconversation. Giles held his breath, sensing instability in the air.

"We had not anticipated that, I'll admit," Gordon said quietly, "but House Colet was our endgame. The negative repercussions were as good as nil."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that."

"Either way, I was hired to sell the paintings. I did my job. Everything that comes after that is up to you, Minister Saquille. A mere *peasant* like me can't even set foot in the House of Lords, after all." Gordon coughed lightly, his voice taking on a self-deprecating tone. "All you have to do is dismantle the opposing faction. Then controlling parliament will be like taking candy from a baby, no?"

"Of course," Saquille replied. "And mark my words, we'll make that spineless crown prince abdicate."

"It is only a matter of time, Your Excellency, before you control this kingdom as regent. Any petty cash you throw my way is inconsequential."

There was a pause. "You really have a way with words," Saquille said.

Richard rolled his eyes at the minister, so easily pacified by obvious flattery. "I can't believe this guy made it as far as he did in the palace."

"The generations before him were competent, I believe."

"The thought of that idiot holding up parliament all this time makes me even more annoyed by it all," Richard grumbled with a sigh.

Giles nodded in agreement.

"Shall we intervene?" the inspector asked, gauging the right timing for an arrest.

Giles stopped him. “No, let’s wait a bit longer,” he said, craning his neck to listen in on the adjoining room.

Gordon was groveling. “I’m a busy man myself, so it pains me to always be taking up so much of your valuable time, Your Excellency. So if paying me in full is too difficult at present, I wouldn’t mind taking the ring on your finger and calling it even.”

“You what?”

“I cannot accept a check. I don’t exactly trust banks, you see.”

“But this ring is my—”

“Your father’s services during the war were highly regarded, and he received that ring directly from the king as a gift. But you’re destined to be regent, Your Excellency. I believe you deserve a much bigger gemstone than that.”

Saquille moaned nervously, and his butler, anxious to intervene, said, “M-Master…”

Discarding a royal bequeathment to pay off your partner in crime was as good as treason. Simply catching Saquille and Gordon together red-handed would have been adequate, but with a ring as proof of payment, Saquille could certainly be taken to court.

“It will fall a little short of our agreed amount, but I do love emeralds. And I’ll cover my tracks; I wouldn’t be so careless as to sell it to an antique dealer. There is no need to fear a scandal.”

With Gordon’s promise hanging in the air, the pair of pacing feet came to a halt: The minister had accepted Gordon’s deal. The butler’s heavy breathing carried all the way into the adjoining room. Giles’s party exchanged nods and got ready to barge in.

“There. Now you and I have nothing to do with one another. Take it and get out of my sight.”

“Certainly. I am eternally grateful to have served you. In the future, your party has my full support—well, I can’t exactly promise that, but—”

“Hold it right there, you two. Freeze!”

The inspector burst into the drawing room and blew a whistle. Saquille, visibly shocked, whirled around, as did his butler, who had gone pale in sympathy.

“Who are you people?!” Saquille demanded.

“Levi Saquille, Otto Gordon, you are both under arrest for conspiracy against the crown.”

Saquille’s eyes bulged at the gun the inspector pointed at him, and when he recognized Giles and Richard behind the inspector, his face twisted with malice. His eyes darted left and right, searching for an escape, but police officers swooped in and quickly restrained him.

“Hey! Let me go! Don’t think you can get away with treating me like this! What power do Bancroft’s and Molins’s little brats have over me?!”

The police officers were commoners. Were they the only ones present, Saquille could have used his title as a shield to resist arrest. However, the presence of the son of the Marquess of Molins and the son of the Earl of Bancroft rendered this strategy ineffective, and the minister did not seem pleased. He glared at Giles with bloodshot eyes.

Calmly, Giles said, “If the Marquess of Molins were here himself, he would sentence you where you stand. You should be thanking us for giving you a proper trial.”

“I see,” Gordon said, ominously calm. He was accepting his restraints without a struggle, both hands raised obediently and a faint grin on his face. “And I suppose you intend to offer me that same benevolence? I would never defy a government official. I am but a feeble peasant who was deceived and merely obeying orders.”

“Watch your mouth, Gordon!”

“Yes, effectively, perhaps I was committing fraud. But how was I to refuse a direct order from a nobleman?”

“Y-you bastard! How dare you?!”

“Take him away,” the inspector ordered, and his officers dragged the howling Minister Saquille out of the room.

Gordon followed them solemnly, pausing in front of Giles and Richard to smirk and say, “I’ll tell you everything I know. For a price, naturally.”

Richard and Giles glowered at this brazen attempt at bribery. *And there it is,* Giles thought, recalling the conversation he had just overheard. Gordon may have confessed to selling counterfeit paintings at Saquille’s order, but he said nothing of the hidden letters or the abdication plot. All he’d done was give them proof that he had collaborated in the art sales by force. He was clearly aiming to get off on extenuating circumstances or have his sentence reduced. *It’s like this was his plan all along.*

He hadn’t shown any signs of trying to escape. Whether that was because he had deemed it impossible or because he had a different aim, Giles couldn’t say.

Gordon smiled coolly, enjoying the dubious frown on Giles’s face. “I mean, I never thought a discerning noble could be fooled by a counterfeit painting. After all, even that *precious little baron’s daughter* saw through it.”

Giles flinched at the reference to Fiona. Richard put a hand on his shoulder to stop him and gave the order: “Take him away.”

As he was marched out of the room, without even looking back, Gordon sang, “I’ll see you gentlemen at the trial.”

Thus, leaving behind an anticlimactic air, he and Saquille were taken into police custody.

Chapter 11:
When the Dust Settles

LATER THAT EVENING, the Marchioness of Heyward told Fiona that Minister Saquille, leader of the faction for the king's brother, and Gordon the con man had both been arrested.

"Gordon was arrested?" Fiona asked.

"He sure was! My goodness, but that was quick."

"S-so what happened?"

"Not to worry, Giles and Richard are fine. Not a single scratch on either of them."

"Is that so!" Fiona's suspicion was confirmed: The urgent summons had to do with the mysterious letters. She sighed in relief to hear that things hadn't gotten violent, and the marchioness smiled sweetly at her.

Oh thank goodness, Fiona thought. *Oh! And that means I can go home now.*

She was confined to the Heyward mansion because the conspiracies lurking between the feuding political factions could not be made public, and Gordon's whereabouts were unknown. Now that the two ringleaders had been arrested, there was no longer any need to keep her under watch.

Unfortunately, Fiona's notion that she could return home as early as the next day was quickly dashed. "Anyway," continued the marchioness, "the investigation lies ahead. They'll need testimonies, so once things have settled down, His Majesty will invite you to the palace. Until then, you'll need to remain here with me, Fiona."

"Wait, did you say His Majesty?"

"Well, you were one of the persons of merit, Fiona. He will want to commend you, I'm sure."

"Oh, please, he wouldn't..." Fiona's eyes widened in disbelief, but the marquess was nodding with a smile that only grew

broader with each nod.

“No need to worry, my dear; His Majesty is a very kind man. Besides, I’ll take care of your letter of introduction and the dress you’ll wear.”

“Uh…”

The marchioness’s words brought to Fiona’s mind a pressing problem: Fiona had experience visiting the palace—like when she attended the party for the prince—but an actual audience with the king was another thing entirely.

When meeting the king, there was a detailed list of the ways one must dress and carry oneself. Fiona had heard that, in the past, everything was dictated to you, right down to the color and fabric of your clothing and how many pieces of jewelry you wore, all depending on the season or the situation, who was having the audience and who might be in attendance. Things were not as strict anymore, but there were still traditions to be upheld, and most of them were unwritten rules to which Fiona would never be privy.

Even in the world of debutants, a direct blessing from royalty was reserved for the rank of earl or higher—it was all out of Fiona’s league. To a common baron’s daughter like her, a member of the royal family was someone you revered from afar like a god in the sky. Even her father, Baron Clayburn, had only met with the king once, and that was when he received his title. Her other relatives had similar experiences, as did the families of her noblewomen friends.

If she went back home, she would have big problems preparing for her royal audience in terms of dress code and decorum.

“But, my lady, is it really proper for me to be pampered so?” Fiona asked anxiously.

“Oh my, don’t say such a thing! I’m pampering you because I want to. Just relax and leave it all to me.”

The marchioness’s eyes and voice lit up, excited to have something new to look forward to. Fiona decided to take the marchioness up on her kind offer and thanked her.

“I hope the dress we ordered from Michele is finished by then,” continued the marchioness. She was in such high spirits she was practically bouncing off the walls, leaving Fiona to deal with her discomfort and hesitance alone. “Oh, but I suppose that one was evening wear. We’ll have to order another. Oh dear, I’m having too much fun! Anyway, with everything that’s happened, Giles is very busy right now and can’t come by tonight. Are you sad?”

“N-not really.”

“Ooh, hee hee hee! No need to lie to me, dear, I understand.” She gave Fiona a smile and a wink.

Fiona’s looked elsewhere, unable to maintain her poker face any longer. That she blushed so easily was one of her weaknesses as a newcomer to romance. It earned her a ceaseless supply of empathetic smiles from the marchioness, but there was simply nothing she could do about it.

The intimate details of Giles’s late-night visit and their moment in the garden had, of course, leaked to the heads of the house. The servants’ subtle and deft yet necessary scrutiny was praiseworthy. It was clear that Giles was able to come and go as he pleased only because he was the marquess and marchioness’s godson, whom they trusted.

“I hope things settle down quickly, don’t you?” the marchioness asked.

“Um, yes, my lady.” Not having the heart to disagree with this sweet lady who thoroughly believed Fiona and Giles were lovers, Fiona guiltily shut her mouth.

With her impending visit to the palace placed squarely on the marchioness’s shoulders, Fiona plunged herself into her own task: catching up on her work for the gallery. Truth be told, she wished she could go to the gallery, but when Dennis came to visit her the next day, he told her they didn’t want her back at work for a little while yet.

“Roche doesn’t want me back? Why?”

“Police officers and inspectors are coming and going all the time to question Rudolph. Roche advises discretion for the time being.”

“But if they need testimonies, shouldn’t I provide one too?”

“Oh, but your statement will be taken here at the marquess’s estate, Miss Fiona.”

“Yes, I heard it would be tomorrow or the day after.”

“One visit should suffice,” Dennis assured her. “Besides, if I brought you back to the gallery when it’s filled with filthy men, Lord Lowell would yell at me.”

Dennis’s excuses didn’t quite make sense to Fiona, but she understood that the gallery was hectic at the moment. She gave up on the idea of returning to work, but there was one other matter on her mind. “All right, then answer me this: How is Rudolph? They aren’t too rough with him, I hope?”

“Well, he does seem to have repented a little. He’s cooperating and answering their questions, so he’s made a good impression with the prosecution.”

Fiona relaxed, relieved to hear that the little artist wasn’t so feral anymore. “That’s good news.” Despite their less-than-ideal first encounter, Fiona harbored no ill will toward Rudolph. His aggressive attitude and rough manner of speech were simply different from those of the children in her family dominion.

“You needn’t worry about him, Miss Fiona. Between myself and Mr. Roche, one of us is always there for him. He understands what he’s done wrong—in his own way, you might say—so he’ll obey any orders he’s given, even if he dislikes them. He doesn’t seem too keen on returning to his old village either.”

With no family, and his surrogate father dead, Rudolph had no place to call home. According to protocol, he ought to go to an institution or to a place like prison. Either option meant he wouldn’t be able to keep up his painting.

Giles was kind enough to let me know that they would take my statement into consideration when determining Rudolph’s sentence. I wouldn’t want to make a final decision until I had a chance to speak with the boy himself, but I do have a dream scenario for him…

“I wonder, what does Rudolph think of painting?” How did a boy who was trained in art restoration feel about counterfeits and

having created them? That was what Fiona wanted to know most of all.

She had only been thinking out loud, but Dennis responded bluntly. “Oh, well, um, he says he doesn’t really care in particular,” he stammered.

“What?”

“That little urchin says he doesn’t even like art. I thought that couldn’t be, since he’s so talented at it, so I asked him again, and he confirmed it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. If you need any proof of that, he says he’s never once wanted to paint his own art.”

“Is that really true, though? Are you certain he wasn’t just putting on a front?”

“No, I don’t think he was lying. He hasn’t even made any doodles to pass the time. Though I suppose he is somewhat afraid of art being taken away from him, since it’s all he’s ever done.”

He was a once-in-a-generation talent, yet he had no interest in creating original art. He had cultivated only the minimum of talent necessary to pursue art restoration as a profession. It was difficult for Fiona to believe, but if art was a means of survival to Rudolph, then perhaps it did make sense.

Maybe that was why making counterfeits came so easily to him. But if that were really true…

Ordinarily, Fiona would have no need to worry herself over Rudolph’s future, but she was the first person to point out that his paintings were fake. Just like with Marianne, she could not turn a blind eye or pretend it did not concern her.

Noticing she had plunged deep into thought, Dennis frantically added, “I don’t think he’ll receive too harsh a sentence. He’ll probably be sent to an institution to work for a few years, though that depends on what they decide to do about his guardianship.”

His tone was casual, but it was clear just how deeply he cared for Rudolph.

“Dennis, you and Rudolph have grown close.”

“Close? Yes, I suppose we have. He can be a handful, but I just can’t let him out of my sight. Of course, I’m sure he sees me as a nuisance.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

Dennis poked himself in the cheek and smiled shyly. For all Rudolph’s posturing, he was tormented with worry. Dennis was a great source of strength to him, and Dennis surely had picked up on that.

“I’ve been told that my opinion as to what should become of Rudolph would be appreciated,” Fiona said. “So here’s my opinion, Dennis. If it’s possible…”

Fiona told him her idea as she handed over the stack of documents and letters she had finished. Dennis’s eyes grew wide.

“…so I wanted to hear what Mr. Roche thought about that,” Fiona finished.

“Uh, well… I’m not sure how to put this, but your suggestion is, uh…” Dennis fumbled over his words, and Fiona nodded for him to continue. With great strain, he did. “Well, um, to be honest, that idea sounds very unlike you.”

“Unlike me? Really?”

“Forgive me, that came out wrong. It’s just that I assumed you would want a more lenient punishment for Rudolph.”

“Ah, like an acquittal?”

“Yes.”

“But that wouldn’t be right.”

Rudolph’s crimes had been forced upon him, and moreover, he did not know for what purpose his counterfeit paintings would be used. Combined with his status as a minor, these facts made it tempting to let Rudolph off scot-free, but that was not right.

Firmly, Fiona told Dennis that there was a line that could not be crossed. “Copying famous artists in the pursuit of learning is perfectly acceptable; you can make as many copies as you’d like, and art restorers in particular do so frequently. But what Rudolph

did was plagiarism, and his plagiarized works were used to con people."

In the art world, it didn't matter what the circumstances were—plagiarism was the ultimate taboo. Armed robbery and assault almost paled in comparison. While the crime itself could not be seen, the reality of it could not be erased. Fiona knew that trying to protect Rudolph would have the opposite of the intended effect.

"You're right," Dennis said slowly. "I'm still a novice when it comes to art, but in the military, we too had a line we could never cross."

"What I'm saying is heartless. I'm well aware of that."

"No, you're thinking of the future. Meanwhile, I'm actually relieved that you aren't a just softie who shelters and indulges others. I'm glad you're that sort of person."

"We can't know the future for certain, but I want to make sure he has a path waiting for him… But, Dennis, what do you mean by 'that sort of person?'"

"I believe 'noble' is the word. I couldn't be prouder." Fiona seemed perplexed by his praise, but Dennis didn't let that bother him. "I only started work at the gallery so I could be your bodyguard, Miss Fiona, but I've come to like it. I want to continue this role, so I appreciate that I got to do more on this job than my originally assigned tasks."

"Um, but I didn't do anything."

"And so modest, to boot. Ah, I wish I could've been there to see you take Gordon down a peg. Though I did hear a great deal about it after the fact."

Fiona shrank back, intimidated by his curiosity. She really wished people would stop using her momentary loss of composure as an amusing story. "A-about that!" she cut in. "I feel, well… I'm sorry for what I did, though I can't promise I'll never do it again."

"Ha ha ha! Good for you, I say! Well, I'll relay your thoughts on Rudolph to Mr. Roche. I'm sure he'll be in agreement."

With a smile and a wave, Dennis put the estate behind him.

***

With an ample supply of evidence and testimonies, Minister Saquille was tried and convicted of conspiring to incite a rebellion against the crown prince and interfere with the line of succession. He was sentenced to yield his title to his son and confined to house arrest on his land. His title was also lowered from earl to baron, and part of his lands were taken away. Because the abdication plot had proved rather ineffectual, the king's younger brother never aspired for the throne, and House Saquille's national service had been lauded for generations, he was spared a harsher punishment.

Of course, in the minister's view, his punishment was likely worse than death. His only son and heir was mediocre at best—not the sort of vassal who would wave the banner of the king's younger brother. Saquille clearly saw a future in which his son's hands were full simply managing the meager plot of land they had been allowed to keep. One by one, the connections he had built with other noblemen over the years dissolved, until the king's brother's supporters, who had been one of the two pillars of parliament, now fractured into several little groups. They had, in effect, been annihilated.

Nobody in his right mind wanted to associate with a tried and convicted rebel. House Saquille was doomed to live hand to mouth as a noble family on the fringes of high society. Someday, they might regain their privileges, but that day was far in the future.

While Giles agreed with the minister's sentence, when it came to Gordon's treatment, he was riddled with concerns. Just as he had so shamelessly implied, Gordon was fantastically cooperative with the investigators. He had not destroyed a single incriminating piece of correspondence between himself and the minister; on the contrary, he presented them obediently and did not hesitate to give a testimony. Because of that, the trial proceeded almost too quickly.

“Come on, don’t be so angry,” Richard called out to Giles. Giles said nothing, sulking down the hallway in silence. With a loud laugh, Richard ran to catch up to him. “Oh, don’t glare at me with that pretty face of yours; you’re scaring me. Come on, the king and the crown prince both thanked you personally! Oh, *and* the king’s brother.”

Everyone kept a careful distance from Giles, whose anger was obvious even from a considerable distance. To his old friend Richard, however, this was a perfect excuse to tease his friend, who had become quite emotionally expressive of late.

“Your hands were tied,” Richard insisted. “Gordon is shifty as hell, but nothing more.”

“I know that,” Giles said at length.

“I’m just as dissatisfied as you, my friend. I can’t believe that guy doesn’t even have priors.” Richard offered him a sympathetic smile, but Giles looked away in a huff.

Gordon had sold counterfeit paintings—he had admitted as much himself. His argument, however, was that he couldn’t turn down an order from a nobleman. This defense worked for him, as did the fact that he had no prior convictions—not even a minor offense.

He claimed that the counterfeit paintings were only made to promote his gallery opening and that he did not intend to use them to defraud people. They had, he argued, only been sold at his gallery recently because of miscommunication between himself and his staff. These were the sorts of lies he told. When he said he had no objections to buying them back from the people he sold them to, the authorities could pursue the matter no further.

As for his disgraceful treatment of Rudolph, well, who could deny that he took in an orphan child and paid him, albeit meagerly? The court did not view that as problematic either. In the end, with his assertive cooperation with the investigation, Gordon was let off with a fine and his sentence suspended with probation.

On the subject of the letter Giles found at his hideout, Gordon admitted that he sought to make friends in high places, but he kept mum about the author of the letter. It mentioned an

“antechamber where the black lily painting hangs,” a clear reference to Saquille’s exclusive-use guestroom in the house of a baron with whom he was friendly. According to Gordon, he had used this information to approach Saquille, but the minister had not heard a thing about Gordon. Whenever the baron held a soirée at his home, the minister stayed the night in the guestroom with the black lily painting. All the letter conveyed was a fact that was common knowledge in their circle. Therefore, the investigation team determined that whoever sent that letter had no direct connection to the case at hand.

The investigation accepted Gordon’s plea—that Saquille had forced him to sell counterfeit paintings as a means of quickly eliminating the political enemies that had bothered Saquille for years—and took it into consideration. It was also true that Gordon’s testimony and the evidence he provided had led to Saquille’s swift conviction. Giles could understand the utility of such a plea deal, but that only made him angrier.

“But Gordon will be on probation for a while, won’t he?” Richard offered.

“There’s only going to be a guard watching his house. That’s not at all binding.”

“Just take heart in knowing he can’t move about freely. I sympathize with you, Gil, but you’re taking this way too hard.”

“Rick.”

Richard smirked, amused by the long-anticipated return of the Icy Scion. The Icy Scion in question frowned back at him.

They left parliament and stepped outside to find the sun in a much higher position in the sky than they had seen in a very long time. It was so bright they both had to squint. “Well, you just go see her and calm yourself down,” Richard said. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Make sure your face goes back to normal before you get there.”

“This *is* my normal face.”

Richard poked his stern cheek. “If you stay like that, you’ll terrify Miss Clayburn,” he said, then pushed Giles into the waiting carriage. “Tell me what choice Rudolph makes, all right?”

“I will.”

With a satisfied wave at Giles’s lackluster response, Richard shut the carriage door. From the carriage window, Giles watched Richard quickly prepare for his own trip home, sighing quietly to himself and leaning back in the seat.

The days following the arrests were chaotic and full. He hadn’t even been home in days. He still occasionally found time to go to the Heyward mansion, but every time, Fiona was either out with Miranda or busy with a tailor doing a fitting—the timing was never right. Night visits…were something he had to refrain from doing. As a result, he hadn’t seen her for days.

All that happened is my life returned to how it was before we met. So why…?

Historically, Giles liked to keep people at as great a distance as possible. After he began his fake courtship with Fiona, though, he saw her nearly every day. He had exchanged more words with her than with his family, including his parents, and even after suddenly cutting contact with her, he did not sense a change in the distance he felt between himself and others.

He never felt lonely when he was alone. It still felt so freeing, not being bothered by others. Sometimes, though, he would catch himself seeking out Fiona’s golden hair or her slender shoulders. Every time that happened, he felt a sense of wrongness when she wasn’t there beside him.

It was silly; even he knew that. The servants kept him up to date. He knew Fiona was doing well at the Heyward mansion. She sent him letters regularly too, so there was nothing to concern himself over. But he could not hear her voice from the words on the page.

Fiona was not good at smoothing things over. If something were wrong, he would know immediately, if only he could see her—but he couldn’t. And more than anything, what ate away at him was knowing that she was not free to move about and do as she pleased…and that he was the main reason why.

Giles had sent word that he was on his way, so as soon as he arrived at the Heyward mansion, Fiona descended from the second floor to greet him. Her muted yet elegant dress was nothing like the clothes she wore when they first met; Giles's sister and godmother likely chose it for her. He did not care about outward appearances, but he did believe what she was wearing now suited her better.

He exhaled in relief to see her looking well, but there was an undeniable strain in her smile as she descended the stairs. It was clearly forced.

"Good afternoon, Lord Giles. Long time no see."

"Is something wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your smile is stiff."

Giles touched Fiona's cheek, and her shoulders flinched in surprise. For all that she insisted she was used to acting like a couple, Fiona had forgotten Giles's touch during their time apart. For some reason, this only made Giles gloomier.

Fiona, catching the foul mood on Giles's face, looked away uncomfortably. Then she yanked on Giles's arm until his ear was at her level and whispered, "I must confess...my corset is too tight."

"...Huh?"

"This dress is so beautiful, but its construction is really challenging my patience and... Lord Giles?"

The solemn look in her eyes as she confessed her plight as if it was an unbearable crisis had caught Giles flatfooted. He knew it was cruel of him, but the euphoria of the sudden lightness in his chest made him burst out laughing.

"Y-you don't have to laugh..."

"Sorry—ha ha!—it's only that I didn't realize it was such a grave crisis." He looked away, still laughing.

"Oh, *really*!" Fiona blushed. Unlike the other ladies of Giles's acquaintance, however, it wasn't because she was with Giles; she blushed for her own wounded ego.

Her response, snappy yet obtuse, was familiar and soothing to Giles. Even if her hair and clothing changed, inside, she remained Fiona.

“My, my, my. What lovebirds you are.”



The marchioness, cheery as always, had appeared in the entryway without them noticing. Fiona panicked and jumped away from Giles, but he yanked her back by the waist and said, “Godmother.”

Just as Fiona had testified, the garment around her waist was tight as a drum. He could feel it through the thin fabric of her dress. He had placed his hands on her waist before, with all the dancing they’d done at parties, but it had never felt that stiff. Giles’s sister insisted corsets were nothing once you got used to them, but he felt a pang of sympathy for Fiona; it must hurt when you weren’t used to it.

“Your corset *is* tight,” he murmured.

“Lord *Giles*!” Fiona hissed.

“Sorry. Well, we’d better hurry, then, so you can be free of it as soon as possible. Let’s go.” Giles released her waist and offered his elbow. Fiona blushed a deep red but slid her pale hand through the gap in his arm. The ring on her finger caught the light, filling Giles’s heart with a strange sense of completeness. “Excuse us, Godmother. I’ll stay and chat with you next time.”

“Yes, and I look forward to it,” the marchioness said merrily. “Have a great time, Fiona. And don’t forget, you and I are having tea tomorrow.”

“Y-yes, my lady!” Fiona curtsied, her smile betraying her discomfort at the reminder that her questioning was slated for the next day.

Giles bowed to his godmother in turn and walked out the front door, pleased to see that Fiona and the marchioness had become fast friends. The servants bade them a cheerful farewell as they stepped into the carriage and set off for Roche’s gallery.

Rudolph’s punishment had been placed squarely on their shoulders. They planned to present Rudolph with his options, including the unexpected suggestion from Fiona, and let Rudolph himself make the decision. Once this matter was settled, the case would be closed—at least publicly.

“By the way,” Giles said in the carriage, “Rick warned me that I looked scary.”

“He did?”

He relayed the conversation to her. Fiona craned her neck dubiously, blinking several times as she scrutinized Giles’s face, then smiled softly. “You don’t look scary. Maybe it was the lighting?”

“Could be.”

“Oh! But wait a minute…” Fiona reached out to Giles and pressed her finger square between his eyebrows. “It’s all over now. Your boys up there can relax.”

Giles looked at her. “But Gordon is still—”

“They were going to let him off then and there, but you pled with the police to put him under probation at least until the season was over, and now he has a guard. You did more than enough.”

But Gordon had received no prison time, which Giles considered a failure on his part. His father thought it imprudent to wield his power as an earl to influence the judge, and the crown prince did not want that either. Giles wanted to do *something*, but he floundered and came up dissatisfied.

However…

“You’re right,” he murmured.

“I know.” Fiona’s smile came from her heart. Seeing it, he felt the tension between his eyebrows melt away. He closed his hand around the finger touching his forehead, then lowered it and laced his fingers with hers.

“We still can’t say our troubles are completely over, though,” Giles said.

“Yes. If there’s one thing that concerns me most, it’s Rudolph.”

“We’ve prepared everything we possibly could. Is there anything else?”

Giles was distracted by their laced fingers, but when he pressed the pink-cheeked Fiona for an answer, she steadied her breath and said, “While we’re talking…I’m worried my corset might rip.”

Giles paused. “I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

“P-please don’t laugh. You should be supportive and worry with me!”

“You’re laughing too, Fiona.”

“Forget about me! Oh, Lord Giles, I’d like to see *you* wear one.”

“A corset?”

“And I’ll tie it to the tightest setting!”

The carriage rang with laughter for the first time in a long while.

Chapter 12:
The Path Ahead, Diverging Choices

FIONA AND GILES, having followed a route that was quite familiar to them by this point, arrived at Gallery Roche. Fiona, who had spent the past three days in the royal capital, felt like she was returning after a long absence. They entered the back office to find Rudolph, Dennis, Roche, and Hans, the Clayburn butler, waiting for them.

“Mr. Roche, I’m terribly grateful to you for going above and beyond to help us,” Fiona said.

“It was no trouble, Miss. In fact, it was a good experience for me; a man doesn’t get many chances to participate in a police interview or offer his opinions”

“Well, I’m humbled to hear that. Hans, I’m sorry we dragged you into this.”

The Clayburn butler stood straight and smiled softly to see his mistress again after so long. “All that matters to me is your safety, Miss Fiona.” Though they had written to each other, there remained so many things to be said that they could have talked for hours—but this meeting was for Rudolph.

“Well then, let’s get to it,” Giles said.

Rudolph shrank back, his face taking on a peculiar expression as the adults all surrounded him. Fiona sat beside Giles, Rudolph sat alone directly across from them, and Dennis stood beside Rudolph. Once Hans and Roche had retired to the desk in the back of the room, Giles began to speak.

“Firstly, we were advised that Rudolph is only to be sentenced for producing counterfeit paintings.” Everyone took a breath. The police believed that Rudolph knew nothing of either the abdication plot or Gordon’s intent to defraud people with paintings, so they pursued no other charges. “It has been recommended that you be sent to an institution where you will do community service until you come of age. You will have a meeting

once a month with a caseworker, and once a week, you will present a written progress report."

Rudolph glanced at Dennis, his face filled with utter contempt. Then he made a noise like he was about to be sick and dropped his gaze to the floor. This was a boy who had enjoyed every freedom he could imagine when he worked as an art restorer under his surrogate father. Psychologically speaking, following the strict rules in an institution and living an upright life under guard for several years was, to him, a living hell. With community service imposed on him as well, he would have no time to paint. That being said, he would receive an education in exchange.

He was an orphan with no place to go. That he was not being tossed on the side of the road under the guise of an acquittal was, from some perspectives, an act of mercy.

Giles continued, "We have one other proposition for you. It comes from Fiona."

"That's right," Fiona chimed in.

Rudolph had not been informed that there was alternative. He turned his wary gaze on Fiona as she took over from Giles.

"Rudolph," she said in a soft, grim voice, "it will be very difficult for you to return to the profession of art restoration. You understand that, right?"

Rudolph nodded. "Yeah." An art restorer's job was to repair damaged paintings, not to replicate them. Though he was not yet an adult, in creating paintings for Gordon, Rudolph had made a name for himself as an art restorer who made counterfeit paintings. Suspicion would follow him any time he was entrusted to restore a painting, with clients thinking, *He might use my painting to make a counterfeit and give the fake to me.*

Even if he promised otherwise, his word would carry no weight. Nobody would ask him to restore their art, nor would any studio that wanted to maintain trust with its patrons hire him as an employee.

For Rudolph, painting was a means of survival. His skill was his stronghold for life, his one and only livelihood. He was young

but talented, and it was his confidence in his talents that gave him the strength to carry on after he lost his surrogate father. Although he had never picked up a paintbrush for love of the art form, and although the institution would feed him whether he painted or not, the very thought of painting being taken away from Rudolph must have made him cringe.

"Your counterfeits were very well-made," Fiona told him. "In a world where few people can distinguish between originals and fakes, that makes trust even more important."

"I know that," Rudolph said sullenly, though knowing something and hearing it said aloud gave it entirely different weights. If there was one thing that gave Rudolph's life meaning, it was his skill as a painter. Desperately hiding his terror at the thought of losing it, he waited, breathless, to hear what Fiona would say next.

She surprised him. "Rudolph, tell me the truth: You knew those paintings were going to be used for something bad, didn't you?"

"Huh?!" Dennis yelped. Giles, too, turned to Fiona in surprise. Rudolph flinched and he stared at the ground, clenching his fists in his lap.

"With the redpoll's red," Fiona continued, "the Lammert's gradation, and all the other paintings, you were sloppy on purpose so that somebody would notice they were counterfeit. Am I right?"

Rudolph gritted his teeth. "N-no, I'd never..." He kept his head turned downward, looking up cautiously at Fiona, and the pitiful way his eyes glistened with tears was all the confirmation Fiona needed.

She knew Rudolph was talented enough to make perfect replicas. Though he'd made the paintings indistinguishable at a glance, he left clear, if hidden, clues that those paintings could not possibly be genuine, clues that Gordon had overlooked. Fiona believed Rudolph had done this intentionally.

Of course, Rudolph was probably motivated in part by revenge against Gordon for his imprisonment, just as he had said.

That wasn't all, though; Fiona suspected Rudolph felt guilty, and scared by his own acts of resistance.

"Without those little clues, it would have taken much longer for somebody to identify them as counterfeits. They may, in fact, have never been exposed."

Giles said, "Well, with that new evidence—"

Fiona knew he was about to say that they might have been able to reduce Rudolph's sentence or even get him acquitted. She shook her head, and Roche nodded gravely. "We can't, Lord Giles," Fiona said. "The intent behind his actions is irrelevant."

Roche gave Rudolph a sympathetic look. "Besides, had Gordon's scheme been successful, things would have turned out much worse. I'd wager Gordon only released the boy because his fraud was exposed. Am I right?"

"Well, answer me this, Mr. Roche," Dennis cut in. "What if Miss Fiona hadn't discovered they were counterfeit?"

"You know as well as I do what lows that sort of criminal would stoop to, Dennis. While they carried out their scheme, they would have kept him confined in anticipation of the unexpected, and once their scheme was complete, they would've silenced him," Roche said matter-of-factly. "Yes, exactly what you're thinking." He made a slicing gesture at his neck.

Dennis was in the military for a long time, but with no large wars being waged at present, his primary duties involved border patrol and reconnaissance. He had virtually no direct combat experience, and he perceived children as targets to protect, not as threats. The idea that Gordon would first force Rudolph to be his partner in crime, then throw him to the wolves when he was finished with him... That made Dennis even more furious than Rudolph.

"I truly am grateful that things didn't turn out the way Mr. Roche described," Fiona said quietly. "But the grim truth is that you won't be able to work as an art restorer. Nobody will ever forget that you painted those counterfeits, nor will they forgive you for it."

Little teardrops fell quietly on Rudolph's fists, which were clenched in his lap. "Well, yeah... I know that."

"Rudy..." Dennis softly rested his hand on Rudolph's head, and Rudolph's tears began to flow freely.

To clear the heavy feeling in the air, Fiona turned cheerful and said, "That's why I have a proposal for you, Rudolph. Would you like to live on Clayburn land?"

Rudolph looked up, baffled by the unexpected proposal. "Huh?" Through his blurred vision, he saw Fiona smiling at him.

"We have a skilled craftsman on our land. His name is Stanley, and he owns and operates a tiny clock workshop by himself."

"Clocks?"

"He's a stubborn, obstinate, tough-looking genius. You might find that he's a lot like your late mentor."

Fiona gave him an airy look, as if to say, "Watch after him just like you watched over your old master, won't you, please?" Rudolph stared intently at her. He was no longer crying.

He could have produced perfect counterfeits, but he had chosen not to. He had walked a tightrope, resisting Gordon, the man who decided whether he lived or died, as much as he dared. This was a testament to Rudolph's pride as a craftsman, and that pride had inspired Fiona to make her proposal.

"It's not the same as art restoration, but you can make great use of your deft attention to detail."

"Well, I...yeah. I ain't mad about that." Rudolph affirmed that delicate handiwork was what he truly enjoyed, and shared that he had repaired lamps and the broken chains on an easel himself.

Fiona smiled in relief. "The thing about Stanley is that he's surly but not mean-spirited. And you'll work with some very fine merchandise, so you're sure to develop a keen eye."

"Yeah. That sounds fun, I guess." Rudolph firmly wiped his tears away with his sleeve, the light returning to his eyes. He would have to begin his training from square one, but the dark future that had seemed to lie ahead of him ever since Gordon took

him in was gone. For the first time in ages, he saw a ray of light on the horizon.

Fiona smiled softly. “You won’t be able to restore art anymore, but someday…I don’t know how many years in the future…if you ever feel like painting for yourself…”

If you ever want to paint, not as a restorer of other people’s art but for your own sake…

“…then you have a place here.”

“Here?” He looked up at Fiona, seeking confirmation.

Roche answered him for her. “In this gallery. Just so you know, assessments and negotiations are no joke, so make sure all those gears and screws don’t make you rusty.”

“A clockmaker who can paint,” Fiona said merrily. “That sounds lovely.”

As he watched her and Roche happily discuss the matter, Rudolph thought he just might see a glimpse of a future in which he held a paintbrush. He would work on clocks in the workshop with his gruff master by day and spend the occasional evening with a canvas.

But even as that cheery vision unfolded in his mind, he shook his head vigorously. “D-don’t be stupid. Why’re you goin’ so far for a kid like me? I ain’t nothin’ to you lot.”

“Let me see… Let’s just call this a rotten grown-up’s atonement for getting you caught up in their mess,” Roche said, evoking the words Rudolph had yelled the day he was caught in the alley.

Fiona nodded. “Yes, we don’t want you thinking all grown-ups are like Gordon.”

“I don’t, you idiot. I’d never, *ever* put you in the same camp as that bastard.”

At last, a winning smile twinkled in Rudolph’s eye. The atmosphere in the room now peaceful, Hans nodded in satisfaction.

“Your monthly interviews will take place at the Clayburn mansion, with myself and my father,” Fiona said. “As for your written reports, we’ll have you write Dennis a weekly letter. You can write anything you like, as long as you include what you’re currently up to.”

“Huh? Why him?”

“Unless you’d rather write polite, proper letters to a caseworker you’ve never met?”

“Fine. I’ll settle for Dennis.”

“Hey! A bit cocky, aren’t we?”

“Argh! Ge-gerrof!”

As Dennis tousled Rudolph’s hair wildly with both hands, he blushed and attempted to flee from the sofa. Merry laughter echoed through the room. Sensing a pair of eyes on her, Fiona looked up and met Giles’s gaze.

“Glad everything turned out well,” he said.

“Yes. Thank you, Lord Giles.” They shared a smile, their burdens lifted from their shoulders.

Thus, it was decided that when the season was over and Fiona returned to the Clayburn barony, Rudolph would come with her.

Drinks and refreshments were set out afterward, and, feeling peaceable, the grown-ups held a status update meeting. Fiona was particularly concerned about her little sister Cecilia’s health, but Hans reassured her that Cecilia was doing well.

“I know people don’t catch influenza this time of year,” Fiona insisted. “Really, I do. But that silly girl never lets on when she’s not feeling well.”

“Fear not, Miss. The doctor says there’s nothing wrong with her.” Cecilia was seen by a doctor regularly, and apparently, in Fiona’s absence, she had received a clean bill of health. “She did seem lonesome when you first left home, but Miss Olga came to keep her company.”

“Oh! Olga visited?”

“Lord Norman visits nearly every day as well. The three of them are often together.”

Cecilia was on the threshold of adulthood, but between having poor health that kept her indoors and a father who was not one for social affairs, she still did not have anyone she could call a friend. Other than her own family, her only acquaintances her age were Norman and Olga, Fiona’s longtime close friend. Fiona beamed radiantly to hear that not only had Norman, a regular at the Clayburn estate, visited, but Olga was tending to Cecilia as well.

“Yes, she and Miss Olga have had many a merry conversation,” Hans told her.

Fiona giggled. “Yes, they’re both bookworms.”

She imagined they must have had lively discussions about books and novels they had both read. In actuality, however, their conversations began and ended with a dissection and verification of all the rumors involving Fiona and Giles. But rather than tell Fiona that, Hans simply gave her a penetrating stare. “But Miss Fiona, during your stay at the marquess’s estate you have blossomed into a lovely lady.”

“Hans?”

“You’ve finally taken an interest in clothing and hairstyles; I am beyond pleased to see it. A marchioness’s training is certainly nothing to sneeze at.”

“Whoa, Hans, easy there!”

Hans had watched Fiona grow up since birth. Seeing her in that dress felt like seeing his own granddaughter come of age. While Hans was supportive of her job at the gallery, he still was thrilled to see her dressed elegantly in age-appropriate, stylish fashion.

He wished her poor mother could have seen her like this. Tears welled in his eyes and threatened to spill over, making Fiona feel awful. *Hey, don’t be so happy about this dress! Now I can’t complain about my corset being too tight!*

Each day since her arrival at the marquess's estate her corset had been laced tighter and tighter, but the maids boldly asserted that it was still too loose every time they dressed her. It was only by the grace of God that she had gotten them to back off that morning after they insisted they could tighten her *just two notches more.* To Fiona, who wasn't used to corsets, it was more than tight enough.

It made her skin prickle anxiously to think about how complicated her dressing routine would be for her audience with the king if her daily wear was already such a big production. She loved pretty clothes, but the burden of dressing like a proper lady was taking an invisible toll on her.

As Fiona inquired about Cecilia like a good big sister, Giles sat relaxed beside her, holding his cup in one hand. Though they sat on an old sofa in a cramped office, they looked like a work of art. If somebody were to make a bromide of them, it would be quite popular. The expression on his chiseled face was so relaxed and peaceful, an onlooker would never imagine that he was known as the Icy Scion. As they conversed, he even smiled lightly at times.

Someone who had known Giles before the previous month might have suspected him of being body-snatched—that included Dennis, who had served for more than a year in Giles's platoon. Though he had recently grown accustomed to this new Giles, when Giles caught his gaze, Dennis panicked and pushed the conversation onto Roche.

"Th-that's right, I just remembered! Mr. Roche, you had some news for Miss Fiona?"

"Oh, right. I did."

"News for me? Did something happen?"

Dennis gave her daily updates, but with it decided that everyone would gather at Gallery Roche, she had yet to receive the day's news from Dennis. Fiona had not been informed of any pressing matters, so she looked at Roche inquisitively, unable to predict what it might be.

Roche smiled at her and said, "Miss Fiona, we received word from Reggie."

“Oh! Really?” Fiona jumped to her feet, her eyes gleaming. Roche held out a hand and told her not to get carried away, but Fiona eagerly pressed him for more.

“The message was, ‘*He said the painting would be finished soon, so maybe that’s what this is about. If we make the delivery arrangements quickly, it ought to arrive while I’m still in the capital!*’”

The painting was to be delivered to Gallery Roche, so if it came after she returned to the barony, she would miss it. Even she could see how giddy she was acting, but nothing excited her more than her uncle’s paintings.

Then Roche followed her giddy high with news she would never have expected. “He sent the painting.”

“He…sent it?”

“Yes. It ought to arrive in one to two weeks at the earliest.” Seeing the return of Fiona’s former look of bewilderment, Roche cocked his head. “What’s this, Miss Fiona? You’re always so excited when Reggie sends a painting. What’s different this time?”

“N-no, it’s not different. I am excited, and I do want to see it as soon as I possibly can…but, um, Mr. Roche, when exactly did you get this message from him?”

“Let me think. I believe it was quite a while ago.”

“Oh no. But, Mr. Roche…”

Fiona rarely complained about anything, but her disappointment was obvious. Giles turned to look at her, surprised to hear an edge in her voice.

She explained that her uncle having encountered difficulties sending paintings from foreign lands was what had motivated her to work at the gallery in the first place. In a way, it was the main reason she worked there, so Giles could imagine why she would be upset that she didn’t get to arrange the painting’s delivery. However, he also got the sense that there was more to her disappointment than that.

“Don’t tell me Uncle arranged to have it delivered and insured himself?” she said.

“No, I made the arrangements this time,” Roche replied.

“You did?”

“I was sending something else anyway, so yes.” Roche apologized for his lack of communication, but from his tone and expression, it seemed there was more he wasn’t letting on about.

Giles’s eyes darted over the group. Hans’s eyes were oddly shifty, and his mouth was closed tight, but Fiona was so emotional she didn’t even notice. Ordinarily, Fiona gave off a strong, composed air, but in that moment, she looked young for her years. He found it both surprising and irksome.

Giles set his cup down, and Roche shot him a stiff smile. “Well, I know Reggie isn’t known for his tact, but he seemed to catch on to the fact that you’ve been very busy, Miss Fiona.”

“Um…yes?”

“He probably didn’t want to ask you to handle the job, lest it interfere with your courtship,” Roche said meaningfully, glancing back and forth between Fiona and Giles.

Fiona gasped and snapped her mouth shut, grasping his meaning. She had confided in Reginald by letter about her father’s plan to marry her to Norman. Her uncle had promised to be her ally after her engagement announcement was postponed, so she had updated him on the situation with Giles when he asked.

She looked around the room. When she saw old, familiar Hans nodding in understanding, Fiona’s hands shot to her face.

But, Uncle, you never used to concern yourself with this sort of thing! He tended to do his own thing with absolute disregard for the other people in his life. She hadn’t thought him capable of being so considerate.

“Oh dear, I feel so ashamed. I’m sorry I snapped at you, Mr. Roche.”

“Now, now, I don’t mind, Miss. I let you handle all sorts of other tasks here, and Dennis helped me.”

Despite Roche’s assurance that he wasn’t offended, Fiona kept her hands over her face as she plopped back into her seat; the flames of shame from letting herself get carried away refused to subside. She peered through the cracks in her fingers and met

Giles's gaze. The light in his grayish-blue eyes seemed harsh to her, but Fiona didn't have the fortitude in that moment to wonder why.

"P-pardon me for carrying on so. I, um…"

"It's all right, Fiona. I can tell you really wanted to help your uncle," Giles said.

His words brought her sudden clarity of mind. *That's right,* she thought. *That's what made me lose it. I felt like my uncle no longer needed me.* All her clerical work at the gallery was the same, but when her uncle chose not to ask for her help, it made her feel like he didn't need her anymore.

"Yes, you're right," she said slowly. "I guess I really did want to help."

Relationships went both ways. If one of the people involved wanted or needed more than the other, it couldn't last. Fiona knew this, yet it felt as if the person she had admired all her life had rejected her, and it hurt.

The waves of emotion in Fiona's heart gradually subsided, and Roche spoke again. "I'll let you know the minute the painting arrives."

"Thanks," she said weakly.

"Don't worry, you will be the one to unwrap it. That's still your job."

"All right, thanks." She nodded. There was still a stiffness in her voice, but she had finally calmed down.

Her uncle disliked annoyances and hated beating around the bush. If he no longer wanted Fiona's help, he would have told her so directly. She admonished herself for letting that slip from her mind.

"I didn't realize you felt so strongly about arranging all his shipments. Reggie is a lucky man to be loved so deeply by you, Miss Fiona."

"Mr. Roche?"

"That's right," Hans said. "I remember that when you were a little girl, you'd often say, 'When I grow up, I'm gonna marry

Uncle!'"

"H-Hans?"

"Master was most upset when he heard about that. Said he's your own father and you never said that about him."

"Ha ha ha! I can picture it now," Roche chuckled.

"But that all happened ages ago!"

With Roche and Hans laughing it up over times gone by, Fiona once again felt out of place. Her hand wandered aimlessly in the air until another hand grabbed it firmly. Surprised, she turned to the side and found a smile sculpted on a marble-like face.

"Lord Giles?"

"Godmother's probably wondering where you are. Let's head back before it gets late."

His expression was absent of warmth, just like the day they met. Fiona had no other response but to nod silently. Barely missing a beat, Giles stood up, leading Fiona by the hand. She made her flustered goodbyes and headed with him to the door.

Only then did Rudolph, who had been quietly stuffing his cheeks with sweets, finally speak. "Huh. *Somebody's* jealous."

"R-Rudy! C'mere, you!"

"No rest for the clever, eh—*urgrah!*"

Despite Dennis's frantic attempt to shut Rudolph's mouth, Giles and Fiona had heard Rudolph loud and clear. Fiona turned around, her eyes wide with horror. Roche gave her a playful shrug of his shoulders, and there was a sideways smirk on Dennis's flustered face. As for Hans, he looked sharply to the side, just as he had the first day he and Fiona visited the Bancroft mansion together.

"Um, are you…"

Fiona's gaze wandered up Giles's arm to his face—and he looked away. Unless she was mistaken, though, his ears were crimson. Fiona's heart slammed against her chest.

There was a long pause. Then Giles said curtly, "We're going."

“A-all right.”

Without giving each other so much as another glance, they headed home.

Side Story:
The Circumstances of the Bodyguard's Appointment

THE SOCIAL SEASON was well underway when Dennis came to the capital for the first time in a while. He was there to visit his employer, the Marquess of Molins.

The Green barony, into which Dennis had been born, was a distant relation of House Molins. Despite the gap in social class, he'd enjoyed amicable relations with members of the Molins family since childhood, especially Richard. They found a quick kinship with each other, each being the third-eldest son of his respective family.

Coincidentally, during his time in the military, Dennis's commanding officer was Richard's closest friend, Giles. With Giles and Richard posted in different locations, Dennis had acted as a sort of go-between for them. So when Dennis visited after his longer-than-average military service to announce his retirement, Richard's face lit up at the sight of him.

"That's right! Dennis, now that you're here, I can ask you!"

"A-ask me what?"

"Do you have plans for where you'll work next?"

"No, nothing yet." Dennis went on to explain that he wanted to take some time off and decompress before deciding the next chapter in his life.

Richard grabbed his jacket and stood. "Good, then come with me."

"All right, but where are we going?"

Dennis recognized the smile on Richard's face. It was the look he got when he was up to no good. Seeing that bad omen sent his heart pounding, but Richard was as stubborn as he was friendly. Once he set his mind to something, he would see it through—by force if necessary. Dennis knew that better than anyone, and he also knew from their longtime association that Richard would never force anyone to do anything they truly did not want to do.

Because of this, Dennis gave up any idea of resistance and caved to his friend's demands—but the next words from Richard's mouth caught him by surprise.

"We're going to see your scary former lieutenant commander. He ought to be home right about now."

"Uh, what? My former lieutenant commander... Do you mean Lord Lowell? P-please, wait a minute—"

"Come on, hurry up. Gee, you're a lifesaver! This will take a load off Giles's mind."

"Again, could you please tell me what this is about?!"

"I'll explain on the way."

Dennis goggled in astonishment, and, with a cheerful smile, Richard shoved him into a carriage.

This former lieutenant commander of whom Richard spoke was Giles, who had served in the same platoon as Dennis. In the military, where phrases like "fair and upright" and "straight as a die" were reduced to shells of themselves, it was commonplace for soldiers to suffer under the merciless, arrogant rule of their commanding officers. Giles, however, did not engage in favoritism, and he was one of the few officers who did not take bribes, so he earned the trust of most of his men.

If you asked any of them if he was friendly, however, they would insist he wasn't. But he did not flaunt his status as the heir to an earl, and he defied his good looks with nerves of steel and a skilled hand. He also exerted himself fully, both in combat and in negotiations with superior officers, and his subordinates relied on him heavily.

Giles's genius was exceptional, yet his superior upbringing and his friendship with the crown prince rendered him oblivious to this fact. He assumed everyone else was capable of what he could do, so his expectations of his own men were high. As a result, they often had to push themselves to their limits to succeed. All of his lesson plans were brutal. He also always made Dennis take part in training for administrative work. Of course, the experience did serve him well, but he found Giles's merciless leadership scarier than actual field combat.

Money could not win him over, so even bribes were useless when it came to Giles. Even now, the memory of his callous scolding when he caught his subordinates trying to cover up their failures made Dennis break out in a cold sweat. Though Giles never so much as raised his voice in anger, he was so intimidating in that moment that even Dennis, who had nothing to do with the cover-up and merely happened to be in the room at the time, froze in terror.

Giles was hard on others, and even harder on himself. The impeccably flawless Icy Scion was a name he had actually earned in the military; only later did it spread in high society. Dennis had mentally prepared himself for the eventuality that he might bump into his former commanding officer in the capital someday, but… why did it have to happen so soon?

He was so stupefied by the unexpected turn of events that his shoulders were already tense, but as they sat in the carriage and Richard cheerfully explained the reason they were going to see Giles, curiosity got the better of Dennis's nerves.

"Ah, so he wants me to be a bodyguard. Who am I protecting?"

"Gil's beloved."

"…Uh." Those were the absolute last two words Dennis ever expected to hear together. He rubbed his eyes and tugged on his earlobes. "Are my ears playing tricks on me? Perhaps I'm dreaming…"

"You didn't mishear me. This is real. She's Fiona Clayburn, daughter of a baron. They only recently began their courtship. We want you to keep an eye on her at her place of work to ensure no problems arise."

"You can't be serious. Wait, what?! No bloody way!"

"Ha ha ha! Yeah, it's shocking, I know."

Dennis was so shocked he lost his manners, but who could blame him? Despite the God-given good looks with which Giles had been blessed, he was an infamous lady-hater. Even in social settings, he made only minimal, polite contact, and he never

sought women out at parties. His relatives had tried to set him up with women, and he had flatly rejected every last one.

And now…he has a beloved?

A giant question mark formed above Dennis's head. An arranged betrothal he could understand; Giles was the heir of a renowned house, and it was common enough for an eldest son's wishes to be ignored and a bride chosen for him. If that were the case, though, Richard would have called her his fiancée. The word "beloved" implied she was a lady he had begun courting of his own accord.

His love life was so dead, we used to place bets about it. I can't believe it! He couldn't even begin to imagine Giles smiling - agreeably and whispering sweet nothings into his lover's ear.

"Well, rumors of his relationship are spreading through the capital like wildfire right now, so I figured they'd reach you in time," Richard said, satisfied with the shocked response he'd - gotten from Dennis. "They go out and canoodle in public - practically every day."

Dennis couldn't believe that either. "Canoodling? But that isn't the Lord Lowell I know. It's an impostor."

"Ha ha! That's my Dennis; you know him well. All right, I'll let you out of your misery and give you the plot twist. So here's what's really going on…"

When Dennis heard the next thing out of Richard's mouth, he cradled his head in his hands. *I can understand wanting to avoid marriage, but taking a fake lover?!*

"Why did it come to this?" Dennis murmured.

"Well, I was actually the one who first thought up the plan."

"Of course you're behind it. Lord Lowell would never dream of such a scheme. Wait, that's not the issue here! If anybody finds out, it would be a massive scandal. What are you going to do about that?!"

"We'll just make sure nobody finds out."

Richard sounded confident, but Giles had adamantly avoided women all his life; he had no experience with courting. How could

a man like him pull off a convincing, loving, mutual relationship with a lady? It was unfathomable. This was the royal capital's high society, a gathering of the nobility's shrewdest. It would take much more than a half-baked, last-minute charade to fool them.

Besides, Giles's father, the Earl of Bancroft, was the very personage who had made Giles so harsh. If he saw through the act and a scandal erupted… Well, just the thought made Dennis shudder, despite it having nothing to do with him. But, Richard, as a coconspirator, would not be let off so easily if their plot came to light.

This is petrifying. The noblewoman who's in on the scheme with him is in really deep water too.

According to Richard, she wasn't infatuated with Giles's good looks, and she had declared herself uninterested in romance—what in the world was she like? To agree to be a stranger's fake lover, she would have to be quite desperate.

Finally, Dennis regained his wits. "Now, wait a minute. I take it this conversation is top secret?"

"Of course it is. The only ones in the know are me and the couple involved. And…" Richard pointed at Dennis. Realizing he had already become a coconspirator against his will, Dennis's face tightened into an awkward smile.

"Oh, gee… Y-you never had any intention of letting me escape, did you!"

"Nope. I had faith that you wouldn't betray my expectations, Dennis."

His escape route smoothly blocked, Dennis cursed the -heavens. He knew he shouldn't have let his guard down.

The turmoil in Dennis's heart contrasted sharply with the smooth ride of the carriage as they made their way to the Bancroft estate. It took only a glance at Richard with Dennis in tow for Giles to understand what the meeting was about.

"Dennis Green… Ah. That makes sense."

"A-an honor to see you again, Lieutenant Commander!"

“I’m not your lieutenant commander anymore.”

“Yes, sir!” he barked reflexively, snapping his heels together and standing at attention. They were in Giles’s personal quarters, not at a military camp, and both of them were retired—the power of habit was a formidable thing indeed.

As Dennis squirmed uncomfortably and broke out in a cold sweat, Giles shot him a penetrating stare. “But I’m not sure he’s fit to be her bodyguard—”

“Whoa now, Gil,” Richard cut in cheerfully. “If we put a gruff military man in the gallery, he’d scare the customers away, wouldn’t he? Trust me, you want a bodyguard who doesn’t look the part.”

It was true: Dennis did not look like a military man, either in stature or in the face. Bodyguards were always boorish men, so if they wanted to use this stereotype to lull their enemy into a false sense of security, Dennis was a perfect fit. When it came to intimidating wrongdoers, however, he was lacking.

“Dennis has a keen eye, so he won’t overlook anyone - suspicious. He’s perfect.”

“Uh, what exactly do you mean by suspicious?” Dennis whirled to look at Richard. When the subject of a bodyguard had been broached, Dennis assumed he was to ward off all the impassioned noblewomen who flung themselves at Giles.

“Oops, did I forget to tell you? Miss Clayburn stopped a con man from selling Lady Colet a counterfeit painting. The man in question seems none too pleased about that, and some of his buddies have been stalking her.”

“Yes, you did forget to tell me. That’s much more serious than you implied!”

“Well, that’s why she needs a bodyguard,” Richard said, sounding frustrated.

“Ah… Well. Fair point.”

To hire a bodyguard to watch her at her place of work, they must have really been worried about her. That she needed -

protection from con men as well as jealous noblewomen made the situation much more clear.

“So the only ones who will know about my bodyguard assignment are the gallery owner and her butler, Hans—correct? Neither she nor the other employees are to know about it. Additionally, only the three of us here know that the courtship is fake.”

“You got it,” Richard confirmed. “To Miss Clayburn, you’ll just be a new hire, not a bodyguard and definitely not somebody who’s in on the romance charade. If she ever does find out… Well, I don’t think I need to spell out for you what will happen, eh?”

“O-of course not, sir!” *That smile on Richard’s face is giving me the creeps. I can just hear him saying that if I ruin this fun little game for him, he’ll end me!*

What a mess. Dennis could only hope to get through his service without a hitch. He understood the situation all the way down to the counterfeit con, but it was a much bigger - responsibility than he’d initially thought. Though the most daunting task was all the secrets he would have to keep. Dennis was not a blabbermouth, but he was not good at lying in the - moment; backed into a corner and questioned, he could see himself blurting out everything.

“If you decline, we can arrange right away to send you to some other post,” Giles said ominously. “That’s right, I heard the fort in the west needed more scouts—”

“I gladly accept the bodyguard assignment, sir!”

With a satisfied glance Dennis’s way, Richard said, “Gil, you’ve informed the gallery owner, Roche, right?”

“Yes, I’m leaving all the work-related details to him.”

“All right, then. Dennis, I’ll loan you a carriage. Go straight to the gallery.”

“Right now? Isn’t this a bit—”

“Our enemy won’t sit back and wait for us.” Richard’s tone of voice was casual, but his words weighed heavily on Dennis. Sensing that this bodyguard business was not a mere precaution

but rather a measure of protection from danger that was already afoot, Dennis braced himself for the task ahead.

"Yes, my apologies. I'll head right out."

"I'll expect a status report every day after work hours; if it's an emergency, contact me immediately." Giles handed Dennis a letter of introduction and, receiving word from a servant that he had another visitor, left the room. Dennis and Richard watched him walk away, and Dennis let out a deep sigh.

"What's wrong? Feeling upset?" Richard asked.

"Oh, uh, no. I planned to look for employment regardless. It's just that things proceeded a lot faster than I anticipated, and I've never even set foot in a gallery. In a way, though, this assignment is actually a big help."

To a man who'd lived his life outside of it, art was an industry he felt most ill-matched for. His duties would likely only involve protecting Fiona, but he was curious to get a peek into a whole new world, and he was grateful to have a job at all, besides.

But Dennis's superficial answer did not satisfy Richard. Smiling, he pressed Dennis for more. "Good. Anything else?"

Dennis fell silent for a moment. Then, with great effort, he said, "Well…Lord Lowell seemed dissatisfied with me, like he believed I wasn't up to the task. I just wonder if maybe there's someone more capable you could have offered the job to."

When Richard offered Dennis the bodyguard gig and during the briefing that followed, Giles's emotionless face grew sterner and sterner. He looked grumpy, somehow. Though Giles had put on a polite mask and not said so explicitly, he seemed to feel that Dennis was not bodyguard material.

Richard burst out laughing. "Oh, no, no, no. It has nothing to do with you personally, Dennis. Gil would hate anybody who became her bodyguard."

"Huh?"

"Well, you'll see what I mean soon enough. Don't worry about it." He waved an airy hand, then stopped with his hand in front of

his face and held up his index finger. “Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone else, you hear?”

“Yes. Of course I won’t…?”

For all the swearing to secrecy he had already done that day, Richard sure was dropping a lot of cryptic hints. Dennis could only cock his head, confused, at Richard’s knowing smile, and then he put the Bancroft mansion behind him.

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One evening, a little while after Dennis started working at the gallery, Giles was tied up, so Dennis went to Richard to deliver his daily report.

“So anyway, this morning, we received one letter, and this afternoon, we received two more. The handwriting was different, but they all said generally the same thing. It seems likely somebody is instigating it.”

Roche and Hans had been supporting Giles behind the scenes, relieved to have Dennis in charge. Richard picked the letters up off the table and waved the envelopes with a tired sigh. “I’m surprised the bastards haven’t given up yet. By the way, Miss Clayburn isn’t wise to it, I trust?”

“She isn’t, sir. No need to worry.”

“I don’t mean just the letters. I mean you, Dennis.”

“E-everything’s fine,” Dennis insisted, for his own sake as much as Richard’s.

The initial plan was for the bodyguard to be assigned the role of a salesperson in the front of the gallery, but when Roche learned of Dennis’s military background, he assigned him to work in the back office. In other words, he was Fiona’s assistant.

Interacting so closely with the one I’m bodyguarding was a huge miscalculation. Yes, it was the ideal position from which to protect her, but it also made it much harder to keep secrets from her. To make matters worse, Dennis needed to be on his top game with

his clerical work at the gallery so as not to rouse Fiona's suspicions.

The work was a different beast than his clerical work in the military. His brain felt like it might explode from all the things his daily tasks covered, but thanks to Fiona's patience in answering his questions—and to Hans, who was in on the bodyguard secret and had an odd way of leaping in with an assist—Dennis had somehow begun to settle in at his new job.

He realized that he actually rather enjoyed art dealing. His fellow employees were all affable, as was the atmosphere of the gallery. He had become such a diligent worker in such a short time that even Roche approved of his performance. As a place of work, Dennis found it quite satisfying.

But in stark contrast to the peaceful workplace, the -threatening letters addressed to Fiona were the epitome of sinister. Some of them even contained needles or shards of glass. Watching Richard carefully look over each letter, Dennis let out a silent sigh. *It's cruel. Even the words they write could cut her.* It was not the first time letters like these had come in on his watch, but even not being the addressee, he felt each new one as a psychic blow. Their intended recipient must never see them, at any cost.

Roche and Giles would deal with the senders of the letters, so all Dennis was expected to do was intercept the letters before they reached Fiona and see what was inside. He would also report any stalkers or suspicious persons to the police. Neutralizing the problems around her without Fiona knowing it posed its fair share of challenges, but compared to his days in the military, it wasn't all that hard on him. Not that he ever expected his days of training in the stinking mud would serve him well in the elegant royal capital, of course.

It still baffles me, though. I wondered what sort of woman would agree to be Lord Lowell's fake lover and hold a job on top of that—and I still don't have an answer.

Dennis had braced himself for the terrifying unknown—but when he met Fiona, he found her an ordinary noblewoman. Her normalcy was so startling that in a way, it astounded him. As they

finished up their first day's work together, however, he realized that there was also something unique about her.

Fiona was the daughter of a baron, but she did not look down on her commoner coworkers. Neither did she put on airs around the customers of higher class, nor belittle Dennis for being new. Some artists and fellow industry workers were quite wild, and most had one or two quirks, but Fiona didn't put up any walls with them. She dealt with any issues that arose with a natural poise and impressed Dennis deeply.

What surprised Dennis most of all about Fiona, though, was that her demeanor was consistent with everyone—Giles included. She did change her behavior and adjust her personal space to play the part of his lover, but Dennis couldn't detect a hint of flightiness or yearning in her eyes. That had to be unusual.

The only time Fiona seemed to act differently was when she spoke about her uncle. He'd looked after her since she was a little girl, and he was the reason she started work at the gallery. He seemed to be a special person to her even within her family. When Fiona spoke of wanting to travel the world with her uncle, her eyes lit up. One look at that face, and it made perfect sense to Dennis that she would pretend to court Giles to avoid an arranged marriage to her childhood friend that would confine her to the barony.

And just as Richard had prophesied, Fiona and Giles began to look like a proper couple. It was the reason Fiona received so many threatening letters.

"Do you think the instigator is Caroline?" Richard asked.

"The ones actually writing the letters are other daughters of the nobility, but I do believe it must be her."

The letters all followed the same pattern: They slandered Fiona, then detailed why she was a bad match for Giles. Then they would list the qualities and virtues befitting a future countess, all of which pointed to Caroline. The handwriting and stationery varied, so Dennis inferred that many different people had sent them; either her lackies were sending the letters voluntarily or

under her orders—they couldn't be sure which—but Caroline had to be involved somehow.

"So, how was it today?" Richard asked.

"We received letters, but there was no stalker."

"Not that; I meant Gil. She appraised paintings at the Fowler residence all morning and then he took her to the gallery, right?"

"Oh, yes. Lord Lowell went home immediately after, so I only caught a distant glimpse of him. Just so you know, that man *definitely* perceives me as an enemy!"

"Does he? Ha ha ha!"

"It's no laughing matter! What are you going to do about it?!"

The day before, Fiona had begun making house calls to appraise the paintings Gordon had sold so she could determine whether they were fake. After the day's appraisal, Fiona had come back to the gallery for work. Dennis was there too—as he should have been, since Richard had hired him, and Giles approved it.

He worked not at the front desk but as Fiona's assistant. That was something Roche had decided; it was not like Dennis had wished for it. Yet whenever Giles looked at Dennis, it hurt like a knife. His scrutinizing gaze did not seem meant to determine whether or not Dennis was doing a suitable job as Fiona's bodyguard.

"What *can* I do about it? You don't need to feel guilty about it, Dennis. Of course, if you make bedroom eyes at Fiona while Giles is away, that's another matter."

"B-but I would never do that, and you know it! There's Hans to consider, and Mr. Roche and the other employees often pop in to check on us! And for a start, Miss Fiona isn't—"

"Hm? You call Miss Clayburn by her first name, I see."

The blood drained from Dennis's face. "Yeah… That's bad, huh…"

"From the look on your face, I'll wager she calls you Dennis?"

Dennis paused, his face turning blue with dread. "It's complicated." Richard only seemed to grow more amused.

“Ha, I see.”

Fiona may not have altered her behavior depending on a person’s social class, but that didn’t mean she was indifferent to disparities in social status. For one, she still addressed Giles as “Lord Giles,” even though she was supposed to be his lover. Yet she called Dennis—a man she had just met—by his first name.

There was a reason for that, though. The gallery already had an employee with the surname Green, so the people there had organically taken to calling him by his first name. And since Dennis was to be Fiona’s closest coworker, she wanted him to address her by her first name in turn. Dennis was resistant to it at first, and it wasn’t until he received permission to add a “Miss” to her name that he finally agreed.

He’s already insecure about me working at the same place as her, but if he hears us calling each other by our first names… Well, he had a feeling Giles wouldn’t go easy on him. An image of Giles as his superior officer flashed in his mind, and Dennis’s voice cracked in his throat.

“B-but if I suddenly change the way I address Miss Fiona, she’ll get suspicious. So what should I—”

“Don’t change it. It’s much more fun this way.”

“Please, don’t joke around. Help me!”

“I would, but I’m never in the gallery.” The smirk in Richard’s voice belied his sympathetic words, making Dennis feel even more bitter.

“Um, just to confirm, their courtship… It is an act, isn’t it?”

“Ah yes, the eternal question.” Richard narrowed his eyes - critically at Dennis. “I’m sure *they* think it’s just an act.”

“You mean they don’t notice it themselves? Oh dear, that’s yet another problem.”

An epic sigh escaped him, but Dennis couldn’t help it. He had always thought of Giles as a man who executed everything - flawlessly, but now that he had seen a very different side of Giles, he felt a sense of kinship with the earl’s son budding inside him. (Only a little, though.)

Dennis pressed a hand to his forehead, and Richard, donning his usual knowing smile, poked Dennis's face with a finger. "Speak of this to no one. Got it?"

"Of course I won't!"

This time, Dennis understood exactly what Richard meant. He was at his wits' end, but he nodded in firm agreement.

Side Story:
Closeness of a Childhood Friend

A FEW DAYS AFTER Giles and Richard orchestrated the successful arrest of Gordon and Minister Saquille, a Clayburn family carriage returned to the townhouse from the Heyward estate, where Fiona had been staying. Norman and Cecilia were waiting as the carriage parked, and Hans, who had attended parliament in place of the absent baron, stepped out of it.

That's odd, Norman thought, noticing that Fiona wasn't with the butler. He tilted his head inquisitively, and, beside him, Cecilia seemed even more perplexed. A dark cloud quickly shrouded the radiant excitement on her face.

"Hans, why isn't my sister with you?" she asked, peering anxiously into the empty carriage.

"Miss Fiona won't be coming home yet," Hans said apologetically.

"She's not coming home? Oh dear, why not?"

"Let's go inside and I'll explain everything. I've brought a letter from her."

Fiona was supposed to shelter in place at the Heyward estate until the counterfeiters were in police custody; now that they had been arrested, Cecilia had assumed her sister would come right home. But once they ambled into the parlor, caught their breath, and listened to Hans's explanation, everything became clear.

"Apparently, Miss Fiona's testimony will be crucial during the interrogations and trial. With all the detectives and policemen coming and going, the Heyward estate is the ideal place for her to stay."

"Ah. Yes, that makes sense."

The Clayburn townhouse was outside the center of the royal capital. The Heyward estate was much closer to the police department where the investigation was taking place. Moreover, government officials coming and going from the estate would

draw no suspicion, whereas if policemen were to visit the humble Baron Clayburn, which stood on the lower fringes of the peerage, they would draw attention and people would inevitably assume something was amiss.

Fiona was one of the good guys who thwarted the counterfeiters, Norman thought, *but the fact remains that she was mixed up with the conspiracy. I guess that doesn't look very good.*

The mere fact that Fiona had a job outside the home already raised many eyebrows, so it was certain that, were they to learn of her involvement, some people would ignore the actual criminals and criticize Fiona. Then all the backbreaking efforts from her father and Giles to keep her free from scandal would have been for naught.

"Sorry, Cecilia, but you'll have to hold out just a bit longer." Norman gave her a sympathetic smile, but Cecilia's disheartened gaze remained fixed on the letter from Fiona that Hans had handed her. "I understand that you're upset. I know how much you were looking forward to her coming home."

"Thanks, Norman. But I…"

The sisters had never spent a day apart before. To Cecilia, spending time away from a family member was new terrain. *And it was very sudden, besides.*

Fiona had mentioned many a time that when Cecilia came of age, she wanted to travel the world with their uncle Reginald, but that was still in the future; Cecilia had plenty of time to prepare herself for it. This absence was different. Fiona left home one day for work as she usually did…and never came back. The complete lack of warning had gutted Cecilia even harder than her absence might have otherwise.

Frail since birth, Cecilia never went out much, so her family was her world. Neither her father nor Hans were worthy replacements for her sister, so it was difficult to tell her not to feel anxious. Norman worried about potential impacts to Cecilia's health, but between Hans's visits to relay news and communications from Fiona and Olga's regular visits after she learned of Fiona's absence, Cecilia's health had remained stable.

But understanding that her sister would eventually come home was one thing; adjusting to her absence was another. Norman feared the extension to her sister's absence might worry Cecilia again.

He wished he could be of some help. It didn't matter how far back their friendship went; Norman was incapable of filling the lonely hole in Cecilia's heart by himself. Knowing that made him feel unworthy…and something else festered beneath the surface in his heart.

What is this feeling? he thought, surprised. He couldn't name it. But he returned his focus outward, deciding now was not the time to dwell on it.

"Can't Fiona come home for a visit, at least?" Cecilia asked. "Even for half a day."

Norman supported Cecilia's plea with a look at Hans. She had a point: The interrogations wouldn't last all day, so a visit was surely within reason.

But Hans shook his head. "If it were only the interrogations, Miss Fiona would do just what you suggested, Miss Cecilia. But she has an audience with His Majesty to prepare for."

"A royal audience?"

"Yes. It will be a modest affair, but His Majesty wishes to offer his direct appreciation for her hard work. In the near future too."

Cecilia and Norman's eyes rounded at this unexpected news. A blessing from the king meant that Fiona's actions had been deemed meritorious. Norman and Cecilia were thrilled for Fiona, and they wanted to celebrate with her. Her father, who had been under stress all this time, would likely be relieved to hear it as well.

"That's amazing!" Norman beamed. "But now I get it. She has to prepare for that."

The practical issues this posed brought Norman's head back down from the clouds. Hans nodded heavily, a grim look on his face. "Exactly. When the master was given his title, he had years to prepare, and there was a memorandum to follow. I haven't the

faintest idea where to begin in preparing Miss Fiona for her audience."

"Yes, you wouldn't," Norman agreed.

"Is it really so difficult?" Cecilia asked.

"I'm not exactly an expert myself, but there are special pledges to sign and all sorts of etiquette rules to follow," Norman said. He and Hans folded their arms and frowned thoughtfully, and Cecilia looked even more worried. "When you have a royal audience, there are proper responses to memorize, and not to mention she will need a proper dress."

"But she already has a few dresses... No, you're right. None of those would do," Cecilia said.

"There's apparently a certain kind of fabric the dress needs to be made from. It's not like a normal party dress," Norman elaborated.

He came from a barony, just like the Clayburns, so it was unlikely he would have more than one royal audience in his life. He knew that a person granted an audience with the king was supposed to wear attire that was both elegant and subdued, but a lady's dress code was far outside his purview. But he was quite certain that it would take a lady much longer than a man to prepare.

"Are the jewelry and shoes also special?" Cecilia asked.

"Probably, yes. There might even be rules for hairstyle."

"Oh dear. This is all completely over my head..." Cecilia's voice trailed off weakly.

"Same here," he murmured in sympathy.

There were also likely numerous other restrictions beyond the dress code that Norman was unaware of, and every matter must be tended to in preparation. A royal audience was a joyous affair, but for a common baron, it was a heavy burden; there wasn't nearly enough time to prepare.

Norman and Cecilia sat there, looking troubled, but Hans said cheerfully. "That's why the Marchionesses of Colet and

Heyward are assisting Miss Fiona in every way possible. They have truly saved us."

"Really? Well, that's good news. Her father will be relieved to hear that," Norman said.

"Yes, but they have to give her lessons in decorum and arrange her attire, hence the necessity of her staying at the estate That is what has delayed her return."

"Well, if that's the way it is, then I suppose there really is nothing I can do to help." Cecilia sounded like she had accepted the situation, though a little tension had returned to her voice. She was upset that Fiona couldn't come home right away, but she would have been even more upset if Fiona was insufficiently prepared and unable to hold her head high in the royal palace.

Hans shot Cecilia an affectionate, fatherly look, proud of her for putting her sister's circumstances above her own loneliness.

"I'll bet the pressure is getting to Fiona too," Norman said.

"Oh, no, my sister will do just fine! But, Hans, if I bake something, will you take it to my sister along with a letter?"

"Of course. I know she will love that."

"Then I'll do just that. Hmm, what should I bake..."

Reassured by Cecilia's bright smile, Hans left the parlor to tend to more preparations. Oblivious to the fact that she and Norman were now alone, Cecilia began to plan what she would put in Fiona's care package.

"You're so sweet, Cecilia."

"I'm sweet?"

"For giving her the stuffed bunny and baking her treats."

Looking back, in spite of her loneliness, everything Cecilia did had been with Fiona's best interests in mind. The bunny she had sent along with Hans was one of Cecilia's greatest treasures, and Norman was sure she would prioritize Fiona's preferences in whatever she baked. Fiona wasn't the type to cuddle with a stuffed animal while she slept, but the gesture certainly demonstrated how much Cecilia cared.

Yet Cecilia cast her gaze downward in discomfort. “I’m not at all sweet. The truth is, I wish she would ditch the royal audience and just come home.”

“I’m sure Fiona feels the same way.”

“Wouldn’t she rather be praised by the king?”

“This is Fiona we’re talking about. Oh, then again, she would love to see the art hanging on the palace walls. Can’t you just hear her tell the king, ‘In lieu of your kind words, please let me revel in all your paintings!’”

“Oh, Norman, you big goof! But actually…” She giggled. “Yes, she’d definitely say that.”

Noticing the cheer in her eyes and voice, Norman finally relaxed, but before long, Cecilia frowned again in worry.

“You know,” she said slowly, “talking about all this is making me a little scared.”

“Huh? Why scared?”

“I just wonder if I’m going to be okay. Oh! Um, I know that has absolutely nothing to do with my sister’s audience…”

“Ah, you’re talking about next year’s debut.”

Preparations for Cecilia’s coming of age were proceeding under Fiona’s primary supervision, and Mrs. Bennett was making her dress. Cecilia knew she would stand out, wearing a dress made by one of the most popular dressmakers in the capital; she didn’t need to worry about her attire being inadequate.

Rather, for her entire life, Cecilia had rarely left the house. The only people she interacted with outside of her family were her tutors and the citizens of the barony. She also had few interactions with youngsters her own age. This was likely what worried her.

“Fiona and your father will probably pick out the parties you’ll attend. You don’t need to worry yourself over a thing, Cecilia,” he said. Fiona and her father would never push anything on Cecilia that would burden her. Still, Norman understood why she would feel anxious. “All you need to focus on is your health.”

“Really?” Cecilia looked as though she didn’t believe him.

He gave her a resolute smile. “Besides, your father will be your escort, won’t he? So even if you trip and fall, you’ll be just fine.”

“But I might step on my father’s foot and injure him badly.”

“If that happens, I’ll take his place.”

“Huh?!” Cecilia’s cheeks burned red. A lady’s escort for her debut into high society was always either a family member or a fiancé.

“So don’t worry,” he said gently. “No matter how many times you step on me, I’ll still be able to dance. I’ll be the perfect escort until the very end.”

“Um, N-Norman, I—”

“But I wouldn’t want to make you walk if you were ill with a fever, so unless you don’t mind me carrying you in my arms in front of everyone, be sure you don’t catch a cold, and don’t push yourself too hard. Got it?”

“Y-yes,” she replied meekly, her eyes swimming. Cecilia hung her head, her cheeks turning even redder.

Damn. She’s adorable.

In that moment, Norman truly believed that the mysterious feeling in his heart was nothing more than brotherly love.

Profile

Kobato Kosuzu

An author who mainly writes romance novels for women. Other works include *The Apothecary Witch Turned Divorce Agent* (DRE Novels) and *The Black Earl's Marriage Situation* (Amazaonite Novels).

The manga version of this work, True Love Fades Away When the Contract Ends, is currently being serialized through Comic Ride Ivy, and is also available in English from Seven Seas Entertainment.



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