



THEIRSTO TRAIN

SAMANTHA MADISEN

Theirs to Train

By

Samantha Madisen

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Published by Stormy Night Publications and Design, LLC.

www.StormyNightPublications.com

Madisen, Samantha

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Cover Design by Korey Mae Johnson

Images by Period Images and Shutterstock/Ironika

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Chapter One

“Lina!”

The voice that followed Lina up the windswept hill held a note of exasperation, but Lina paid her youngest “cousin” no mind, except to cast a careless glance behind to assure herself that Anna had been able to extract herself from the deadened, tangled branches of the half-dead chestnut grove without injury. Anna was slower than Lina, because she was less accustomed to adventure. Lina didn’t have the patience to wait for her, but she also wished no harm upon the girl. Anna, after all, was a staunch confidante of hers, though Lina did wish that the slight, pale child would not insist upon following her everywhere. Anna was only months younger than Lina, but she seemed like a small child sometimes.

From the shuddering, milky windows in the attic of the most improperly-named Green Grove Manor, where she had been indulging in one of her favorite pastimes, Lina had seen the carriage approaching from far off. Black against the dark gray of the road, almost invisible in the distance through the wintry drizzle against the dead brownish gray of the fields, it had first appeared to her to be a figment of her wild imagination.

No one ever came unexpectedly to Green Grove Manor.

And why would they? A sprawling estate that had fallen into disrepair, its chestnut groves consumed by disease and neglect, its fields unworked and overgrown in summer, its facade flaking away like dead skin, and the interior unspeakably in shambles, Green Grove Manor offered a visitor very little by way of comfort.

Or adventure or interest, Lina added pointedly to her thoughts.

She had stared at the moving black dot only long enough to ascertain that indeed, it was not her imagination that some unannounced visitor was in fact approaching the manor along the long, stony road that cut across a ridge between the fields and the groves. It took her only moments to creep across the attic rafters, through the corridor, and down the former servants’ stairway in the west wing of the house. The wing was not used, and left unheated in the winter, so it was precariously crumbling in upon itself and thusly deemed a danger.

Which is why Lina spent as much of her day there as she possibly could.

There had been a fine rain falling when she made a run for the chestnut grove, which was the only way to reach the road without being spotted, and it had turned to cold sleet that was only now retreating. Anna had followed her, demanding to know why she couldn’t just wait for the visitor to arrive, and expressing concern about their health, until she had fallen behind. Lina was nimble and stealthy from years of practice picking through the chestnut grove, and Anna, of course, was not.

“We will become ill if we continue in the rain!” Anna had pleaded.

“Return home, then,” Lina had retorted. “Although you know what I think of such perfect nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Anna had whined. “You will catch your death from the cold.”

Lina had paused only to turn around and look at Anna pointedly, because while Lina loved adventure far more than was proper, she loved confronting unreasonable presumptions even more. And Anna—well, she had hopes for Anna learning to do the same someday.

“Anna, I am inclined to wander in the grove all winter long, rain or shine, am I not?”

Anna stopped and regarded Lina with wide eyes and uncertainty. She nodded.

“Tell me then, when have I caught my death of the cold? Or even so much as a spell?”

Unlike the elder Harlowe sister Evangeline, Lina—who Evangeline and the other members of the household insisted upon calling by her Anglicized and Christian name, Caroline—was never ill. *Evangeline*, who rarely went outside in the winter, was prone to passing half the season in her bed, pale and lethargic. Lina was inclined to believe that Evangeline was ill from staying indoors all the time, but this opinion, when voiced, had been very poorly regarded and earned her additional horrid chores, which only piled on, as none were ever rescinded once assigned.

She was nearly at the road, and she could hear the wheels of the carriage and the jingle of the horses’ reins. Lina would have loved nothing more than to drive a carriage herself, but that was naturally disallowed.

She peered over the embankment and decided she had time to dart across the road and behind a windbreak, where she would be able to view the oncoming visitor prior to his arrival. There was no true motive for doing this except for the sheer excitement of it: Lina was, as all the Harlowe family was wont to say, a bit feral.

The carriage was farther away than she had imagined, and so she was able to dart across the road when the carriage was at a bend in the road, and her crossing was obscured. From there, she managed to duck behind the windbreak, and settle herself in with a good view to the oncoming vehicle.

It was something to behold, and even in the adventure-seeking heart of Lina, the sight struck a chord of fear. The horses pulling the carriage were enormous and pure black. The carriage itself was shiny and black as the night, larger than most, with rich black curtains concealing the occupants from view. Only the driver, dressed in an oddly ostentatious red cloak, delineated the coach from an oversized hearse. That, and the fact that there was no carriage of this size and quality anywhere near this forsaken part of the world.

Lina enjoyed the vague thrill that stirred inside of her, even as she caught her breath. Perhaps as the carriage passed she would get a glimpse at a crest or even an inhabitant. And then she would enjoy the thrill of returning to her home without being caught, and somehow drying and remaking herself so that no one but Anna would be the wiser that she had been out in the fields.

What else was there for amusement in this dreadful place?

As the carriage approached, however, the driver craned his neck, and abruptly, just in front of her hiding place, the great beasts pulling the carriage reared and the magnificent vehicle came to a clattering stop.

Lina closed her mouth to hide her breath, and stepped back from the thicket, cringing as a branch

snapped beneath her foot. Her heart beat furiously in her chest as she struggled to contain her wild breath. The top of the carriage was visible over the windbreak, so she could see the door to the compartment open. The hat of the driver peeked over the top, and if he had only sat up just a bit, he would have seen her. The crunch of the gravel on the road indicated that the occupant of the carriage had stepped out.

Whoever it was, he was dressed in black and moved slowly, saying nothing as he walked back and forth along the line of the windbreak.

The footsteps stopped.

Lina wondered at that moment, for no particular reason, where Anna was. She sincerely hoped the foolish girl was on the other side of the road still. While the Harlowes had become warily accustomed to Lina's "wild" behavior, they were very intolerant of Anna following in Lina's footsteps. The number of inventive chores that would be heaped upon her would be staggering, she was certain, if Anna were discovered on the side of the road in the rain by a dignified and wealthy visitor.

The pause went on so long that she could no longer hold her breath, so she let it out in a steady stream with the hope that it would dissipate in the air, though it seemed quite certain that the mysterious visitor was already aware of her position.

But still nothing. She glanced at the driver, whose hat was motionless, face forward with the cultivated disinterest of all English servants to their masters' whims.

And nothing. Not a sound nor a movement.

Lina's fear dissolved as curiosity flooded her chest. She was carefully balanced in a most unladylike crouch, and she moved forward with her usual grace, one step at a time, searching through the thick bracken for clues as to the stance of the motionless visitor.

And nothing.

She crept closer still, eyes on the ground as she scooted her dress away to soil it as little as possible, biting her lip in concentration. When she looked up, leaning toward the bracken, she was startled thoroughly by the blink of one unfathomably light blue eye.

She inhaled, and fell back, her mouth open, her heart racing.

"Do you require assistance?"

The voice was calm, betraying very little by way of emotion or intent. The question was not friendly, or mean, or disbelieving, or compassionate: it was none of these things. Somehow, in its low, graveled purr, it carried an undercurrent of impropriety. Lina felt as though someone had plucked a chord inside of her, one that was tightly strung between her neck and her... unmentionable places. Naughty places.

"N...n...no," she breathed. Her voice left in a whispery staccato, so low that she was certain she would have to repeat herself.

But the driveway crunched, and the black contours of the man moved through the sparse holes in the bracken, and the carriage shifted. The door closed, the motionless driver leaned back, and the horses began, as suddenly as they had stopped, to trot down the road toward the manor.

Lina let her breath escape her in a huff, with a sigh of relief. The sound of the carriage disappeared, and she struggled to her feet, started along the windbreak, and went back through the hole she had climbed through. When she looked down the road to assure herself that the carriage was far enough away to risk crossing the road for the grove, her heart was stabbed again by another pang of fear, and a thrill: the curtain in the back window of the carriage was, most certainly, dropping, from where it had been lifted in order for the occupant to look back on her.

“*Merde,*” she whispered.

And then she hiked up her skirts, noting that they were already soiled, and made haste for the chestnut grove, grabbing Anna by the arm as she passed her. The younger girl was staring, open-mouthed, but said nothing as Lina pulled her along behind her.

This was not the first adventure Anna had been on with Lina, though it was likely to be the strangest, perhaps for all time.

“And if we do not return with haste, Anna,” Lina said, finishing her own thought aloud, “it is likely to be the most consequential!”

Chapter Two

Lina rushed Anna through the decrepit west wing of the manor and through the attic, back to their own shared room, where they wintered together to save money on heat. With only two house servants, the affable, overworked, and unfailingly loyal Mr. and Mrs. Gray, it was impossible to keep fires in every room of the manor except to keep the home sufficiently heated as to prevent its complete destruction.

Her heart dropped when they burst through the door, dripping wet and mud-caked, to find Evangeline standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed, a scowl already etched deeply enough in her features to indicate that she had been frowning with disapproval for quite some time.

“Anna!” she hissed, snatching her younger sister by the arm as though she wished to rescue her from a fire. Evangeline’s eyes, however, remained accusingly on Lina as she continued to speak to Anna. “You’re positively filthy, soaking wet, and cold as ice!”

To Lina, she directed a venomous snarl. “And where, pray tell, have you two been gallivanting about?”

“A visitor has come!” Anna exclaimed breathlessly, unperturbed by her sister’s demeanor as always. Anna wrenched free of Evangeline’s limp grip and scurried to her wardrobe, tugging at her dress as she did. “He, or she, or they, have arrived in a grand shiny carriage with a driver with a red velvet cape. Oh, what *could* they have come for?” Her cheerfulness soured for a moment and her face fell. “You don’t believe that it is bad tidings, do you Lina?”

“*Caroline*,” Evangeline hissed at Anna, and it was difficult to discern whether the utterance was a correction meant for Anna, or the beginning of a lengthy admonishment directed at Lina. The Harlowes generally frowned upon the use of Carolina’s nickname, and furthermore, of her French name, and Evangeline was only too pleased to comply with the Anglicization. Evangeline was also only too eager to direct a tirade at Lina whenever possible, all the better still if it was deserved.

“Has he arrived?” Lina asked, ignoring Evangeline either way. She opened her own wardrobe, which was tucked away behind the door, smaller and much more meagerly stocked. Lina cast an eye at Evangeline, who was, as always, clothed in a richly textured dress as opposed to a frock, and without a hair out of place. Evangeline dressed each day and then seated herself to embroider or engage in otherwise approved activities for proper ladies, and would reach the end of each day unblemished.

When she was a child, Evangeline had been very, very pretty. Her hair was black and her eyes were blue, and her complexion was like milk. But upon reaching seventeen years of age, Evangeline’s appearance had drastically declined: she had become stout, her skin had grown patchy and red, and her nose, once a finely sculpted aquiline feature, had inexplicably continued to grow into more of a beak. None of this was helped by the permanent downturn of her mouth, which, now that she was nineteen, had etched fine lines into her cheeks. Her glorious, shiny black hair was all that remained of her former beauty, but propriety dictated that this, too, be pinned up in such a way that it was diminished.

Lina, who was only one month older than Evangeline, had been, in the words of Mrs. Gray, a

“fearsomely plain” child until only recently, when, for whatever reason, she had blossomed like a flower into a great beauty. The Harlowe household had been so accustomed to her plainness and she had transformed so slowly, that it was only very recently that any of them had realized fully that Lina was no longer plain at all, but strikingly beautiful. With chestnut hair that picked up fragments of red, a pink, teacup-lipped mouth, and bright blue eyes, she was physically the definition of an English Rose, a fact which had sunk in with Evangeline in recent months and more deeply infused her expressions with great sourness.

“And how is it that you are aware of this visitor’s arrival, and furthermore that he is a man, when I have only just been informed of this myself?” Evangeline said archly. She turned abruptly away as Lina, who was in possession of very little modesty around her sisters, tore her wet and stained frock over her head, shift and all.

Lina gave a careless laugh. “Of course, you know how I have come upon this information, Evangeline. But I do not know who he is, or why he has come.” Lina changed her clothing quickly, with skill: she was accustomed to such activities, and unlike Anna or Evangeline, she had few dresses to choose from. She selected the finest one, which was a very plain dinner dress of light blue, with an empire waist trimmed by a violet ribbon, and a low neckline that showcased her petite breasts, smooth chest, and swanlike neck. Evangeline’s dress was a masterpiece of deep red with tiny, embroidered flowers, but Evangeline lent it—as she lent all things—a dour and drab appearance.

Lina crossed the room to Evangeline, whom she felt pity for more often than exasperation. The expression on Evangeline’s face when she saw how the plain dress was transformed by Lina’s beauty was such a pity-inspiring event. She took Evangeline by the arm and smiled, attempting to infect her with excitement. “Come, Evangeline, tell us what you know of this visitor and why he is here.”

Evangeline loved, more than anything, to be in the possession of secrets and information, and to disseminate it as she saw fit. Truly, it was the only currency she possessed because her personality was as sour and dull as her appearance.

Lina pushed past her to sit in the dressing table chair and repair her hair, but not without casting an excited and interested look at Evangeline, who was, she could see, already warming to the idea of divulging her secrets.

“I’ll do your hair right after mine, Anna,” Lina said, before looking at Evangeline expectantly in the mirror. “Do tell, Evangeline. Tell us everything you know.”

Evangeline would tilt her chin and draw the story out to such incredibly boring lengths, Lina knew, but she minded not, for Evangeline would be all the more reasonable for having done so.

“Well,” Evangeline said imperiously, as Lina began to twist and braid her hair with a frightening speed—practice at tidying herself up for presentableness having been honed to an art form by her feral nature.

There was a frantic rap at the door before Evangeline could say anything more. The door opened without a wait, and a flustered Mrs. Gray burst into the room.

Mrs. Gray was out of breath, a decidedly atypical state for the unflappable woman. She surveyed the scene before her, eyes stopping on Lina. The rotund woman pressed her hand to her chest and breathed heavily. “Oh. Goodness. I was certain you were to give me a fright, Miss Caroline.” Mrs. Gray was well aware of Lina’s comings and goings, and neither approved nor disapproved of them. In the way of every good English housekeeper, her life’s mission was to make all rooms and members of the household feel as though nothing was ever out of place, and to do so with the greatest efficiency possible. It was very inefficient, in Mrs. Gray’s estimation, to attempt to tame Lina or to console the Harlowes when she gallivanted about like a feral cat, or engaged in wanton reading in the attic. Her tactic, therefore, was to ensure that it appeared to all concerned that such goings-on did not take place.

“The good Lord has mercy upon me that you are here and in a presentable state, Miss Caroline,” she puffed. “A visitor has arrived. You are to put on your finest dress and take dinner in the formal dining room immediately.”

Mrs. Gray’s eyes scanned the two older girls quickly with a flicker of disapproval gathering in the corner of her mouth.

“This is my finest frock,” Lina sang cheerily, returning her gaze to the mirror to finish arranging her hair.

Mrs. Gray sighed heavily. “This will never do. This will not do.” She looked at Evangeline scathingly, up and down, then shook her head. “This is lovely, but much too large,” she said, approaching to pull out Evangeline’s skirts. With her eyes on the fabric accusingly, she muttered. “Have you got anything else, Evangeline, perhaps something that fits you a bit”—the housekeeper paused to search for a word and settled on—“more snugly?”

Evangeline puffed with pride, having evidently taken all of Mrs. Gray’s comments to be directed at her. “I have,” she said, rushing to her own, overstuffed wardrobe, while Lina met Anna’s eyes in the mirror and the two exchanged a smile.

Evangeline retrieved a glorious yellow dress, which indeed fit her snugly enough that she had squeezed from the top and strained the hems in such a way that, as only Mrs. Gray knew, the dress had been let out and then reinforced, and likely should never be worn by Evangeline again.

Mrs. Gray, curiously, looked at the dress, then at Lina, then back at the dress, with a shake of her head. “‘Tis still too large, I suspect,” she murmured. Pushing past a bewildered Evangeline, whose optimistic assessment of her own figure did not extend to the utterly ridiculous, Mrs. Gray began to rifle through the wardrobe.

“Ah,” she said, pulling a dress from the drawers, which had been tucked away in layers of tissue by Evangeline herself, who maintained the furtive hope that she would one day retrieve it to wear when her figure returned to its once glorious state by means of a miracle she expected with all of her heart. It was a Christmas dress, of shiny red damask with a dark green velvet overlay, and by far her finest garment.

“This will do quite nicely,” Mrs. Gray said, removing the dress and walking toward the door. “I will press it and return in no time.”

“But,” Evangeline objected weakly, sensing that something was going quite wrong, though what it might have been, she could not say. “That dress is much too small for me...”

Her voice trailed off, as a cloud of realization overtook the features of her face, even before Mrs. Gray spoke.

The housekeeper’s voice was kindly, which almost made her comment sting even more. “Darling Miss Evangeline,” she cooed. “I apologize. ‘Tis only Miss Caroline whose presence is requested at dinner. Now, I must be off. Caroline, make haste to disguise your wet hair, however it may be that you accomplish such a task, and be ready when I return to don this garment and be off.”

Lina’s hand dropped slowly to the dresser, and she watched Evangeline with a mixture of horror and pity, her mouth slightly slack.

Evangeline glared at Lina in the reflection. “Well,” she snapped. “Don’t sit there with your mouth open like the uneducated... well, I shan’t even say it.” Evangeline pursed her lips, folded her arms, spun about, and stomped from the room. “Clearly,” she hissed, “there has been a grave error.”

Lina waited until the sound of Evangeline’s footsteps receded before meeting Anna’s astonished gaze in the mirror.

Anna was bursting with excitement.

“Will you paint your lips?” she asked excitedly. “Oh, do let me do it.”

Chapter Three

Evangeline's dress was a bit too large, but Mrs. Gray had evidently foreseen the problem and devised an elaborate belt to cinch up the loose fabric. She pinned the bodice with an almost magical method that could not be seen, but issued a warning in a hushed voice. "Walk and sit *properly*, lest the pins be disturbed and prick your skin."

"Mrs. Gray, why not just let it out—"

"You must look your best, dearie," Mrs. Gray said sharply. Then tenderly, brushing the velvet to smooth it all in the same direction: "This could be the very fortunate event this family has prayed for." Her eyes returned to Lina's. "Now. Be a proper lady."

This final command was issued with a force very atypical of Mrs. Gray, and it caused a stab of fear to pierce Lina's heart.

"Off you go," she said, pushing Lina toward the door. "Mind you, use your Christian name and say as little as possible."

Evangeline, who had returned to throw herself dramatically on her bed, crying that she felt quite ill and could not have dinner anyway, sniffed and did not look up at Lina as she left the room. Anna grinned nervously, but nothing occurred to her to say.

* * *

The dining room was gleaming and smelled of fresh polish, and Lina noted with some amusement as well as trepidation that the finest rug in the home, an antique oriental rug that remained carefully stored and was to eventually be sold, had been retrieved and placed in the room, along with the fine china that was similarly boxed away with the intention of selling it.

The room was barely and unevenly lit, with the candelabra placed at the end of the table where Mrs. Gray indicated that she should sit. Lina gave her a strange look, which Mrs. Gray cut short with a searing glare issued at precisely the same time that the semi-hysterical Lilla Harlowe, wife of Lina's guardian, stiffened noticeably.

Lina allowed her chair to be pulled out by Mr. Gray, who was playing the role of butler in a rarely-used suit with tails that, like the rug and the china, had been mysteriously recuperated from storage.

Rushing to the dining room, Mrs. Gray had pulled Lina aside at an alcove and whispered sharply.

"The visitor is a *very* wealthy gentleman. He is a foreigner and a reclusive man with eccentric habits. He will attend dinner at a private table, and you are *not* to make a fuss about it. It is in the interest of all concerned but especially you, Miss Caroline, that you say very little and mind your manners." Then she had squeezed Caroline's hand and implored, tears in her eyes, "*Please.*"

Lina had followed, bewildered, with a cold stone of fear settling in her gut. Desperately, she wanted to ask Mrs. Gray why she even needed to be at this dinner if all she was to do was remain silent, and who this gentleman was, and why, if he was so very eccentric and reclusive, was he dining with

anyone at all? Most importantly—and the question lingered in her mind, bringing with it a peculiar dread—why was he *here* at all? Wealthy gentlemen generally stayed far away from the Harlowe household, as the Harlowes' fall from wealth had been accompanied by a commensurate fall from society. And since the depths of the Harlowes' financial ruin were known in detail only to the Harlowes, and covered up as best as could be done, wealthy men were not invited to the Manor, lest they discover for themselves the elaborate ruse.

Lina sat, and her heart raced as she struggled to remember her “manners.” The glare of the candles made it hard to see even the Harlowes, seated at the opposite end of the table, much less the supposed guest, who she assumed was seated by the great window, where a table could be placed if one wished.

But why would anyone do such a thing?

Lina had gathered from snippets of conversations she had eavesdropped on, or outright spied upon, that the Harlowes were quite anxious to unburden themselves of her. Evangeline had been more than helpful in bestowing upon Lina additional information to that effect: Lina was a financial burden on their already strained household, and the simplest resolution of such a burden was marriage, but since Lina was—as Evangeline had hastened to remind her several times—a bastard with no name and no inheritance, she was essentially without prospects.

The Harlowes, while impoverished, still held peer titles, and aristocratic bearing amounted to something. Evangeline also seemed fairly certain that a dowry of some kind had been salvaged for her.

Evangeline also clung to the belief that she was still as pretty as she once was. Lina, who had become accustomed to her role as plain, bastard child given a home only by the grace of fortune and because of Mr. Harlowe's honorable word for a comrade-in-arms, had not been entirely disabused of this notion herself.

A wealthy male visitor, therefore, might rightfully make sense, if he were a suitor.

But a suitor for Evangeline.

“The best you can hope for,” Evangeline had told Lina, “is to marry a commoner, like a stable boy or a butler or such.” And then, because Evangeline was simply spoiled and insecure, and not truly mean, she had pressed her hand to Lina's shoulder to reassure her. “At least *you* stand a chance of marrying for love. While I,” she had sighed with the sort of practiced sorrow that sent her to bed for days, and could have been very real or very imagined, “must sacrifice myself at the altar of wealth for the good of the family.”

Anna, who was a blonde angel and looked like a doll, had clasped her hands together in wonderment. “And what will I do?”

To which her sister had snapped, “You will get off the floor and behave like a lady, and not speak of such things at such a young age. It is positively improper.”

Anna was eighteen as of the previous week, but Evangeline would always think of her and treat her

like a small girl.

A stillness pervaded the dining room once Lina was seated and basic introductions had been made, and it lasted through to the first course.

“Mr. Blackstone has traveled all the way from London in a single day,” Mrs. Harlowe said, to break the uncomfortable silence.

Lina did her best to contain herself, and failed spectacularly. A glow overtook her complexion and she nearly dropped her fork. “Oh, London,” she said breathlessly toward the dark figure, further obscured by the glow of the candles placed so near to her. “Is that where you live? Is it as exciting and glorious as they say it is?”

Mrs. Harlowe’s face had already become quite rigid by the time Lina finished her sentence.

There was a terrible beat of silence, and Lina pressed her lips together and cast her eyes upon her plate. She knew she was frequently “over-exuberant,” which was unladylike, but now she wondered if perhaps calling a city “exciting” was not also “wanton” in some way, which was something she was never, *ever* to be.

“I am not particularly fond of London,” said a voice from the small table. It was a deep, authoritative voice, strong and clear, but in its contours Lina detected the inflection of a middle-class accent, one which, like her own mild French accent, had been scrubbed as clean as possible, but lingered stubbornly.

For the first time ever in her young life, Lina felt an inexplicable shiver travel through her torso. The flush of her cheeks deepened when the shiver pooled lower in her abdomen than was proper to even think about.

“I prefer Paris,” the voice said.

Lina’s exuberance reared its head again, as she lifted her eyes and smiled broadly. “But I am from Paris!” she said loudly, and to her regret, in a most unladylike way. “I am, that is, rather, I don’t have very many memories for I left when I was young, but the memories I do have—”

“Caroline,” Mrs. Harlowe said sharply, but not soon enough to stop Lina from rambling on to say:

“... are of such gaiety and liberal spirit...”

This final sentence caused Mrs. Harlowe’s features to pinch up into a display of mortification the likes of which Lina had not seen for some time. Lina was instantly overcome by emotion, which rushed to her cheeks and made her eyes sting.

“Caroline, I am certain that Mr. Blackstone has no interest in such impressions.”

Mr. Blackstone did not respond to this comment either to affirm nor deny it, and Lina took in a deep breath and lowered her eyes, hoping that her frustration did not well up in her eyes, as it sometimes did, as tears. Extravagances such as the goings-on of the Parisians were held in very low esteem by Mrs. Harlowe.

“Yes, of course,” Lina managed to say. She smoothed her napkin and took a small bite of pork, which Mr. Gray had prepared most extravagantly, in the only extravagant way he knew how—a French cooking method which Lina herself had instructed him in. She suddenly found the whole thing very funny and had to suppress a smile.

Mr. Harlowe took it upon himself to talk about the weather, and Mr. Blackstone’s journey, and inquire about various London businesses that he frequented when he traveled there. The meal continued on this way, and quite awkwardly, with Mr. Blackstone’s low, rumbling voice only occasionally issuing from the shadows. The sound tickled Lina from the inside, and more than once she felt desperate to speak to the mysterious man, but she held her tongue as instructed.

She was grateful that she managed to finish the meal without any mishaps and without speaking.

“Caroline, if you are finished with your meal, you may retire. I am certain Mr. Blackstone is quite exhausted and the men wish to take their liquor in the drawing room at a sensible hour.”

Mr. Gray was already there to pull out her chair.

“Mr. Blackstone, I suppose I will be taking my leave then, if you would excuse me. It was ever so lovely... dining with you, and...” Lina, at moments like this, always struggled with the proper words. “I do so hope that you enjoy your stay here at our lovely home.”

Mr. Harlowe cleared his throat, and Mrs. Harlowe’s eyes were nailed to her plate. So, she must have said something wrong, but there was nothing new in that. She left, relieved that she had not taken the tablecloth with her as she once had, and covered her mouth in the hallway to stifle a laugh.

For laughter had a tendency to overcome Lina when situations were preposterous, which is what this one seemed to be.

As she walked through the corridors, and upstairs to her bedroom, however, she placed her hand on her stomach, for something there felt funny, though it was not an illness, and when she recalled the sound of the stranger’s voice, it fluttered wildly inside of her.

Chapter Four

Anna met her at the door with her finger to her lips. “Shh,” she hissed. “I believe she really has gone to sleep.”

The two girls looked at Evangeline, who was lying in her bed, frock and all, but indeed appeared to be asleep. Evangeline often feigned sleep, but her attempts were so silly that no one ever believed her. Lina closed the door behind her carefully and turned her back to Anna to have the clasps undone.

“Did you really dine in the dining room?” Anna whispered, unhooking the buttons.

“Yes, but there is something stranger still,” Lina said, smiling, turning to divulge the secret in a whisper. “The man is from London, and his name is Mr. Blackstone, and he dined alone at a table by himself.”

Anna furrowed her brow. “That’s very unusual, is it not?”

Lina faced the wall again. “I think so,” she said, her own brow furrowed. She had, after all, been to very few formal dinners herself, and they had been parties, so there was no room for a table to the side.

Anna giggled. “I hear the Americans put their children at a private table,” she said. “Was he a child? What did he look like? Why is he here?”

The low, firm voice of the stranger echoed in Lina’s mind again, and gooseflesh rippled over her shoulders. “He’s not a *child*,” she practically snapped. “But neither did I see him, he was... in the shadows.”

“Maybe you are to marry him,” Anna said cheerfully.

The strange sensation in her stomach returned, cooler and more forcefully than before. “Don’t be foolish,” she said sharply, and then felt instantly unkind. “He’s a wealthy man,” she said more gently, though even as she said this, she did begin to wonder if Anna might be on to something. “If he were here for marriage he would...” her voice trailed off as the brief hope that had fluttered, inexplicably inside of her, receded, and she felt the sting of disappointment.

A wealthy man, after all—a man with the traces of a middle-class accent—would marry one of the Harlowe sisters for a title and social status. That was plausible.

Lina frowned. Not because she had arrived, yet again, at the undeniable truth of her life and her fate, for she had long ago accepted it. She frowned because she had experienced such an unfamiliar, momentary feeling of hope.

“How silly,” she said aloud, to herself, and Anna made a noise behind her.

Lina turned quickly to console her. “Oh, no, not you, dear. No, no. Me. I was speaking to myself. I promise.”

Anna still looked dejected.

Lina slipped out of the dress shamelessly and hung it up. Her hand rested on her night shift momentarily, and then she took out a frock and slipped it over her head.

“Men like Mr. Blackstone would never be here to court someone like me,” she explained to Anna, smiling. “So we can be sure that is not the reason he is here. Do you know what that means?”

Anna’s sour features changed instantly. She cast a furtive look back at Evangeline, who still appeared to be sleeping.

Anna looked back at Lina, and the excitement in her voice almost turned her whisper to a shout.

“Time for an investigation!” she cried. She started for her wardrobe, but Lina held her back.

“Anna,” she said, crouching down to look her in the eye as she took both of Anna’s hands. “This is a most dangerous mission, and I cannot allow you to go with me...”

Anna’s face began to fall, and her mouth opened in protest.

“...for if you do not remain here to make it look as though I am asleep in my bed, and tell Evangeline and Mrs. Gray that we have retired quite exhausted, then I cannot succeed. Your duty is most important to our success.”

Anna smiled. “And you must promise to tell me everything,” she said.

“Everything,” Lina said, kissing Anna’s forehead. “I promise most solemnly.”

Anna nodded gleefully, and spun around to busy herself at her task.

It was not the first time, after all, that Anna had helped Lina sneak off into the house late at night. Though usually, it was done in the name of fruit or cheese.

Chapter Five

Because the Harlowes could ill afford a governess, and because Mrs. Harlowe and Mrs. Gray had quite enough to do just keeping up the facade of the Manor and their social standing and their wealth, and because Lina was destined to marry a commoner anyway, she was left for much of her childhood to study by herself. It was why Lina's embroidery, handwriting, and piano playing were all in such a disastrous state—not that it mattered. The Harlowes likely thought her slow-witted, but it was the result of Lina using her time to explore the vast Manor, and the many secrets it contained.

It was also why she was adept at least one thing, which was unlikely to ever be any use to her as a commoner: she could stealthily move about a sizable house unnoticed by all, and knew just where to place herself to overhear what went on in other rooms.

Which is how she arrived at the heating grate above the great stove of the secondary kitchen which was no longer used, where, by climbing atop the great stove and standing on her tiptoes, she was within reach of overhearing the two men, who, she was grateful, remained in the drawing room, speaking in hushed tones. As she had expected. She held on to the grate and strained to hear better.

“... as you require,” Mr. Harlowe was saying. ““But I can be certain that the girl has no option but to comply, and that shall be the end of it.”

There was a long pause, and Lina worried that the strange Mr. Blackstone's voice would be too low for her to hear. But when she heard it, it was clear and low, and as before, it sent a sensation through her body that could not be described by any words in her possession.

“And what of the rumors that the girl is wanton?”

Mr. Harlowe appeared shocked by the sigh that came from him. “Mr. Blackstone, you may rest assured that they are merely rumors. Surely a man such as yourself knows how sharp the tongues of high society can be.”

“In my case, Mr. Harlowe,” the voice said coldly, sending another shiver through Lina, “those rumors are all quite true.”

Lina now felt a chill descend through her body—nothing like the other strange feeling Mr. Blackstone's voice had inexplicably cultivated. She was breathing too rapidly, and she struggled to slow her racing emotions.

“Yes, well,” Mr. Harlowe said at last. “In the case of Miss Blanchet, there is something to the rumors that she is headstrong and quite... ill-mannered, though we have tried very hard, there is nothing one can do about good breeding, or lack thereof. You've heard her speak, of course. There is nothing to be done about her accent. And she is... well, the illegitimate daughter of a mariner and a French maid, so she is quite... French. But I assure you, Mr. Blackstone, that with reference to any rumors that circulate, inculcating Miss Blanchet with infractions more... serious... than these, they are most incorrect.”

Another pause made Lina's stomach flip.

“Do you know, Mr. Harlowe, how I have made my fortune? A man like myself, with no title, no land, no social standing whatsoever? A man like myself, with such an unspeakable countenance?”

There was no reply from Mr. Harlowe. Lina squinted, as if it could make her hear better.

“By being clever, Mr. Harlowe. And one of the most clever things about me is that I am a very good judge of when a man is lying to me. Not because I am a great reader of minds, no no. I am simply a man with reason, and suspicion, and an utter lack of trust in the motives of others.”

The floor creaked, and Mr. Blackstone’s voice was much closer to Mr. Harlowe when next he spoke.

“You owe me a *great deal*, Mr. Harlowe, and you haven’t a thing of value in this house with which to pay me. I would say, then, that you have every reason to tell me a lie.”

Mr. Harlowe stuttered for a few moments, before managing to say, “I assure you, Mr. Blackstone, I do... I do not speak falsely.”

The floor creaked again.

“But, Mr. Blackstone, my good gentleman, if there is but a flicker of concern about the honor of the young Miss Blanchet, you know I have another daughter, my lovely Evangeline...”

A low laugh emanated from Mr. Blackstone. It was sinister, and chilled Lina yet again. “Mr. Harlowe,” Mr. Blackstone rumbled. “You would give your own daughter to a man like me? To a monster? When I have just told you... the rumors you have heard are true? Every. Last. One.”

“I... I would... Mr. Blackstone, I merely wish for you to understand that I must... we must, we are indebted to you, and we must—”

Mr. Blackstone laughed again, and the way he did so cut Mr. Harlowe off. It seemed to Lina as though the air had become chilled as well.

“Your daughter Evangeline is rumored to be plain, rotund, and in possession of a very docile personality, Mr. Harlowe.”

Mr. Harlowe made a noise that sounded a bit like a hiss.

“I am not the sort of man who wants a plain, rotund wife with a docile personality. I am quite taken with Miss Blanchet, who surely you can see is a great beauty and shall not be a hippopotamus within the year. I cannot... properly discipline a hippopotamus, can I? Nor would I have much reason to do so if she is perfectly docile and utterly dull. No. Miss Blanchet is what I want, and Miss Blanchet is what I shall take, or you shall have to repay me with property. This is, of course, provided that Miss Blanchet is not... defective in some way. Is she, to your knowledge? And I pray thee speak the truth.”

“She is... she is not, Mr. Blackstone. Not... not to my knowledge. I give you my word of honor.”

Another pause, while Lina shivered beneath the vent.

“Your word of honor,” Mr. Blackstone repeated. “I suppose that is a very good word, indeed, for it is upon your honor that you have undertaken the guardianship of this girl.”

There was another shift of bodies above, and then the sound of footsteps. “I dare say that honoring your word may be your salvation, Mr. Harlowe. I shall send instructions for the girl’s transfer to London, and the preparations for the wedding, which will be a small and quiet affair. In the meantime, be advised: I have eyes and ears everywhere, and should rumors of Miss Blanchet’s behavior not accord with what you have told me, well... we shall return to this topic only if necessary, as it is quite unpleasant to think about.”

Footsteps echoed above Lina’s head, indicating that Mr. Blackstone had taken his leave.

Lina let out the breath she had been unconsciously holding in a slow and steady stream, her head swimming. She crouched to regain her balance on the precarious stove and lower herself to the floor, pausing to take a few deep breaths and steady herself.

Snippets of the overhead conversation flew about in her mind, detached from each other. She felt a spell coming on, quite like the spells that Evangeline described. *Wedding... monster... discipline... defective in some way... discipline, discipline, discipline.*

The funny feeling that had taken root in her abdomen earlier in the evening at the sound of Mr. Blackstone’s voice gripped her anew, and she steadied herself with a few deep breaths.

Just as she was about to lower herself carefully, hopefully without sound, to the floor and return to her quarters, footsteps above her crossed the floor with the heavy, characteristic sound of Mrs. Harlowe’s trudge.

A feminine whisper hissed above her. Lina rose again to get closer to the vent, and strained to hear the discussion above her.

“My darling wife, there is no option but to accept the conditions of Mr. Blackstone’s request. He is an eccentric, and I daresay a madman, but we are left with no choice. Caroline will be a burden upon us until she is married off. If she is wed to Mr. Blackstone, we shall recuperate our debt and then more, allowing a modest dowry for Evangeline.”

There was a long pause. “I am perplexed, wife. Was it not you who thought this arrangement acceptable when it was proposed?”

Mrs. Harlowe’s whisper was high and sharp, and Lina strained to hear her response. “That was before I... should not say, but surely you have heard of the... rumors.”

Mr. Harlowe sighed loudly, and above her, Lina heard the loud clatter of a glass whiskey snifter upon the table. “Sharp tongues abound, even in polite society.”

“But what if they are true? What if...?”

“I suggest, Mrs. Harlowe, that if these rumors are those which I believe them to be, they are most inappropriate for a woman to speak of or so much as sully her mind with the thought of. Surely you are not behaving or thinking with such wanton indiscretion?”

There was a long pause.

“No, husband.”

“The matter is closed, then. We are left with no choice but to send Caroline to Mr. Blackstone. Dear wife, don’t pout so. I have not even told you the most marvelous aspect of our arrangement.”

There was another shuffling of feet, and Lina strained to hear the voices of her two guardians, but nothing was said for some time and she began to tire of holding her precarious stance on the stove. She crouched again, and waited, as the clink of crystal and a feminine giggle emanated from above.

“You shall be very pleased with this,” Mr. Harlowe teased, at last.

“Come then, dear husband, do not keep it from me.”

“Mr. Blackstone has arranged, dear wife,” and there was another long pause, presumably while Mr. Harlowe sipped his drink, during which time Lina’s heart raced and her impatience made her skin damp with sweat, despite the chill of the abandoned kitchen. “For our triumphant return to society. We shall attend balls in London, my dear.”

Mrs. Harlowe squealed quite audibly. “But how...?”

“My dear, a great deal can be brought to effect by the possession of wealth, and Mr. Blackstone, while he is without title or bearing, has much of that. These are new times we live in. But I digress. Think not of how such a change of fortune has occurred, but what it will mean for Evangeline, who shall at last be presented to society, and with any fortune, married off.”

Mrs. Harlowe’s excited breathing could be heard by Lina, and she could almost see her guardian clutching her chest in delight, eyes glittering.

“But... but... whatever shall we wear?” she said suddenly, in a cry of despair.

“But my dear wife, you should know that I would have thought of everything. The entire family shall be seen by the finest tailors in London, at Mr. Blackstone’s expense, as part of our arrangement.”

More heavy breathing punctuated a pause, as the furniture shifted above Lina, a result, no doubt, of Mrs. Harlowe’s ecstatic, and unladylike, collapse in her chair.

“A return to society,” she breathed. “Oh, I simply must tell Evangeline!”

Lina carefully climbed down from the stove with her heart racing, lest Mrs. Harlowe entertain the idea of performing this last act that very evening, which, judging by her breathless demeanor, was a distinct possibility.

Her skin tingling, her thoughts in a flurry, Lina worked her way back to her quarters, where she found Anna asleep and pillows piled beneath her own blankets. Shaking, though she knew not what from, Lina blew out the candle and tucked herself beneath the covers, struggling to breath more softly, lest Mrs. Harlowe burst into the room at any moment.

Chapter Six

“Oh!” Evangeline exclaimed, not for the first time on the very long journey to London, “this is ever so long and arduous!”

She fanned herself dramatically.

Lina smiled and looked out the window. Already they were passing the towns at the outskirts of the city, and no matter what lay ahead for her at the journey’s end, there was plenty to watch and see, all of it new and delightful. The road had become smooth, but even when they had traveled down the bumpy, poorly maintained roads from the Manor, the ride had never been arduous. Mr. Blackstone had sent for the family, and they were ensconced now in two gleaming carriages like the one he had arrived in months ago, when his peculiar proposal had been accepted by Mr. Harlowe.

Lina’s protestations about the marriage—which itself was described to her in only the barest of terms—had fallen upon deaf ears, and the Harlowes had all but threatened to turn her out into the street if she did not obey. Only Evangeline, surprisingly, had been receptive to Lina’s complaints about the marriage, which Mrs. Harlowe had dismissed out of hand as “utter foolishness” and “the silly fantasies of a little girl.”

“You must dismiss out of hand these ridiculous notions that women who marry for true love come to any end except unhappiness. Love, my dear girl, fades within a year. Poverty does not,” Mrs. Harlowe had declared imperiously.

Lina had kept to herself the fact that she knew Mrs. Harlowe’s concerns were not only for Lina’s financial fortunes, but her own.

Evangeline, on the other hand, had taken Lina aside and clasped her hands firmly, her eyes brimming with tears. “You must never abandon your hope of marriage for true love, Lina.” She had even used Lina’s true name, and squeezed her hand with heartfelt sympathy. “When we go to London, you shall attend balls and meet all manner of dashing men, and so shall I. Oh, you will be so very wealthy when you marry Mr. Blackstone, and you will invite me to all of the most beautiful balls and parties! You will see, he is not so very monstrous as he is rumored to be.”

Well. Evangeline was at least somewhat sympathetic to Lina’s problem, even if much of that concern was rooted in self-interest.

“How *long*,” Evangeline complained, “until we arrive?”

“Isn’t it grand?” Anna commented.

It was grand, indeed, Lina thought, and she smiled at Anna.

As for herself, Lina thought, her fate was not sealed, though thinking of her options made her stomach turn and flop. There was the matter of the sensation low in her belly—shamefully lower, where her naughtiest parts were—when she thought of Mr. Blackstone’s authoritative, crisp voice as he uttered the word “discipline.”

But she was not going to be married off to a monster, if in fact that is what he was. Though discovering what these “rumors” about Mr. Blackstone were was proving itself to be quite difficult. Evangeline did not know, and Mrs. Harlowe had been a locked box since the day of Mr. Blackstone’s departure—he had gone without so much as a goodbye or even breakfast.

Lina worried that loneliness awaited her with Mr. Blackstone.

On the other hand, she owed a great deal to the Harlowes, who had taken her in when her father had died. She did not want to be a burden on them.

There was, though, the matter that they seemed quite keen selling her off, and a great deal of money appeared to be being exchanged for this transaction, which only led an inquisitive mind like Lina’s to ponder why a man like Mr. Blackstone would *pay* great money for a girl with no family and no title, and for that matter, the albatross of being a bastard child hanging about her neck.

Unless there was something truly monstrous about him, which made all women of good standing refuse his offer.

When she saw the dense yellow fog hanging about the murky gray buildings of London in the distance, she did not bother to let Evangeline, who had asked at least ten more times if they would ever arrive, know. She smiled, and lifted her chin.

Because while she had not made any decision thus far, if she was in London, she was a great deal better off than at Green Grove Manor.

She had gone so far as to entertain the idea—the very wicked idea, certainly—in her mind, of disappearing, in the middle of the night, into the streets of London, wearing a ball gown that she would be able to sell for a modest amount that would surely enable her to go... somewhere.

Her heart dropped to think of what such a wicked action would lead to for the Harlowes, and so the idea was one of last resort.

But should it turn out that Mr. Blackstone was a monster, she would have no choice. After all, if the Harlowes were so willing to throw her beneath the wheels of the carriage for their own gain, she would be blameless for having done the same to them to save herself.

For now, it was a game of strategy, much like chess, which Lina played in the attic against herself, as women did not play games such as chess in the Harlowe household. Anyway, none of them would have been able to even amuse her, if Mr. Harlowe’s chess game as she had spied it one evening was as terrible as it had then seemed.

Chapter Seven

Mr. Blackstone had arranged for the Harlowe family, and Lina—Evangeline rarely failed to point out to anyone within earshot that Lina’s surname was *not* Harlowe—to take up temporary residence in a townhouse in the ultra-fashionable Grosvenor Square, in the home of a man who had no family and had set off for Europe.

Lina had been required to take Mrs. Harlowe, and subsequently, Evangeline, at their word when they told her the area they were to be staying in was “very nearly exclusive.” She had supposed that it would be quite something. She had not expected the seemingly endless rows of white marble homes, all curiously interconnected, nor the bustle of the upper-class women strolling about in the most fantastical and, to Lina’s own mind, ridiculous costumes imaginable.

Evangeline ceased her endless complaining about the journey as soon as they arrived within the limits of the city, and became silent in awe, until they reached the wealthier neighborhoods and she began to heap praise, in a breathless, high-pitched voice, upon the fashion sense of the women she saw from the carriage window.

The household servants who had remained at the residence made a good show of not appearing entirely displeased to see the new family, though Lina thought personally the staff must have been somewhat dismayed, for with their master away in Europe, they had enjoyed free rein of the home and only had the duty to maintain it in proper order until his return. Their faces were stiff and revealed no trace of welcome, nor disdain.

“London servants are ever so much cooler,” Evangeline had confided to Lina. “It’s the way of their profession.”

Each girl had been given her own private quarters, a luxury that Lina imagined she might have appreciated had she not been so very overwhelmed. Anna appeared almost immediately at her door looking very much like a dour little child who was attempting to put on a good face.

“Whatever is the matter?” Lina asked her. “Don’t you like your room?”

“It’s beautiful,” Anna had replied. “It’s just... so very far away...”

So they had agreed between the two of them that Anna could come to sleep with Lina in her bed, at least until the wedding.

“After that,” Anna had pondered, “Shall you have your own room or shall you have to share?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Anna,” Evangeline said, entering the room at precisely that moment to survey Lina’s quarters and, undoubtedly, determine just how much better they were than her own so she would know how much to scowl. “Mr. Blackstone is incredibly wealthy and everyone will sleep in their own room. Do not ask such silly questions in polite company, either, lest the entire city of London be made aware that we share a room.”

Anna looked at her sister strangely. “But I like—”

“Sharing a room is low-class, and you shan’t speak of it again!” Evangeline hissed.

Lina was no longer listening to the two of them, but rather, tapping her fingers to her lips and looking blankly at the wall, thinking. She *did* wonder about such things. She knew that when a woman was married, she had certain responsibilities to her husband, and that they occurred at night, and she vaguely understood that they revolved around things Mrs. Harlowe considered “very naughty,” which meant intimate parts of the body and nakedness.

How very strange, she mused, it must be to see a naked man.

She wondered if the same would be expected of her. And why, precisely, it had to be so.

But not much more wondering could be done, for visitors arrived at that moment, and there would be, from then on, an endless stream of visitors and functions, and Lina would not be able to think her own thoughts except at night.

* * *

The first visitors to arrive were distant cousins, who, like the staff at the home, appeared none too pleased at the arrival of the Harlowes, for all they managed to smile. There was the portly Mrs. Myrna Tilton, whose hair was a peculiar purple color, and whose sharp tongue lashed out upon her arrival. “Why, you must be absolutely bewildered as to what to do with yourselves, having come from... your estate. The first thing we must do, dears, is visit the dressmaker. A new frock can provide a girl with just the confidence she needs to pretend she has proper etiquette and upbringing.” Her eyes searched the drawing room like those of a hawk as the girls presented themselves. She glanced up and down Lina’s figure and muttered, “Well. Yes. Very lovely. I suppose we can see what has caught the imagination of the man.”

And then she breathed a haughty snort through her nostrils, and made a face that indicated she did not approve of such a thing, before sitting down.

Her daughters were named Elizabeth and Charlotte. Charlotte was quite plain, but had a warm and friendly smile that made her seem more becoming than she really was, and Lina liked her right away.

Elizabeth was a dark-haired girl with a pretty face ruined by the scowl that she seemed to have inherited directly from her mother. Elizabeth gave Lina the same quick up-and-down of the eyes that Mrs. Tilton had, and stiffly told her she was very pleased to make her acquaintance, though anybody could see she was not.

“I am *so* glad you’ve come,” Charlotte gushed effusively. “Although we live in London, we see only the same people day in and day out and they ever so—”

“Charlotte!” Mrs. Tilton snapped, much like a lapdog might. Her jowls were still wobbling beneath her chin after she snapped her mouth closed when she smiled most disingenuously around the room. “Shall we have some refreshments?”

And so the conversation turned incredibly dull, with Lina and Charlotte meeting each other’s eyes as they sat politely through it. Lina knew, then, that when Charlotte asked the room if anyone might be up

for a stroll to take in some air, that she wanted Lina to volunteer.

Which was fine because Evangeline was not one to engage in sport of any kind. Lina squeezed Anna's arm to give her the secret message they shared when they could not speak: she wanted to go alone, but she promised to tell her everything.

Anna understood.

Elizabeth very nearly rolled her eyes as her sister—making Lina second-guess her own instincts—when Charlotte practically begged her to go with them.

“In this heat, absolutely not,” Elizabeth sighed. “I have a fair disposition and fair skin, and I shall swoon.”

And so, they were free to go together.

“I do hope you aren't put off by my beastly sister,” Charlotte said to Lina, as soon as they were outside. She had linked her arm around Lina's as soon as they reached the street.

“I thought you wanted her to come,” Lina said dubiously.

“She's a mule. You must always tell her the opposite of what you wish her to do, and she shall do as you wish. I do hope you don't think poorly of me speaking about her like this, but she is quite the beast. Stay away from her, and you shall have a lovely time in London.”

Lina smiled, still unsure of how much to trust Charlotte, as she seemed one of those people simply too nice to be true.

“They say you've come from Paris,” Charlotte said. “This way, to the promenade, where there is some shade. Is it true? Do you remember it at all, or have you forgotten? They say you speak French perfectly. I do hope you might tutor me if that's the case; mine is pitiful and my tutor is at her wits' end, perhaps you can meet her. Is your name really Caroline?”

Lina smiled, trying to keep track of the dizzying questions, for the girl really did seem to want to know the answers. She was quite endearing, and Lina was so happy to have a possibility of friendship with someone likable, that she felt she was flying.

“My name is Carolina,” she said, “But the people I like call me Lina.”

“Then I shall call you Lina, for I know we've only just met but I am a very good judge of character and I know that I want to be dear friends with you,” Charlotte cried.

“Just don't call me Lina in front of Mrs. Harlowe.”

“Or, I imagine, in the presence of any stodgy, purple-haired ladies. They are *so* silly. The French are having ever so much more fun, and I think they're jealous.”

Lina had never heard anyone talk like this, and she could tell that she would very much enjoy Charlotte as a friend and ally.

They went on a very long stroll, round and round the park, talking excitedly about every aspect of their lives that they could think of. Charlotte wanted to know everything she could about Paris, for she wanted to visit someday. She tried out her French, but it was, unfortunately, so poor that Lina was relieved when she gave up and began to speak English again. Lina, for her part, had endless questions about London, and society there, and so much more.

But, a very annoyed driver, wiping sweat from his brow, appeared before them. “Miss. Tilton. Miss Blanchet. I have been... looking for you everywhere. Your mother, Miss Tilton, wishes to remind you that a stroll is no longer than one hour and that anything more is a hike, and unseemly for two young ladies lest someone get the wrong idea.”

“I suppose these are her words, not yours, Mr. Pratchett?”

The driver stood up, straightening his collar, and did not answer.

“We shall return forthwith,” Charlotte told him, in a mocking tone. “We have only twice more around the square until we have walked four miles.”

The man began to draw in a breath, when Charlotte swatted at him playfully. “I say so in jest, Mr. Pratchett. Surely you know that.”

Mr. Pratchett did not seem to know anything of the sort, and he did not turn to leave them until Charlotte promised to return, truly, that moment.

And that was how Lina met Charlotte, and felt much better about her time in London for it.

Chapter Eight

Lamentably, the two girls were rarely alone together from that moment on, for there were so many events to go to and people to call upon, and shopkeepers and tailors and florists and the like to see, that even though Charlotte's presence was requested everywhere and Mrs. Harlowe seemed quite happy to comply, the two were never alone.

Lina wished, nearly every day, that she had managed to ask the one question that was burning on her mind since her arrival.

At long last, the two managed to get ahead when Mrs. Tilton stopped to introduce the family at the turn of a corner, where Charlotte grabbed her elbow and encouraged her to walk very quickly, so that they might gain a bit of space between themselves and the horde of angry sisters and fussy mothers.

"There," Charlotte whispered. "When they turn the corner, they shall simply think that we have continued on our way, unaware that they have stopped following us. I have so many unfinished questions from the other day." She laughed. "Dear me, they seem to have all flown out of my mind... oh, yes: how *did* you meet your Mr. Blackstone? He's ever such a recluse. What is he like?"

"Oh, Charlotte," Lina said, gripping her arm fiercely. Tears, unexpectedly, welled up in her eyes. "If only I knew! But I know nothing of Mr. Blackstone, nor why he... it was all so unexpected and... and... I haven't even *seen* him."

Charlotte stopped dead in her tracks, concern on her face. "You mean to say that you haven't *met* him?"

She looked, for the first time, utterly horrified. Her mouth was slack, and she had gone quite pale.

"I thought," she said quietly, to Lina's disbelieving silence, "I mean, I had assumed that because you seemed so... so, calm... that the rumors were all false, as they almost always are, and that you had... you had..." her voice trailed off.

"What?" Lina said desperately, just as they heard Mrs. Tilton's high-pitched voice call out to them. "I beg of you, Charlotte, tell me what you mean."

Charlotte gave a furtive glance back at Mrs. Tilton, and clutched Lina's arm tightly. It was too late for the girls to pretend that they had not seen Mrs. Tilton bustling along the sidewalk toward them, and both girls wished to avoid her sharp tongue and torment.

"I shall speak to you as soon as it is possible, I promise," Charlotte whispered. "But it must be... a very private conversation."

Lina nodded, and though she wished desperately to hear what Charlotte had to say that instant, turned bravely toward Mrs. Tilton and the other girls, with the same bright, false smile as Charlotte.

"My apologies, Mother!" Charlotte said. "We were so caught up in our discussions about the historical landmarks at the park... for Caroline is ever so interested... that we did not realize we had left you behind."

“It is most,” Mrs. Tilton huffed, dotting at her sweating brow, “*Unseemly!*”

“Of course, Mother,” Charlotte said sweetly, though Mrs. Tilton never specified what, precisely, was so unseemly.

“I feel I am about to faint,” Evangeline complained. “It is ever so hot, and almost noon.”

Mrs. Tilton looked approvingly upon Evangeline, while Lina and Charlotte laughed quietly, without smiling, but linked together by the arms, so that each of them could feel the bubbling laughter trapped in their bodies.

Mrs. Tilton called for a carriage, and they were all sent home immediately.

* * *

The opportunity to speak to Charlotte alone did not come for several days, for it seemed to Lina that Mrs. Tilton reckoned with Charlotte’s plan to divulge a secret to Lina, and accordingly, glued her hawk-like eyes upon the two girls wherever they traveled. In both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, she inserted herself into every plan, conversation, and stroll, or sat herself between the two girls at any dinner or tea they attended, so that they never had a chance to speak.

But just as Lina was beginning to despair, she was surprised by Charlotte’s resourcefulness when she slipped a piece of paper into her hand at dinner, which read simply:

Tell them you wish to retire early and I shall meet you.

Lina’s heart soared, for Charlotte had become such a dear friend in such a short time, and possessed the same cleverness and curiosity as she herself did. Most importantly, Charlotte possessed a secret that Lina desperately needed to know.

Charlotte had a difficult time containing herself when Lina, very theatrically, pretended to swoon as they made for the drawing room with the ladies after dinner.

“Caroline,” Charlotte cried, taking her by the arm with an admiring smile that only Lina could see. “Whatever is the matter?”

“I feel a bit unwell,” Lina said, holding her hand to her forehead as she had seen Evangeline do on so many occasions, though it nearly made her burst into laughter.

“You must be exhausted,” Charlotte had said, with false bravado.

“I think I shall retire early,” Lina said, eliciting a glare from Mrs. Tilton, whose sharp eyes missed nothing and whose suspicion seemed to know no bounds.

“Shall someone accompany you?” Charlotte asked, giving Lina a sharp look and a small shake of the head. She was ever so clever, Lina thought. They needed to throw the terrible Mrs. Tilton off the scent.

“I’m quite all right. No, no, do carry on, I think it has just been all a bit too much,” Lina said. “I shall

take my leave.”

Mrs. Tilton remained suspicious, but accepted a tea when Charlotte returned to be seated next to her on a chair after kissing Lina good night.

She did not know how Charlotte planned to break away from the group, but it mattered not: she was a clever girl and Lina had faith that she would see her soon.

* * *

The knock came almost an hour later, and Charlotte was quite flushed when Lina opened the door.

“How did you—”

Charlotte brought a finger to her lips to silence Lina, and pushed into the bedroom hurriedly. When the door was closed, she turned to face Lina, and smiled. “I said I was using the water closet, which as you know, can take a great deal of time. I locked the door from the outside,” she said, giggling with mirth, and unfolding her hand, palm-up, to reveal the key to the water closet.

Lina smiled, and then her face fell as she remembered the reason for this clandestine meeting, and it was not all fun.

Charlotte pursed her lips, seemingly understanding the dismay on Lina’s face. She flounced onto Lina’s bed, careful to keep her skirts spread so they wouldn’t wrinkle. She extended a hand to Lina, and pulled Lina toward her when she took it. She clasped Lina’s hand in both of hers.

“I shall tell you what I’ve heard about Mr. Blackstone,” she whispered. “But you must promise not tell another soul that you have heard this from me. It is quite... *inappropriate*. So much so,” she said, with one of the quick, spontaneous smiles that interrupted nearly every one of her sentences, “that I can scarcely bring myself to say it.”

Lina cocked her head. She put a hand on Charlotte’s arm and squeezed. “Charlotte, I should be forever grateful if you will tell me what you have heard.”

“They say,” Charlotte said, leaning close to whisper, her pulse throbbing rapidly in the hollow of her throat, “that Mr. Blackstone is never seen in public because he is hideously disfigured.”

Lina leaned back, her lips pressed together. She tried to image a hideously disfigured man, but because she had never seen one, she could not conjure a picture that made the idea of a man so repellent that she might risk her opportunity at security and fortune for it.

“I suppose that is unfortunate,” Lina said quietly. “Is that what they mean by ‘monster’?” She looked at the ceiling. “Oh, but how terrible could it be?”

Charlotte leaned toward her again and pressed her arm. “But that isn’t why they call him a monster, at least not... not the only reason.”

Lina met Charlotte’s eyes, which had grown dark and troubled, and her mouth, forever forming smiles that seemed beyond her control, was serious and trembling. “They say also that... that...”

Lina leaned in closer.

“That he is... this is quite indiscreet, Lina, you must promise not to utter word of it...”

“I promise,” Lina said hastily, squeezing Charlotte’s arm again, lest she never reveal the secret.

“They say that he is a man who... who subscribes to... to... *depravity*.”

“Depravity?” Lina repeated.

Truth be told, she did not honestly know what the word meant, for examples of “depravity” were never provided. She suspected, naturally, that it had something to do with the very naughty acts performed by a married couple in order to procure children.

“Sexual,” Charlotte said, her whisper so soft it was barely audible. “Depravity.”

Lina’s lips moved soundlessly, attempting to form the beginnings of several words, until she at last settled on, “But... but... but... whatever... whatever does that mean?”

Charlotte’s lips trembled. “It’s... not discussed, Lina, in great detail. But do you know of those very wicked books, the books that...” her voice disappeared into a whisper. “I am only telling you this for your own good, please understand I would never speak of such... depravity, and filth, if not...”

“Charlotte, do tell me,” Lina begged.

Charlotte’s eyes were on her skirts. She shifted uncomfortably, twisting her hands in her lap. “I know not how to describe it, exactly...” she said. “I was doing a terribly naughty thing and listening in on the conversations of my cousins, who are older and married... I am quite uncertain if I should, or even if I am able to, repeat what they have said.” She looked up at Lina imploringly. “I think I am unable to go on.”

Lina’s eyes were wide, and she had a tense, nervous feeling coiling up inside of her, connecting, as though by a taut string, her very private places, her chest, and her mind. She swallowed, to find her throat dry. “I too, overheard a conversation between my guardian and Mr. Blackstone,” she whispered. “And he said, Mr. Blackstone said, he required a wife that he could...” Her voice trailed off as her lips struggled to pronounce the word she had overheard, and when it left her mouth it plucked at the tight chord deep in her body and sent a shiver throughout. “Discipline.”

Lina could see by the way that Charlotte’s eyes flew to her lap that she had hit upon the very core of what the girl wanted to tell her.

But what sort of discipline? What sort of discipline was on par with sexual matters, and for that matter, sexual depravity?

Thoughts fluttered into Lina’s mind, as images and scenarios, and though they were vague because of her state of complete naivety and ignorance about all matters “sexual,” they were visceral enough—tickling her in the low, low regions of her abdomen—that she recoiled from them as one would from a hot coal.

Once, Lina had experienced a similar sensation, after reading a book locked away in the attic, which

had described in great and sordid detail the proper discipline of a maid. A number of her father's books had been sent with her to Green Grove Manor, and placed in the attic, she was told, because they were in French and unsuitable for tutoring. The book had seemed quite funny, and the material, if going by the title, quite dry. She could not even say why she had selected it and flipped through the pages. One chapter had been entirely dedicated to a description of how to cane a maid upon her bare skin, with her skirts over her bent figure, while having the maid count the strokes of her punishment aloud.

The same, cold-hot feeling that now snaked through her body had been set in motion by the chapter, and Lina had slammed the book closed, never to return to its pages again, for she feared she had stumbled upon something quite forbidden, which was not a handbook for discipline at all, but one of those *érotique* stories she had heard her mother's friends chattering about in France.

Charlotte pressed her lips together and took Lina's hand anew. "I know not, darling Lina, let us speak no more of it. Perhaps they are only rumors and nothing more, and anyhow we shouldn't speak of such things."

Charlotte stood up, smoothing her skirts with unnecessary haste, and made for the door, but not before Lina noticed that her countenance, ordinarily quite pale, had flushed in much the way Lina was certain her own had.

"Charlotte," Lina whispered, taking her hand. "Thank you."

Charlotte gave her a kind, almost pitying look. "I am uncertain if I have done anything for which you should thank me." She leaned forward to kiss her cheek. "It could all just be rumor, dear Lina."

And then she was gone.

Chapter Nine

The next few days passed like a dream for Lina, despite the burning thoughts regarding her marriage, and the secrets surrounding Mr. Blackstone and his “depravity,” which caused quite a flutter in her heart, though she could not explain it.

A parade of tailors and seamstresses were brought to the home, and the girls were accompanied by the very severe Mrs. Tilton to glorious shops, where Lina was permitted to select divine fabrics for gown after gown: evening gowns, ball gowns, dresses that she would have called gowns that were in fact to be used every day, and of course, the wedding dress.

Evangeline seemed quite content with her allotment of garments, and she had begun to thaw from her earlier jealousy, for Evangeline was quite easily distracted by shiny things and promises of balls and social climbing. All of these had been given to her because of Lina’s fortunes, so Evangeline, while jealous, could hardly remain in the terrible mood she had seemed determined to remain in for the rest of her life.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, seemed only to grow darker. She never spoke to Lina, only glared at her across the dinner table or sniped, in her very clever way, by making the sort of comments Mrs. Tilton was so adept at. “But of course, you couldn’t be expected to know that, coming from your... upbringing,” she might say with a withering smile, before sipping her tea.

Lina was accustomed to this sort of treatment, and was therefore quite capable of ignoring it. If anything, Elizabeth’s subtle nastiness might have soothed her a bit, and even worked in favor of soothing some of her anxiety about her upcoming wedding with the mysterious and potentially “depraved” Mr. Blackstone. Elizabeth could scarcely conceal the jealousy that burned beneath her disdain for Lina, for, in the end, Lina might have had a most questionable background, but the wealth of Mr. Blackstone’s estate was evident in the lavish wardrobe and arrangements he had made for her. And while wealth was certainly not the only requirement for prestige in society, it did go a long way, and even Elizabeth could see that.

None was more adept at stoking the fires of Elizabeth’s jealousy than Charlotte, who seemed to make it a sport. “If Mr. Blackstone allows it,” she would muse, for instance, pretending that she was unaware that Elizabeth was listening in on their conversation, “you would easily be able to travel all over the world in such fine style. How marvelous.” And other such commentary, with a devious smile and sometimes even a wink in Lina’s direction.

The truth was that Lina herself entertained such fantasies when she lay in bed at night, unable to get to sleep. There was much to fear from this marriage, and much unknown about Mr. Blackstone, and she remained ever poised to run away from it all. On the other hand, the possibilities that could come from marrying Mr. Blackstone were nearly endless: what if she could travel? What if she could decide, like some wealthy women did, to summer in France? Or even further away? She had such desires to explore the world, and they would never be realized if she remained an unmarried bastard, or married a commoner and worked as a maid. There was also the matter of the Harlowes. In the end, they had done her such favors by taking her into their home, and Evangeline, for all her faults, was still like a true sister to her. And Anna was beloved, a real sister in her estimation. Her marriage to

Mr. Blackstone promised to repay them for all of their kindness, and to lift Anna to new social heights and opportunities of her own. There was no reason, to be sure, that Anna could not be brought to live with them.

There was much to consider, and when she lay awake turning it all over in her mind, she was unable to come to any decision about what to do. And so she floated along, attending the functions and making the preparations, unable to make a decisive move to commit mentally to the marriage, or to run away, or to even plan for either event.

Before long, the many weeks had passed, and a series of balls was upon them. Mr. Blackstone remained, still, at his estate in the north, and no definitive news about the wedding had been forthcoming. She had a dress and a date, and she knew that the affair, as per Mr. Blackstone's peculiar tastes, would be small and private. It would take place in the town near his estate, but it did seem strange that he remained so far away, and sent no news.

For Lina, this was strange but in many ways a blessing. It allowed her to continue floating through life as though in a dream, making no decisions, putting off for tomorrow what might be difficult, in exchange for the glamor and excitement of her time in London.

Chapter Ten

Lina admired herself in the mirror for a bit longer than she might have otherwise—for vanity, according to Mrs. Harlowe, was the seed of naughtiness—and was reluctantly pleased with the image that looked back at her. The gown was an astonishing work of art, and had been selected and paid for already by the enigmatic Mr. Blackstone, as strange as that was, considering that he was not to attend the ball or even arrive in London for weeks.

The skirt was full, made of a paper-thin silk organza draped over a base of fine silk, and this alone would have made the dress quite beautiful, but it was, additionally, embroidered with thousands of intricate flowers in gold, navy, periwinkle, and lilac, giving it an ethereal appearance that quite made Lina feel as though she had stepped into a living fairytale. As she moved, the fabric and the fine silk embroidery caught the light in such a way that she seemed to have been lit up by tiny candles within the gown. The bodice had been tailored to showcase her slenderness, and a border of extraordinary workmanship clung, just barely, to the tops of her shoulders.

“It’s scandalous,” Lina had heard Mrs. Harlowe mutter under her breath. Though in fact, there was nothing scandalous about it, apart from the amount of time that must have been spent creating it.

Charlotte had sent her very own servant to help Lina with her hair, which was decorated so elaborately and with so many curls, tresses, and plaits, that she doubted she would ever be able to remove them all.

Evangeline had been noticeably perturbed by the beauty of the dress, and so had selected a fantastical red dress, with so many layers and tiers, bows and ribbons and sashes, that she seemed visibly exhausted each time she moved. The dress itself required two servants to lower over the enormous hoop that came with it, and she required compacting in order to squeeze through the door of her bedroom.

Anna was disappointed, for she was unable to attend due to a cold she had acquired.

“You look like a princess from a fairy tale,” Anna told her. “Oh, I am so very happy for you!”

Lina gave her a brave smile and thanked her. But she wondered, as they gathered in the carriage—a separate carriage had to be sent for Evangeline and her absurd dress—if she was a princess in a fairy tale, who would have a happy ending, or if her fate were really much, much worse.

* * *

Charlotte’s face lit up when Lina and Evangeline arrived. “Lina,” she breathed, “you are utterly breathtaking!” Then, because she was a kind person and had sensed Lina’s strange affection for the miserable and sometimes petty Evangeline, she smiled in her direction. “That dress,” she breathed with as much sincerity as she could muster, “is *quite* spectacular, Evangeline. You are most glamorous.”

If Evangeline picked up on anything but sincerity in Charlotte’s tone, she did not show it. She seemed distracted enough by the task of maneuvering in the enormous dress that Charlotte might have said

anything to her and she would have smiled politely and said “thank you.”

Charlotte herself was clad in a deep blue velvet dress, and looked quite pretty, and seemed to know that “quite pretty” was all she would ever accomplish, and that attempting to be the belle of the ball would make her look as ludicrous as Evangeline did now. Her graceful acceptance of this fact made her radiant. She linked arms with Lina, and the two tittered their way to the archway through which the guests were entering the ballroom, while Mrs. Tilton frowned behind them, her shapeless bulk swathed in legions of black chiffon that gave off the distinct effect of looking like she was at once attending a funeral and a gala.

Lina was relieved to see that Evangeline would be able to slip through the doorway without having to adjust or compact her dress. Arriving at the ball had required so many creative solutions centered on managing Evangeline’s dress that Lina already felt quite tired.

From the moment she entered the ballroom, Lina could feel that all eyes and all thoughts were upon her. The event glittered and shone, and a great orchestra played divinely. Candles and gas lamps and chandeliers twinkled and flickered over the beautiful frescoes of the grand room, and light caught in the expensive fabrics and jewels heaped upon the women, who were painted and decorated like pastries and flowers. She was overwhelmed for a moment by the sheer glamour of the event, the likes of which she had only imagined and had never been able to picture quite as grandly as what she now saw.

But any sense of awe she experienced from the surroundings was overtaken promptly by the most obvious fact that wherever she walked, whispers snaked through the clusters of women or men who watched her, some furtively, some openly. Heads leaned together, attempting subtlety, but there was no escaping that all heads moved together, and all eyes remained on her, and lips moved quietly but spoke, everywhere she passed.

“Everyone is talking about you,” Charlotte whispered. “They have been so anxious to see you they have forgotten their etiquette entirely. I think Mrs. Chattoway shall be mistaken for a fish and be served as an hors d’oeuvre if she remains gaping as she is for much longer.” Charlotte patted her arm reassuringly and smiled, overly brightly, at everyone they passed. Lina was grateful to have her as a companion.

Lina was also grateful to Charlotte for having dispensed a great deal of advice about what to expect at the ball, for without it, Lina might have been mystified. “Is there a supper room at this ball?” Lina whispered to Charlotte.

“We shall soon determine. But remember what I told you. You must find a man to escort you there, and then you should dance with him, and you must never, ever go to the supper room with the same man twice. *D’accord?*” Charlotte enjoyed practicing her French with Lina. Her accent was comically terrible, but Lina had grown accustomed to it and now found it rather charming.

And so, as Charlotte had instructed, they found a suitable place to sit and wait for the manager of the party to introduce them, so they might be asked for a dance, and subsequently, to the supper room.

Though much of what transpired at a ball such as this one centered upon proper etiquette, and gentlemen would not allow a lady to remain seated for long, or not to be asked to the supper room so that, embarrassingly, a host was required to ask a free gentleman to do so, there were still ways to measure the desire of gentlemen to engage with a lady, and it was quite evident that Lina drew much attention.

It was common knowledge and society gossip that Lina was the lady engaged to Mr. Blackstone, and Mr. Blackstone's wealth was widely known and discussed. But every gentleman to whom she was introduced requested a dance with her, and before long she felt as though the world was spinning about her in a blur of glittering lights and brilliant colors.

Charlotte whispered to her, as they passed each other on the floor, "You simply must ask to go to the supper room, Lina, I'm famished."

She had forgotten the supper room entirely. Her current dance partner was a smiling, sandy-haired gentleman she had seen before during her stay; she felt certain he had tipped his hat at them in the park or at a museum. Lina was hardly paying these gentlemen any mind; she was focused solely on the act of behaving as properly as possible and marveling at the scene around her.

Charlotte had agreed to request to go to the supper room when Lina did, so as not to abandon her in the event she required assistance with etiquette or rules. Lina whispered back that she was most sorry and would ask after the dance, and so she did, and the gentleman, a Mr. Carrington, obliged, as was required by proper etiquette.

He escorted her down an enormous staircase to the refreshment room, and Lina had to exert a great deal of effort not to make an exclamation upon entering it.

At the center of the supper room was a table heaped with such extraordinary culinary items, and so many of them, that she could scarcely believe her eyes. In the center of the table was a sculpture made of ice. She felt a bit dizzy at that moment and grasped the gentleman's arm to steady herself, for she had never seen such a display in all her life, or even imagined it.

Mr. Carrington and Charlotte's dance partner, a gentleman friend of Carrington's—who plainly had asked Charlotte to dance as a favor to his friend, but, like Charlotte, was handsome in a plain and friendly way and was getting along quite amicably with Charlotte—escorted the ladies to chairs. They seated themselves and then, smiling, Charlotte rattled off such a list of requests from the table that Lina's head spun, for she hadn't any idea what most of those things were. Charlotte ordered for her and sent the two men looking for champagne as well.

"You are only supposed to have one glass," Charlotte said, her voice serious. Then she whispered, "but I often have two."

The champagne, which Lina had never tried, was terrible tasting, but intoxicating as promised. They sat, ordering their dance partners about to retrieve food for them, but at last Charlotte told Lina that they might as well return to the dance floor, for the gentlemen were required to stay with them as long as they liked, and would likely wish to dance with more partners.

And so they returned, and danced for what seemed like hours, and the party became louder and more

glittery than it had seemed before. The intoxicating drink had quite gone to her head, and Lina felt after a while that she wished to return to the supper room, if only to refresh herself.

She would never be sure exactly how everything transpired, for Charlotte had explained all of the rules to her extensively, but insisted that everyone at this ball would be so proper and concerned about their appearances as gentlemen, that Lina would never need to remember the rules herself. But she found herself separated from Charlotte at the end of a waltz, and Mr. Carrington came right to her side at that moment, his arm extended for her to take. Another hopeful was approaching her at the same time, and Lina felt quite overwhelmed, as she could not recall what she was supposed to do in this particular instance.

“The lady has already promised the next dance to me, my good man,” Mr. Carrington said confidently. While the approaching gentleman quite clearly knew this to be untrue, he backed away, and requested the next dance, which Lina granted only because she was uncertain what else to do.

Mr. Carrington grinned at her as they spun about the dance floor. Lina smiled back. “I think I may have made quite an error, Mr. Carrington,” she said, blushing slightly. “I believe I have already danced with you once this evening. Is it not improper to accept your invitation more than once?”

“It is improper,” he said, spinning her about, “for me to ask you more than once.”

He smiled at her, flirtatiously, and because Lina had never been in such close contact with a man, or danced with any male except for a relative, she felt for the first time in her young life the thrill of being flirted with, and it made her quite forget where she was.

They finished the dance, and Lina was so overcome that she had to steady herself on his arm again as she left the floor.

“Are you quite well?” Mr. Carrington inquired.

“I am,” Lina said, gripping his arm, “feeling very... much... as though I need to sit down. Or take refreshment.”

Mr. Carrington guided her through the small crowd at the edge of the dance floor and spoke to the gentleman who had requested the next dance with her. Lina was not sure what he said, as another round of clapping arose at that moment and drowned out his voice. The party, by society standards, had become quite rowdy.

Mr. Carrington guided her to the supper room, where she sat and he retrieved her lemonade. She felt much better, but he said she looked pale, and inquired whether she might like to stroll about the garden as a means to take in some fresh air.

And so, because it sounded delightful and Charlotte had insisted that she need not worry about the details of proper etiquette, as the gentlemen at the ball would concern themselves with such matters, and because she felt even more intoxicated than after drinking the champagne, she agreed.

Mr. Carrington led her to the gardens through various passageways, and it seemed to grow hotter as they went, so she was feeling quite dizzy and almost ill by the time they reached the doors to the gardens. She had, as they hurried along through unoccupied parts of the great home, considered

several times declining the gentleman's offer, and returning to the ball, but she was feeling so odd and could not think clearly of how to make such a request without causing offense. Not only that, she was sure the fresh air might make her feel better.

The garden was lit by a few solitary lights and the light cast from the windows of the great ballroom. No one else appeared to be outside, which was something she found to be different than she had expected: she had assumed a gentleman like Mr. Carrington would, as Charlotte advised, ensure that all propriety was adhered to. The cool night air did not have the effect she had hoped for, and one of the last thoughts she had was that she had made a terrible mistake in judgment.

She was turning to Mr. Carrington to explain all of this to him, and then, all was blank for an amount of time that seemed no more than the blink of an eye.

* * *

The next thing she knew, she was lying down, and the earth was shuddering beneath her, and she could hear the sound of horses and the sharp voices of two women talking.

She would never be sure what motive—self-preservation, or perhaps years of practice pretending to be asleep while she was not—caused her to close her eyes as soon as she awoke, and feign the continuation of the fainting spell that had overtaken her. She was terribly confused, but she had enough sense to know from the tone of the voices, that something had gone terribly wrong.

“Surely you saw them leaving together, Elizabeth,” hissed a familiar voice, which took Lina a moment to realize was the voice of Charlotte, for it had such a venomous edge to it that it was rendered almost unrecognizable.

“Oh,” Elizabeth said, almost diffidently.

“Oh, surely, Elizabeth, you cannot expect me to believe that you didn't have your keen eyes glued to Mr. Carrington's every move. The entire world knows that you are looking to marry, and you are looking for wealth first and foremost and dashing good looks second, and that Mr. Carrington is whom you've set your eyes upon. You cannot convince me that you did not see him lead Lina away.”

“Oh, so what if I did?” Elizabeth hissed in reply.

“You knew well it was improper, and yet you said nothing, until it was too late. In fact!” Charlotte cut herself off, and there was a curious silence. When she spoke next her voice had lowered to a scathing whisper. “It wouldn't surprise me if you were the one to alert the guests to the scandal.”

There was no response from Elizabeth.

“You are a miserable little... brat. I do so hope you get what's coming to you.”

“And perhaps I shall, Charlotte. You could learn a thing or two about looking out for your own fortunes. Caroline is a commoner and a bastard and an ill-bred...tart! She does not deserve to marry into such a large fortune.”

“I think,” Charlotte hissed, “that you were simply jealous that Mr. Carrington, the miserable man, took

a shine to Lina instead of you, and now you've gone and ruined absolutely everything for everyone!"

"I?!" Elizabeth almost shrieked. "I've ruined everything?! *She's* the one who was strolling in the gardens in the dark alone with a man, not I! She's the one who had so much to drink that she became... incapacitated!" Then, with almost a snarl, she added, "If indeed that is what happened."

Charlotte hissed at Elizabeth, and Lina decided to open her eyes when no more was said for several minutes. She sat up, holding her head, which hurt terribly, and blinked to clear the blurriness from her vision.

Charlotte leaned toward her and grasped her hand. "Lina, my dear, however are you feeling?"

Lina shook her head. Her throat felt dry. "I don't... I don't know. What happened?"

Charlotte glared at Elizabeth. She returned her gaze to Lina and held a finger to her lips. "Say nothing until we arrive home, for I cannot be certain what this viper will do with anything she overhears."

Elizabeth glared at her sister, and Lina's eyes grew wide. "But I really haven't any recollection," she complained. "I was... walking to the garden with Mr. Carrington, and then—"

"Shh!" Charlotte insisted.

Elizabeth jutted her chin and folded her arms. "She can't incriminate herself any more than she already has," she said, with a haughty smirk.

"Say no more, Lina," Charlotte whispered. "I promise you I shall tell you all I know," she looked over disapprovingly at Elizabeth, "and all I *suspect*, when we have a free moment."

Lina's eyes welled up with tears, and Charlotte shook her head sharply to stop her from saying anything further. The remainder of the voyage took place in silence, the tension between the two sisters palpable in the air.

Chapter Eleven

But Charlotte was never allowed to speak to Lina privately, for news of the great scandal had arrived ahead of them somehow, as all gossip of a salacious nature will do. Lina was found in the garden, draped across the lap of Mr. Carrington, by the hostess and several of her dowdy friends, who had been sent to look at a “most compromising situation” by an unknown source.

By the time the horrified Mrs. Tilton had gathered up the girls in her care and seen to the matter, the ladies had called for a doctor, who examined Lina and concluded that she seemed quite inebriated and little more was wrong with her than that. Mr. Carrington was sent away from the party and the hostess attempted to brush the whole affair under the rug by sending Lina through the garden to an awaiting carriage.

The cover-up was for her own good, not Lina’s, but still somehow the story had reached the Harlowes, and likely all of society. Mrs. Harlowe wailed and threw herself upon a couch, and told Lina to go to her room or she would likely murder her where she stood. Charlotte, before being ushered out the door by Mrs. Tilton, grasped Lina’s hand in both of hers and whispered fiercely: “Stay strong and you shall prevail, you have done nothing wrong!”

Mrs. Tilton wrenched her arm away from Lina’s sharply enough to make her gasp, and Charlotte hissed furiously as they squabbled their way out the door.

Lina went to her room as she was told, and Evangeline sobbed and wailed herself to sleep, crying that her own life was ruined forever.

Lina was almost trapped in her dress, and no one came to help her, so she took it off and considered, momentarily, putting on a nightgown and prowling about to see what she could discover about the evening and what had happened, or perhaps even confronting the Harlowes to tell them the truth, but she felt quite exhausted, and ill, and terribly sad. Exhaustion, more than any other feeling, won out, and she fell asleep on her side, with her feet still planted indecisively upon the floor.

She was awoken by a banging on her door, and the frantic entry of the house maid, followed by Mrs. Harlowe, wringing her hands. “Caroline, get up, get out of bed!” Mrs. Harlowe almost shouted, while the maid flung open the wardrobe and began to assess it as though it were a pantry, speaking to herself as she did so.

“Oh!” Mrs. Harlowe said, holding her head, and looking about the room frantically.

“Get up, get up!” Mrs. Harlowe said. To the maid, she shrieked, “Go and get the chests, I will have her dressed by the time you return, we cannot waste a moment of time!”

“What is happening?” Lina managed to say. “Mrs. Harlowe?”

An ache in her heart gripped her, and she felt another plunge inside of her, as the events of the evening before came back to her. As she watched Mrs. Harlowe pacing the room, waving her hands about, she felt certain that she was being thrown into the streets.

“Hurry, child, and get dressed. It may be possible to salvage this terrible, terrible... incident, yet. Mr.

Blackstone has sent for you, you are to be sent immediately to his estate, and he has made no mention of canceling the wedding, nor anything of the kind. He has sent a telegram... can you imagine such a thing? All the way from there?"

Mrs. Harlowe paused at the wonder of modern technology, however briefly, and then set herself to pushing Lina out of bed and toward the wardrobe, where she stripped her of her shift without so much as a word and started to pull a traveling frock over her head.

"But what?" Lina said, from inside the dress as it passed over her head. "What is happening? Mrs. Harlowe, I—"

Mrs. Harlowe spun her around and held her very tightly by the shoulders. Her eyes were filled with a sort of wild fury that Lina had never seen. They were blue, but her temper had made them burn green. She looked almost rabid. "Listen to me, you most insolent little wench. Your loose, wanton behavior at the ball almost cost us everything! By some grand miracle, Mr. Blackstone appears to have decided to send for you immediately to be married anon. So you are being sent off this moment, that you may hopefully arrive and be wed before the rumors of your terrible deeds reach him." She put a finger up and wagged it sharply in Lina's face, a crude gesture Lina had never seen the likes of from Mrs. Harlowe in her life. "I do not know what, but the grace of God, has prompted the man to send for you at this moment, but you shall get dressed and be packed up with your things and sent away, and we shall all hope for the very best."

"Mrs. Harlowe, I don't recall what happened last night, but I—"

"Say nothing!" Mrs. Harlowe shouted. "Nothing, about last evening. Not a word, not another word. You have disgraced yourself, and you had better start hoping that you say "I do," before the rumors catch up to you, or..." Mrs. Harlowe pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I don't know what any of us will do."

She was packed into a carriage within the hour. Mrs. Harlowe tossed a bag with bread and cheese into the carriage at the last moment, else she might have starved. She did not get a chance to say goodbye to Evangeline, whose nerves had been so frayed that a doctor had been called to give a sedative for her hysteria, nor to Anna, who managed to wave sadly from a window, and make a sign with her hands and fingers of writing a letter. Lina was in tears as the carriage whisked her away, and she was so distraught that she could not even bear to open the curtains and look, for what might be the last time, on the glorious streets of London.

Chapter Twelve

The carriage rolled to a stop in a dim circle of light cast by two weak gas lamps, so that the facade of the enormous building that had been silhouetted against the moonlit sky was swallowed by the darkness.

The driver dismounted and opened the carriage door for her. "I am instructed to leave you here, Miss Blanchet, and to take your belongings round the service entry."

Lina stepped out of the carriage, guided by the driver's hand, and peered into the darkness. Gravel crunched beneath her feet. She could make out, just barely, the contours of an intricately carved, and massive, wooden door just beyond the lamps.

"But I..." she said, bewildered.

The driver, however, had already dropped her hand and mounted the carriage, and with a snap of the reins, the horses had begun a slow trot into the darkness.

"But how am I to... announce myself?" she asked the retreating carriage.

It was gone, around the corner of the wing jutting into the immense gardens, and Lina's throat closed with a lump of fear.

There was no guard, and as she stepped toward the immense door, she realized that there seemed to be no mechanism by which to knock upon wood.

She tapped her knuckles against the wood, and the sound seemed to be absorbed into it, so she herself heard nothing, and surely there would be no sound traveling to the other side.

She stepped back, lifting her skirts, and peered up at the windows. All of the drapes were drawn severely, and either no light glowed behind them, or they were so thick as to give the appearance of emptiness.

The fear that had closed her throat squeezed even more tightly in her chest.

"Mr. Blackstone?" she said, but without bothering to say it loudly, for she knew there was not a soul that could hear her. She formed a fist and pounded against the door, but the sound was so muffled when it reached her own ears that she gave up readily.

A bird of prey screeched in the distance, causing tears to well up in her eyes.

A monster.

Mr. Blackwell's reputation was becoming more and more grotesquely real by the minute.

Lina shivered, though it was quite warm. The sky in the east lit up with electricity and a rumble rolled over her.

"Mr. Blackstone!" she yelled, suddenly infuriated.

Her voice bounced from cold, dark wall to cold, dark wall.

Tears welled up and spilled to her cheeks, and she wiped them impatiently away.

She stood for a long time in the silence, and was on the verge of daring to walk around the enormous building to seek out the service entrance, while battling the urge to run away, when she heard a great rattling behind her. A sliver of weak light spread out upon the ground, and when she turned toward the door, she found it ajar.

Wiping one last tear away, she repeated dully, “Mr. Blackstone?”

There was no answer, and her heart pounded away in the stillness for several moments. But with no other recourse, she concluded that she had no choice except to enter.

The door was heavy, and she had to throw much of her weight into pushing it open.

She found herself in an immense hall, dimly lit by gas lamps that cast a sufficient glow upon the floor to reveal stone flooring of excellent workmanship, and an enormous Oriental rug. The foot of a grand staircase, nearly as wide at the bottom as many of the rooms in her old home, disappeared in a curve into the darkness above, where lights on the second floor illuminated the shapes of arched windows overlooking the foyer—she did not know if such an enormous space could so be called—from every side. Well-kept ferns, and sparse furniture of expensive countenance, were lined along the walls of the otherwise empty room. A single tasteful table with a vase of fresh, exotic flowers stood in the center of the rug.

Finding herself lacking entirely any thoughts about the proper etiquette for such a situation, she pushed the door closed, waited, and finally said, though she was certain it was impertinent, “Hello?”

Surely, the state of the place required that an army of servants were in the employ of Mr. Blackstone. But the house was silent as a tomb.

“Mr. Blackstone,” she said, in a tone that was quite impertinent, but her nerves had now become quite undone. “I demand that you, or at the very least, a... a... butler, or a maid, appear at once and explain to me this most... unusual welcome.”

The dark figure silhouetted in one of the arched openings above her had perhaps been there all along, for she had not seen it appear. It was deathly still. But the voice was unmistakable, a low, commanding purr that sent tingles along her spine.

“Miss Blanchet,” Mr. Blackstone said, using the French pronunciation of her name. “You are in no position to make demands.”

The cool feeling coiled in her abdomen slithered to life, and Lina was grateful for the darkness around her, for surely Mr. Blackstone could not see the odd expression her features took on, nor the flush on her cheeks, the provenance of which was unknown even to her: partly fear, partly the wicked excitement she had felt what seemed like a lifetime ago in the attic of her own home, and partly something else entirely that she knew not how to describe. Her heart kicked wildly and her chest felt like ice was spreading through it like the first frost across the gardens, branching out from the center to her limbs, until she was frozen.

“I expect,” Mr. Blackstone said, “That you shall learn this soon enough, though I had rather hoped the task would not be so very... monumental.”

“I apologize,” Lina rushed to say. Her voice was much quieter than she had expected. “I simply... there was no one to meet me at the door and no—”

“Speak no more.” Mr. Blackstone’s voice was no louder than her own, but it commanded such authority that it quashed Lina’s and sent a stab of fear through her chest. “Mongrave.”

Lina squinted, confused, and then started, taking a small jump backward as a figure in tails stepped into the circle of light. He was an old man, with a stern face that revealed nothing of his thoughts, and he looked every bit the butler.

“Shall escort you to your quarters. We will begin tomorrow.”

The butler, if that was what he was, extended his hand in the direction of the stairs, and then proceeded to walk in that direction, producing from seemingly nowhere a gas lamp which he carried with him as he walked.

Lina opened her mouth, believing that she had something to say, but not knowing what it was and still quite unsettled by the commanding voice of Mr. Blackstone, she closed it. She followed the butler, who, for being quite aged, was moving along at quite a fast pace. She hurried to catch up to him, not wishing to be left alone in the dark.

She was left at the doorway of an enormous suite of rooms by the mysterious and silent Mongrave, who disappeared into the labyrinthine corridors without a word.

The rooms were large and well-furnished, and a tray of food, still warm as if it had just been served, was left for her in the anteroom. There was, to her great surprise, an enormous bathroom, and a dressing room, attached to the bed chamber. The rich sheets of the bed, made of a cotton woven until it seemed like silk, were turned down.

Not knowing what else to do, she ate the dinner left for her, and grew drowsy. She discovered that her trunks had been unpacked, which brought her great relief. She selected a night shift, and was asleep, in spite of the anxiety that plagued her, within a moment of her head touching the pillow.

Tomorrow, she thought, she would straighten all of this out.

Chapter Thirteen

A bright light flashed over her face, and her eyes flew open as she sat up with a start.

A maid, in a crisp uniform, with brown hair coiled up tightly in a bun, shook the great, thick curtains and turned to her. “Mr. Blackstone has requested that you take your tea in your sitting room and wear the blue dress with navy ribbon. Mr. Mongrave shall escort you from the sitting room at half-past. Do you require assistance dressing, Miss Blanchet?”

“I...” Lina wiped the sleep from her eyes. “Well, no, I suppose not, but—”

“Good. Don’t dally, miss. It’s already late in the afternoon and I expect that you have been given some reprieve because of your long travels, but Mr. Blackstone does not approve of sleeping throughout the day. I’d move quickly, miss. Mr. Blackstone does not like tardiness. He considers it disrespectful.”

The maid, without another word, left, before Lina could pry her for information.

Tears began to well up in her eyes again, but Lina fought them off. If this Mr. Blackstone was so inclined to play games with her, she would not let it make her cry. But she hurried out of bed, because until she had a better understanding of exactly what Mr. Blackstone did when he found things disrespectful, she had better not stoke his ire.

She dressed, and as promised, was taken by Mr. Mongrave to tea in one of the many rooms of the enormous estate. Try as she might to make a mental map of the passages and corridors of the mansion, she could not; it seemed to her that they never walked the same way, nor a direct way, twice.

“You may explore the library and gardens until Mr. Blackstone calls for you,” Mongrave said, out of nowhere, when she had finished her tea. And then, like a puff of smoke, he was gone.

And Lina was left sitting quite alone in a great room with a door open to a library, and a door from there to the great gardens.

She walked through them for some time, trying to observe signs of someone occupying the house besides Mongrave or Blackstone, or the maid she had seen earlier. But no groundskeeper nor maid nor butler was to be seen, and at last she entered the library in resignation, where she read a book and waited for the return of Mongrave.

He came some time later, and escorted her to Mr. Blackstone.

* * *

The figure before the window of the room was still. Lina’s stomach felt as though it was being wrung like laundry, and she felt herself sway slightly. But she resolutely remained standing—she would not, like the ridiculous Evangeline, faint from fear.

Her eyes took a few quick, furtive glances about, trying to make sense of the objects around her. They fit into no category of furnishing she had ever known, and they were vaguely unsettling, in that same

cool, fearful, and wicked way, but she was unable to recognize them and would have been even if she had stared.

The man turned around. His face was in the shadows, and Lina averted her eyes after a moment, so that it would not seem she was staring. “Miss Blanchet,” he said coolly, and the deep voice of Mr. Blackstone traveled through her like an elixir, warming and cooling parts her body as it did: her chest, the backs of her arms, her belly... and lower. She felt herself blush, and stared at the floor, with her neck burning.

Then, because he seemed to be waiting for a response, Lina gave a strange curtsy and stuttered, “Mr. Black...s...s...tone.”

“Sir,” he corrected quietly.

Lina’s eyes lifted quickly, from the floor to the shadowy face. Remembering what Charlotte had told her about him being a monster, she looked quickly above his head. “I... I...” she stuttered again.

“Mr. Blackstone, sir,” he said, each word scraping at the insides of her wildly beating heart, though she could not tell if the sensation was painful or pleasurable. Her neck burned hotter. “You will address me properly.”

Lina’s mouth was open, and words failed her. A sinking sensation was overtaking her, and in truth she did feel quite faint; perhaps Evangeline had the right idea, in the end, fainting when overwhelmed.

“I am waiting,” Mr. Blackstone prompted, when she said nothing.

“Mr. Blackstone,” she managed to say hoarsely. “Sir?”

He had an odd cane in his hands, which Lina noticed now only because he placed it in front of him, one hand over the other, atop the knobby end. He lifted it and gave a hard blow to the ground, making Lina jump. “That’s better. When you speak to me—and you will do so only when I say you may—you shall use the appropriate address. ‘Sir’ will do in this context. At other times I shall request that you call me ‘master’.”

Lina felt the queer sensation in her lower abdomen again. She sucked in her breath and lifted her eyes.

There was another, louder smash of the cane against the wood of the floor. “The first lesson you will learn, Miss Blanchet, is to keep your eyes on the floor unless you are told to keep your eyes somewhere else. Do you understand me?”

Lina did not, so her head was shaking as she said, quietly, “I... I... do not understand—”

“You will.” His voice interrupted her without him raising it, and an even icier chill traveled through Lina, though for some reason, it was strangely thrilling. Then, without warning, he yelled, “Doyle!”

The immense bookshelf swung open near the back corner of the room, making Lina look up in that direction. A man was entering the room, also curiously obscured by the shadows and the arrangement of the candles so that Lina could not make out his face. His figure was smaller than Mr. Blackstone’s, and his hair lighter.

Lina squinted into the glaring candles so arranged that his face was obscured. She did not care for being unable to see someone's face.

"This is my physician and right-hand assistant, Dr. Doyle," Mr. Blackstone said, with menace in his voice.

Lina stared for a moment, then looked at the floor, and then, not knowing what else to do, curtsied.

"Dr. Doyle," Blackstone continued, "is... my eyes and ears, in a way. Especially in the city."

Lina's heart felt even heavier, and colder. She stared at the floor and clasped her hands in front of her.

"And do you know, Caroline Blanchet, what Dr. Doyle might have seen and heard in London on his most recent trip?"

Lina thought she just might, but she was struck silent and stared at the pattern of the rug on the floor, her heart beating wildly. Surely, surely, if he had gotten wind of the scandal in London, he would not have sent for her?

"Miss Blanchet? Your master has asked you a question, and now you will answer."

"I do not," Lina said limply, after taking a deep breath to compose herself.

There was a noise as Mr. Blackstone took a deep breath, loudly, causing Lina to look up at him. His neck was exposed in the light, and he was looking at the ceiling. She still could not see his face, but his neck seemed... well, normal. When he lowered his chin, she caught sight of a mouth, with full lips and snarl, but certainly nothing monstrous.

"You do not," he repeated, sending her eyes back to the floor with the venom of his words. "You do not, what?" he seethed.

Lina's eyes watered, and inside she felt torn in a thousand directions.

"I do not, *sir*." This final syllable left her mouth more snappily than she had intended, and once it left her mouth she feared it would anger him. At the same time, somewhere in the back of her mind, she was wondering if this man had any proper claim on her, to be forcing her to speak to him thusly.

"Doyle?" Mr. Blackstone asked, after a pause.

"It would seem that Miss Blanchet behaved inappropriately and had inappropriate relations with a young gentleman at the Chattoway ball. I found her stretched out upon the lap of a gentleman, asleep from too much drink, having engaged in most inappropriate—"

"It isn't true," Lina pleaded, looking up suddenly. The words were pouring from her mouth and she could not make them stop. "I did no such thing; it was all a trick—"

"Miss Blanchet," Mr. Blackstone said icily, again managing to cut her off as though he had shouted with the pure ice of his tone. "I did not ask you to speak."

“But, but, but...” she said, looking at Dr. Doyle, who had a serious but not mean expression as he looked back at her. “But it isn’t true!”

“I saw it with my own eyes, Miss Blanchet. It is quite true.”

“It isn’t true that, that... that... but I didn’t...” Lina attempted to explain but was unable to put what she wanted to say into words quickly enough.

“Because of your indiscretions... thank you, Dr. Doyle, I shan’t be needing you any further,” Mr. Blackstone interrupted her mumbling. Dr. Doyle turned toward the bookshelf to leave.

“But wait!” Lina interjected, forgetting herself and her fear. “This is not... not fair!”

Doyle began to turn around slowly, but Mr. Blackstone waved him away, and so he obeyed him and headed to the door as Blackstone turned toward Lina and breathed like a dragon. “Silence!”

Lina’s eyes filled with tears, but she closed her mouth, for the man’s voice had such an effect that she felt she couldn’t speak any more, even if she very much wanted to.

The bookcase door swung closed, and Lina stared at the floor. There was a long and awkward silence.

“Let us start again, Miss Blanchet. You have lied to me, and for that you shall be disciplined severely —”

“I did not lie,” she said, in a trembling voice. “I must defend—”

“You lied when you said you knew not of what Dr. Doyle spoke,” Blackstone growled. “And you have been disrespectful, speaking out of turn. You shall learn your lesson this evening, Miss Blanchet.”

Lina looked up. Blackstone had retreated into the shadows without her realizing it.

She sniffled. “Mr. Blackstone, sir,” she said quietly, and had to wipe her nose hastily before he turned around. “I apologize for my impertinence—”

There was a crack in the air, which silenced Lina. She recognized the sound, though she could not place it.

“You shall, indeed, apologize for your impertinence, Miss Blanchet. And you shall apologize for your indiscretions. And you shall be instructed firmly in the ways of submission and obedience.”

Lina’s heart went cold. While the words stirred something almost pleasurable inside of her, in her naughtiest places, they also struck her chest with a knife of fear.

Her eyes scanned the shadowy figure before her, looking for the source of the sound, her mind almost grasping it, not quite prepared to believe that it was what she thought it was...

As the realization that the crack had been that of a whip spread through her mind and then, like molten lava, through her body, she stepped backward, looking from side to side, as though for help. The

furniture of the room began to take on a kind of recognition in her mind, though it was far too vague to materialize as a complete thought. The visceral reaction inside of her, however, was very clear: she felt a terrifying thrill.

“Because of your most inappropriate behavior, Miss Blanchet, I have dissolved the previous conditions of your contract.”

Lina was walking backward, though Blackstone was not approaching.

So... she was not to be married to him?

She had retreated so far that she ran into the heavy door, and she began to fumble around for the handle without turning her back. “Sir, Mr. Blackstone, if that... is... the case... then I...”

Then she what? Then she was free, yes, but the Harlowes were sure to turn her out of the house.

The whip—for it was a whip, indeed, she knew that now—cracked again, silencing her completely. “I have, however, spent a good deal of money on you, Miss Blanchet. And I,” he snarled with an evil undertone, “always recuperate my money. Fortunately enough, I have a wealthy... associate, who finds your... lack of discretion and wantonness to be quite appealing. He is, however, quite insistent that you be trained properly before you are transferred to his harem. He has... many requirements and it is imperative that you conform to all of them.”

Lina let out a breath in a huff. She did not know what most of this meant, not really, though like the instruments and furnishings in the room, she possessed a shadowy frame of reference for it all and it was one she did not much care for. “I shall not be... I shall not. If the contract is dissolved, then I shall return home. Call me a carriage at once, I shall depart immediately.”

She spun on her heel, with every thought of opening the door and strolling imperiously down the corridor to the corner, where she would run. She had taken note of the twists and turns, and she believed that she could find the stairway.

But her thoughts, running ahead of her feet, were suddenly spinning around as wildly as her own body, for Mr. Blackstone had crossed the room with lightning speed and the silence of a panther, to catch her wrist. He then encircled her waist, and suddenly, she was spinning, moving, and then being pulled toward a hard and rubbery object like a large rocking horse, and then bent at the waist over the object.

The details of her predicament from there came to her in waves: the sensation of leather around one wrist, then the other. Her voice, loud and protesting, leaving her mouth at an absurd volume. She kicked back with her feet but found only air, and then her arms began to pull ahead of her, pulling her down and over the furnished piece she had seen, and was now realizing, simply, was some kind of monstrous device for... for...

For what?

She could no longer lift her head, and her hair had come tumbling from the loose arrangement she had hastily created, so she could not see from behind her brown curls, nor push the hair from her face. What was more, she could feel a hand—a man’s hand, warm and slightly rough, closing around her

ankle.

She was so shocked by the impropriety of his touch that she fell silent, and went stiff. Her ankle was enclosed by leather as well, and then the process was repeated on the other side.

When Mr. Blackstone pulled her legs apart, spreading them, shame washed over her, cold and hot at the same time. “What are you—Mr. Blackstone! I insist that you... you *stop!* Immediately!”

But this humiliating and utterly inappropriate position was nothing compared to what happened next, as darkness fell over her head. For a moment she did not know why, until, incredibly, she felt the cool air of the room against her bare skin.

The bare skin of her legs, her thighs, and ... her backside.

“The very first lesson that I must impart upon you, Miss Blanchet, is about obedience.”

“This is most improper!” Lina screeched. “I... I... I demand that you... release me... at once.”

Instead of being released, however, she felt a further humiliation being added to her predicament: Mr. Blackstone was pulling on the strings of her silk drawers and pulling them open, so that the silky fabric slipped down her thighs and caught about her knees, leaving her bottom entirely exposed.

She did not have long to consider this impropriety, however, because her skin suddenly felt as though it had been set on fire, and the accompanying sound of a slap reached her ears shortly thereafter. Just as she was processing that she was being *spanked*, like a child by a father, her skin was again set afire.

Initially, she had been too shocked to say anything, and the second slap took the wind from her lungs. But as the third spank cracked against her skin, a sharp bite in a spreading sea of uncomfortable warmth and numbness, she shrieked and began to attempt to kick her restrained feet.

“Now. Miss. Blanchet,” her tormentor said calmly, punctuating each word with a painful spank. “You will be made to understand. That. You shall obey orders. Not give them.”

“Stop! Stop! I insist that you stop this at—ah!”

A rain of slaps, each one more sharp than the last, fell upon her already burning bottom, and she was suddenly without words. Evidently, so was her captor, for he did not lecture her or speak. She kicked and gasped and cried and flailed, and demanded, then begged, for him to stop.

But he continued on, and tears poured from her eyes and her legs and arms ached from the struggle against the restraints.

At last, for there seemed nothing else to do, she went limp, and closed her eyes, sobbing.

A final crack, and she braced for the next sharp sting, which she felt she would be unable to bear. But it did not come.

She sobbed, tears running down her face, hanging limply over the terrible device.

The man behind her said nothing, and fear coursed through her, making her legs tremble, as she anticipated that he would begin his spanking anew.

But something much, much worse was happening, and she could not explain it: the funny feeling, that very same feeling that had been inspired by Mr. Blackstone's voice, or when she allowed the word "discipline" to careen about in her thoughts for too long, had returned. It was now so strong that it was branching out to the most immodest of places, where she could feel a pulsing, pleasurable heat.

And wetness.

Her face burned almost as much as her sore bottom, but she dared not move.

She heard the footsteps retreat from where she was tied, and the soft swoosh of a chair as he sat down.

"As I am certain your guardians have advised you, Miss Blanchet, a woman of these times must be feminine, delicate, and demure. You do not have a great abundance of these qualities, but I imagine that you shall learn them quickly. However, if you are to be a suitable companion for my acquaintance, you will need to learn additional traits. You will learn to be submissive, to be mastered, and to please the man who keeps you. Not by playing the piano or singing, as you might have done in your former life, but by submitting your body to his dominance and pleasuring his organ with your orifices."

As Lina tried to make sense of what he was saying—for the words were all words she recognized, but strung together in such a bizarre context she could make no sense of them—he made a sound like a tssk and rose from the chair.

In a moment, the throbbing skin of her backside was reignited by the warmth of his hand as he cupped an entire cheek. Lina made a weak noise, but dared not to bring further punishment upon herself, as the waves of heat that rolled across her tender skin were almost too much to bear as it was.

She gasped, however, when his finger slipped between her cheeks, swiping right over her dirtiest and most naughty place, before moving down, down, and then...

Her body jerked violently as his thumb pressed on the very center of her private place. A sensation that seemed many times more intense than the cool, funny feeling in her private parts until now, jolted her to life. It was very pleasurable, but also painful, and frightening.

"Aha," he commented. And nothing more.

He rubbed against this place until she was writhing and squirming, making most unflattering and unladylike noises.

"I... Mr. Blackstone, I... please... I cannot... what... oh! Oh, I cannot—"

"You will be silent," Blackstone said calmly, hushing her instantly. "Unless you desire to be punished again. Next time I shall use a whip, for I am growing quite tired of your impertinence and you have already displeased me greatly, Miss, Blanchet."

As he said this, his finger dipped *inside of her*, and worse yet, her body, now outside of her control, pulsed around it.

“Hmm,” Blackstone commented. “Miss Blanchet,” he mused. “Are you the sort of very naughty girl who enjoys being *disciplined*?”

“Nnn...n...no, no, good heavens, no,” she stuttered, squirming helplessly, her body bucking against the restraints, mysteriously *toward her captor*. “I don’t... sir, please, I don’t understand what is happening, oh please. Please, stop... stop...”

But he did not stop. His finger rubbed against that strange part of her body until a screaming ache encompassed her entire lower body. She could feel that liquid was sliding down her thighs, and she wondered what it could be, and burned with shame as it simply poured from inside of her.

And then, just as she thought she could no longer stand it, the fingers were gone.

She panted, and then whimpered. The stimulation that had been so torturous was removed, and yet... she did not feel better.

She let out the deep breath she had been holding and it came out as a sob.

She squirmed in silence, and then shrieked when another hard slap tore across her burning skin. “We shall begin your training tomorrow,” Mr. Blackstone said. “Indicate that you understand by saying *yes sir*.”

Lina sniffled. She desperately wanted to say something else, but she could almost feel the heat of his hand hovering just above her skin, and the painful spanking was throbbing, stinging, and burning over her buttocks. Her skin was raw, and her body jerked just imagining another slap cutting through the pain with its searing heat.

She wanted to protest, so very much, for Mr. Blackstone did not understand, and it was all very unjust. She did not know what he meant about training, or the very strange things he had described about her pleasing this strange man, but she was certain it was all very naughty and *most* improper.

“Yes, sir,” she said quietly, giving up. She would make her case tomorrow, or better yet, she would escape. For now, her only goal was to prevent Mr. Blackstone from spanking her again.

“Good. Now, I shall remind you of what we have learned today.”

Smack.

Lina’s breath was caught in her throat for a moment before it left her throat in a humiliating gasp.

“You shall always look where, Miss Blanchet?”

Lina sobbed. “At the floor,” she bawled. Then, heart racing, she added, “Sir.”

Smack.

“And you shall speak when?”

The pain was too much. This last slap was burning on her hot, throbbing skin as though she had touched a poker. “Oh, please stop, please! I shall do whatever you—”

Smack. Smack. Smack.

Lina opened her mouth, but remembered that there was nothing she could do but take her punishment, if she wanted him to stop.

“This is also an important lesson, Miss Blanchet,” he said, putting his hand on her throbbing skin, making it ignite with heat again. “When you are disciplined, you shall accept your punishment, or you shall even thank me for it. But you shall never, ever, complain. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Lina managed to say.

“Shall I spank you again so that you are fully disciplined?”

Lina’s chest rose and fell rapidly, and her throat went dry. She balled her hands into fists, and her body shook as she tried to will herself to ask for her punishment. Between her legs, she could feel the stickiness of whatever it was that was flowing from her naughtiest place.

As she said the words, the thrilling, painful pleasure rolled through her abdomen again, and so when Mr. Blackstone’s hand came down upon her skin a moment later, she screamed, but she could not be sure whether it was from pleasure or pain.

“Yes, sir,” she said, mustering as much volume as she could. “Spank me again.”

Humiliation turned the skin of her face red and hot, and the burn of the spanking that was delivered by Mr. Blackstone came quickly, biting into her flesh and spreading across her bottom, red-hot, then warm, in waves.

Mr. Blackstone had stepped away again, though she could not place where he was in the room. Tears spilled from her eyes and tickled the sides of her face as they coursed over her cheekbones, and, because she was so placed, into her ears.

She sniffled, and waited, for there was nothing else to do. The possibility that Mr. Blackstone might rain down upon her with another succession of slaps lingered in the air, almost like the touch of his hand over her skin. She squirmed, and her face burned each time a wave of the unfamiliar, hot sensation licked at her insides, and made her pulse deep inside, down, between her legs, where she ached.

Oh my, she thought. These were naughty thoughts, and she knew it. She struggled to push them aside in her mind but could not.

At long last, without her hearing a sound as he approached, Mr. Blackstone was next to her. She knew, because she felt his hands as they loosened the straps on her wrists and ankles. But that was all he did, and her skirts were still over her head as she began, tentatively, to twist against the restraints, which started to come loose.

“You will return to your room. I shall call Mongrave to escort you. Miss Blanchet, do not entertain

any wild ideas in your mind. You may dislike the predicament in which you find yourself, but I assure you that you have no other choice. The Harlowes, for one, would be impoverished and tossed into the street because of your indiscretions. As would you. If you are obedient and receptive to your training, you will live a life of luxury, and your guardians will remain with what little wealth they have, and a renewed social standing.”

He was suddenly behind her again, and though he did not touch her, she could feel his presence on the surface of her skin. “You have,” he growled, “no choice.”

Lina fought against the urge to correct Mr. Blackstone, particularly on the issue of her “indiscretion.” She chewed her lip until it nearly bled, and closed her eyes in fury. It would do no good to make her case to Mr. Blackstone now, and there was a terrible truth in his words. She could not inflict suffering on the Harlowes, if only for Anna’s sake.

She had no choice.

The idea slithered through her, and, like the burning of the skin on her bottom, and the sound of Mr. Blackstone’s voice, it was curiously frightening *and* pleasurable.

His voice was far away, near where the bookshelf that had admitted Dr. Doyle would be, when she heard him next. She wondered how he moved so stealthily; he was an imposing man.

“Free yourself and exit to the hallway when you are composed. Mongrave will escort you to your room. I expect,” he added, a feral purr in his voice, “to hear nothing of disobedience, so much as a breath of it, Miss Blanchet.”

She sniffled. “Yes, sir,” she said, to make certain beyond all doubt that Mr. Blackstone would see no further reason to punish her.

* * *

Her skirts were rough against her tender skin, but she held her head high behind Mr. Mongrave. She did not know if the servants were aware of Mr. Blackstone’s humiliating treatments, but she would not let them have the satisfaction of knowing that her bottom burned so much she could barely walk.

The rotund maid was turning down the sheets of her bed, and patted them with two brisk and professional strokes before looking up at her. Her expression betrayed no emotion whatsoever. “You’ll find in your bathroom the most modern of luxuries, Miss Blanchet. Have you used a hot water faucet before?”

Lina was dumbstruck, which didn’t seem to bother the maid, who walked efficiently around the bed and into the sitting room, which was connected on the far side to a bathroom. Lina followed, not knowing what else to do, and stared emptily as the maid showed her how the contraption worked. It was really quite remarkable: hot water flowed from the tap as though someone had boiled it freshly, but Lina was too stunned by the painful burning of her bottom, the still-stinging humiliation, and the shock of her change of fortune, to register much of what she was saying.

She nodded when the maid asked her if she understood, and the woman scurried away, with Lina

standing in front of the bathtub, filling by the second with steaming hot water.

She very nearly let it overflow as she thought of each moment in Mr. Blackstone's strange chamber. She was filled with fury anew at the wicked lie that Mr. Carrington and Elizabeth, and perhaps even that Dr. Doyle, had perpetuated, and she clenched her fists as she thought about it.

She must find a way to tell Mr. Blackstone the truth.

When she stepped into the bath, it was scalding, and it took some doing to achieve a decent temperature, by turning the taps to various states of open, and draining some of the water. She sighed. In the end it seemed almost simpler to boil the water, though she supposed a servant in the enormous home might see such a task differently. The fire was probably miles away in an estate this size.

Once the water had cooled and she sank into the luxurious bath, she closed her eyes and drifted through the wild events of the day. She did not know what was in store for her. What was a harem, and what did it mean to be part of one? Was that a fate worse than the fate of marrying Mr. Blackstone, a man she did not love? A man who spanked her like a small child, only in a way that... that did what? The feelings snaking through her body were impossible to decipher. They felt so very *wrong*, and yet the more she tried to direct her thoughts away from them, the more she returned to them, and when she thought of the humiliating scene that Mr. Blackstone had just played out, those wild feelings coursed through her body just as they had before.

At some point, replaying the touch of Mr. Blackstone's hand on her bottom, caressing the red-hot skin, her fingers wandered to that place she instinctively knew was not to be touched, or talked about. Between the folds of her skin she found a slipperiness. Exploring it, enjoying it, she struck the center of that part, a tiny, hard nub, and the shock that raced through her body made her gasp and sit up straight in the bath.

She was breathless, and ached between her legs.

It was so very, very bad. So scandalous. So naughty.

But why did she feel the way that she did, and why could she not banish Mr. Blackstone—a beast, by all accounts—from her thoughts, or the sensation in her chest that took over when she thought of him.

She wanted very much to hate him, to find a way to escape him. And yet the cold sensation, sinking and rising in her chest, betrayed a very different feeling than the one she attempted to cultivate in her mind.

She fell asleep much, much later than she retired, and Mr. Blackstone haunted her dreams, where she knelt before him and he growled that she would be disciplined and punished, over and over again, while the ache between her legs throbbed away, unsated.

Chapter Fourteen

“Do you not think you have been a bit harsh?”

Rohan Blackstone said nothing as he crossed the library and helped himself to a snifter of Callum Doyle’s very expensive Scotch, brought back with him from a trip to Scotland. Callum could be so mercurial.

“And how is that, Callum? Was it not *your* suggestion that given the girl’s wanton behavior, she be found unsuitable for our purposes and sent on to Laroui?”

There was no reply from Callum, just a tap on his glass. Rohan turned to face him.

Doyle looked unhappy.

Rohan was not pleased, himself. The girl had seemed a perfect solution to their problems. She was not only acceptable, and in no position to decline their offer, but quite beautiful as well. He had been filled, for perhaps the first time in a great long while, with some optimism.

It had only been because of Doyle’s conviction that her behavior in London made her unacceptable for their purposes, that Rohan had let himself be so convinced.

“Of course,” Doyle said at last, but his voice lacked the conviction it had before.

There was a long silence, as Rohan fumed. No matter how he tried to suppress it, he had developed a fondness for the young girl. Even though he would still be able to enjoy her training, he could not help but feel a vacuum in his chest. The pain of it had caused him, he realized now, to treat her much more harshly than he might have.

He swallowed his drink.

“You are correct,” Rohan said, facing the wall. “I was much more harsh with her than required. A girl of such a temperament must be handled with more delicacy.”

Doyle said nothing.

Rohan turned to him, and anger began to flare inside of him, rising up to his neck and turning into heat beneath his collar.

Callum, accustomed to his friend’s temper, raised a finger in warning. It was Doyle’s duty, in their strange friendship, to rein in the irascible Rohan, to push him back inside of the boundaries of his carefully constructed facade and make sure that he remained there.

Rohan straightened his jacket and waited for Doyle to speak, for he knew that he would.

“It *is* interesting to me,” he said, much too slowly for Rohan’s patience, “that she was so insistent upon denying her impropriety with that young man.”

Rohan tugged at his shirtsleeves to straighten them and inhaled through his nose to calm his temper,

which was yet again flaring.

“Ah,” Doyle said suddenly, shaking his head before taking a final sip of his drink. He seemed to have thought better of his own argument. “Any woman will tell any number of lies to defend her virtue. It serves as proof of nothing.”

Doyle rose, and clapped Rohan on the shoulder, careful to avoid his collarbone, which had never fully healed. “Laroui has already departed, as it is, and he shall be very pleased with your selection. I imagine your debt to him shall be considered paid in full.”

Rohan said nothing and stared at the volumes on his shelves, many of which were titled in French, brought back with him from many years of living in Morocco and France. He narrowed his eyes at the thought of Laroui, who would soon possess the lovely Miss Blanchet, in exchange for keeping Rohan’s secrets to his grave.

He shook himself inwardly and swallowed the last of his drink before turning to pour himself another. Doyle was right; he knew that a woman like Miss Blanchet, who would so easily and wantonly have relations of any kind with a man while engaged, could not be trusted as a bride—especially not for this delicate situation, and all of the secrets within these walls.

“You are right, Callum, as always,” he said. “Good night.”

Callum may or may not have been planning to retire, but he took his cue, gave Rohan a brief nod, and left the room. Rohan fell into the sofa, sipped his drink, and brooded.

He had chosen Carolina Blanchet because he had very few suitable possibilities for a wife, should he wish to marry and live his life as he chose. Which he did. Among those choices there had been few virtuous women, and among those few women, even fewer beautiful women. Her beauty, by itself, might have taken the girl to a modestly decent marriage, but once Rohan saw her for himself he had been overcome by lust. Callum had been in agreement. He was, after all, the one who had scouted her.

When news had reached him of her disappointing and un-virtuous behavior, he had been unnervingly crushed. Before Carolina he had considered taking other women as wives, women who had marred their reputations and would have no choice but to accept the arrangements of his household in exchange for a stable and wealthy existence. He had been unbothered by their behavior. But Carolina, who he had first laid eyes upon in the stormy field, cheeks stained pink with the cold, hair disheveled, temperament defiant and glorious—Carolina’s “betrayal” had struck him deeply.

Callum had advised him to wait, to at least hear Carolina’s version of the story, or perhaps to decide if it mattered, but he had gone wild with jealousy, which had turned to anger, and then, because it was the sort of man he was, he had acted decisively. Cruelly, and—he liked to tell himself, anyway—without remorse. He had sent for Laroui, to whom he owed a great favor, and told him that he had finally located a perfect English rose for Laroui’s collection.

That Laroui had asked him to train the girl was unexpected. Perhaps he had, in a way, been pleased; he could have his fill of the chestnut-haired beauty, take a kind of revenge on her for her betrayal, and then eliminate her from his life as though she had never happened.

Another woman could always be found, and his debt with Laroui would be settled.

But now that he had Carolina here, her skin beneath his, her body responding as he only could have hoped that it might, he was—

He stopped himself from thinking about it further.

It was done, and she was Laroui's.

Laroui would give her riches and treat her well. He expected obedient women but was nowhere near the disciplinarian that Blackstone was, and all the women of his harem seemed quite content with their lives.

The glass in his hand was in the air before his mind even registered that he had thrown it. Rage filled his veins, this time directed at himself.

He stood up, straightened his collar, and wiped a droplet of sweat that had formed there with a handkerchief. He was a gentleman now, though they might never accept him fully, and he would act the part. Always. Even alone, in his own enormous house.

His fist balled again, and he unclenched it.

Damn Carolina Blanchet.

He was not a man who lost control.

* * *

Her breakfast was brought to her, and she was dressed, hurried along by the efficient maid, who made no overtures to gossip nor to obtain gossip, and who seemed almost mechanically disinclined to care why Lina was there, or where she was going, or why the marriage to Mr. Blackstone had not occurred.

Lina feebly tried to pry the information from her, by surveying the dress the maid had selected for her to wear and inquiring:

“Do tell me, what is the occasion for my visit to Mr. Blackstone?”

The maid's accent was a northern garble which Lina could barely understand. “Now, Miss, I'm not privy to it, nor am I to speak of it if I should be, which I am not. You are to wear this dress is all I know, and it's all I'd say if I did know more, which I do not.”

And then she was led to the same room from the night before and abandoned by the escort who brought her there like a package.

She watched him retreat and surveyed the long corridors to her right and her left. The servant had brought her a different way than the one who had escorted her the night before, and she was certain she had been led a different way on the return trip to her room as well. The estate was vast, labyrinthine, and dark, and she would likely lose her way and starve before she escaped if she

attempted such a thing now.

She faced the heavy wooden door, and the coolness in her chest slipped into her stomach. The tender skin of her bottom pulsed as though someone had touched it. The maid had, upon dressing her, bluntly stated that she was to wear no drawers beneath the dress, as it was unnecessary, and she would be unable to remove them to relieve herself.

It was not so uncommon, but when Lina opened her mouth to object, the woman stood up and snapped: "It's my orders and you shall take them off."

So now, the rough fabric of the skirt rubbed her sore skin, each step in the dress reminding her of Mr. Blackstone's firm hand the night before.

The terrible wetness threatened to spill over, she could feel it, slowly welling up between her legs. When she knocked on the door, her lady-parts throbbed with an ache.

The door clicked, but did not open fully. No sound came from behind it, so she tentatively pushed it open.

"Mr. Blackstone, sir, I—"

"Enter, Miss Blanchet."

The voice again performed its extraordinary feat, crawling through her chest like trailed fingertips over skin, sending a chill down her spine that mimicked fear, but was not precisely that.

Mr. Blackstone was, again, standing in the shadows that were created by the lighting of the room, seemingly specifically for that purpose. Again, she longed to see his face: was he a monster, really? She didn't know why she wanted to see him, only that she did.

"Today we shall begin your training, Miss Blanchet. I remind you that you are to be obedient, or you shall be disciplined."

"Yes, sir," Lina said, as clearly as she could. She had dared to imagine herself speaking up, asking Mr. Blackstone if he might listen to her story, so that she could tell him the truth.

Now that she was in his presence, though, she lost her nerve, and it deflated her.

Mr. Blackstone turned to the bookshelf which had, the night before, opened to admit Dr. Doyle. He stepped through it, leaving her alone in the vast room.

"Follow me," was all he said.

Lina stepped, stomach in knots, in the direction of the bookcase doorway. It opened into a dark corridor, damp and cold. She shivered and hesitated, before taking a few steps. She looked behind her, at the door to the enormous study, filled with light. She wondered if she would ever see it again.

Mr. Blackstone had continued walking, and he did not even slow to say, in his characteristically animal-like growl, "Keep walking, Miss Blanchet, or I shall be given the impression that you are being willful and disobedient."

She was still for a beat, and then, for reasons she could not explain to herself, and although she feared she would regret it terribly, she began to follow Mr. Blackstone.

They did not travel far: down a curved staircase, but not a full flight, and through another door, and then another.

“This is the room where you will be trained,” Mr. Blackstone announced, in his authoritative voice.

Lina clutched her skirts in her fists to stop herself from opening her mouth to say something, for she very much wanted to ask Mr. Blackstone a question. Her bottom, however, was still very sore from her discipline the day before, and while the thought of being spanked again held a certain, perverse appeal for her, she knew better than to push her luck.

But the curiosity that had burned inside of her all night long was ignited in her chest again. If only she could know what lay in store for her, what it all meant... if only she could decide if she should try to flee, again... or stay.

Charlotte’s words ricocheted in her mind: *sexually perverse*.

Lina did not have any way of knowing what that would mean, and yet her imagination was running wild, stirring her up, clutching her chest with a strangling fear.

“Turn around,” Mr. Blackstone ordered.

Lina did as she was told, and found herself facing a wall of implements of all shapes and sizes, most of which were not recognizable to her, but some which were—whips, of a sort she had never seen before, with many thick leather straps and elaborately carved handles. There were many ivory objects carved into shapes that looked very much like a naughty picture drawn in the courtyard of her building back in France. The picture had caused all the women to laugh, but the children had been forbidden to know what it represented.

The memory made Lina’s cheeks burn, for while she had not known then, and did not know now for certain what these objects mimicked, she suspected very much that it was a man’s “manhood.”

“Disrobe,” Blackstone said.

Lina turned quickly, shocked, her mouth open in protest. Blackstone was no longer standing where he had been just moments before, but had, as was typical of him, disappeared into the shadows.

“Mr. Blackstone, I—”

“For your disobedience now, I shall take my hand to your backside five times, Miss Blanchet. Part of your training, which we simply must make progress in, is that you must understand the role of your master, and your unquestioned obedience to him. I am your master. Face the wall as I requested and disrobe.”

Lina turned back to the wall and closed her eyes to the assortment of objects for a moment as she reached for the laces of her frock. She fumbled for a moment, and tugged at the laces, but with her shaking hands was unable to loosen the tight knots the maid had formed.

She was nearly sweating when she at last gave up.

“Sir,” she whispered. “I wish to obey you, but I...I can...I cannot...”

She heard Blackstone’s movement as he rose, and she turned her chin subtly to the right to catch a glimpse of him.

“Face the wall,” he growled, and she snapped her eyes back on the wall of devices. She could feel his presence behind her, even though she did not know how close he was. Her skin tingled without him even touching her.

His fingers went first to her neck, brushing lightly over her skin and sending a scandalous current of pleasure down her spine. She knew that her skin had turned to goose-flesh and hoped that he did not see it.

He tugged, first pulling hard on the ribbing of the dress so that it squeezed her tightly, before tugging at the laces to loosen the corset.

His fingers brushed over her shoulders, making her tremble, and he slid the dress from them with a soft caress over her skin.

The material slipped down her arms, and then her waist, and her hands flew instinctively to cover herself.

His arms encircled her suddenly, rock-solid and warm through his shirt. She could feel his muscles flex with their coiled strength against her forearms as he encircled her wrists and pulled at her arms, peeling away her futile act of modesty. “You shall keep your arms at your sides, or wherever I command you to place them,” he breathed.

His breath was hot against her neck, right where his fingers had touched. Her eyes felt very heavy, and they closed slowly as she exhaled sharply, trying to contain the sensations bubbling inside her body. He enclosed her wrists, behind her back, with the wiry strength of only one hand, and she could feel that resistance against him would have been as futile as resisting iron chains.

Yet, the primary feeling that moved inside of her was not the one she expected. Even worse, it was a feeling that was decidedly *improper*. The cool air against her bare breasts was exhilarating, and she could see, with a glance down, that the ache in her nipples must have come from the peculiar change in them: they had hardened into tight knots that were longing, as if they were a separate part of her mind and body, to feel Mr. Blackstone’s fingers brush over them as his breath had done to her neck.

A whimper nearly escaped her throat, but she doused it the best that she could. Still, Mr. Blackstone reacted to the soft sound that hummed in her throat, by squeezing her wrists more tightly, and tugging them down so that she had no choice but to arch her back and tip her neck slightly, thrusting her nipples up even more immodestly.

“I have not begun, Miss Blanchet,” he growled, next to her ear, and her body gave a shudder that was not at all unpleasant.

In an instant, however, she was being turned around, Mr. Blackstone staying behind her with her

hands in his fierce grip. Once she faced away from the wall, she could see the rest of the room, largely occupied by a low, leather-upholstered piece of furniture that looked very much like a bed, with four tall posters at each corner. But where a mattress and bedding might have been, there was only the fine leather upholstery.

Ominously, from each of the four posters hung chains with leather cuffs at the ends.

Her mouth opened and a very small gasp escaped her. Perhaps she might have said something at that moment, if only she had been able to think of what to say. Mr. Blackstone pushed her forward, and so she stepped out of the crumpled dress as she moved with his will, until her thighs were against the cool leather of the bed.

“Bend over the bed and place your hands on either side of your head. I will administer your discipline before we begin, so perhaps you may consider giving greater weight to my instructions as we proceed.”

His fingers released her wrists, and they slid limply to her waist as she stared at the mattress. The implications of the bed fluttered about in her mind: a bed was a place where men and women did the very naughty things that only married men and women did, and while no one had ever spoken of such naughtiness, she was certain that she knew something of what was to take place.

Or at least that it was very, very forbidden.

“I—” she began but cut herself off.

She had no choice, she remembered. If she disobeyed Mr. Blackstone, she would only feel more of his unrelenting punishment on the still-burning skin of her bottom, and perhaps worse.

But bending over seemed *obscene*.

Surely it was?

The thought of such obscenity, of her naked body on full display for Mr. Blackstone as she bent at the waist and obeyed him, again caused the finger of pleasurable humiliation to snake through her naughtiest places. Deep and low in her belly, almost to—*that place*—an ache, much like the craving to be touched that still held her nipples in tight balls, cried out and pulsed as if an animal lived inside of her.

It only grew as she placed her hands on the bed, obeying, and the cool leather grazed her nipples. Her breath was coming in ragged, shallow gulps, and Mr. Blackstone did nothing for several moments, only intensifying her fear, pleasure—and though she was loathe to admit it to herself—her curiosity.

She jumped when his fingers touched her ear and then raked through her hair, pulling her face to one side. Gently, he applied pressure to her head until her cheek was against the leather. Propped this way, her bare chest and head were against the mattress, but her bottom was elevated slightly.

The warm liquid that had welled up between her legs the night before was returning. She could feel it as she shifted her weight, making her thighs slippery, and the place between them even slipperier. She could not understand why this happened, and her cheeks burned with humiliation. What might Mr.

Blackstone think?

She waited, her stomach coiling into knots, in the silence that followed. It seemed eternally long, though she knew it was not. It was long enough for her to think of the sensation of his hand smacking against the skin of her bottom, and with that thought, for a feverish shiver to travel through her.

She could not help the gasp that escaped her when the next unexpected sensation reached her mind: a tickling, slightly rough, limp *something*, like a many-fingered animal, or the tassels of a pillow, grazed her backside. It moved over the lowest part of her back, tickling, from side to side, several times. She strained her eyes to see what it was without disobeying Mr. Blackstone, but this only caused her a headache, and she could see only that he was behind her, dangling something over her bottom.

The something, then, dipped *between* her legs, where its many limp fingers slid through the strange wetness there, and some of them grazed her most intimate places, places that screamed to be touched, all while her mind told her how very naughty it was to even think about those places. The fingers traveled up, between her buttocks, across her other hole, and she squeezed her eyes closed against the pleasure and the humiliation.

“I am going to whip you soundly with this device, Miss Blanchet, to discipline you for your disobedience earlier. When you feel the pain of each stroke, you are to meditate deeply upon your disobedience, and the pleasure it gives you to be punished. You will then thank me for your discipline and beg me to give you another.”

As he spoke, the “device” made circles over her skin, driving her insides to wild convulsions she did not understand. “You will practice the words and actions of submission, and also the thoughts, until such time as they become your reality. We begin.”

The heat of the strap, and its many, many fingers, flashed over her right buttock not a breath after this utterance, and so quite unexpectedly. She cried out, more in surprise than in pain; for while it stung, and radiated in many directions, biting into her flesh in smaller and more concentrated strips than the flogger had, the pain was secondary to something else inside of her. The naughty feeling roared between her legs.

She exhaled all of the air in her chest and stared at her hand. As the wave of heat rolled across her skin, she forgot all else, including Mr. Blackstone’s instructions.

“Miss Blanchet.”

“Sir,” she said quickly. “I... I... I... I have quite forgotten what...wh...wh...what I am to do...” she stuttered.

The pain preceded the sound of the strap, that of limp noodles slapped on a table, this time across her other buttock. “You are to do nothing. You are to think of the pleasure of your discipline, and the pleasure of your submission. And then, you are to thank me, and beg me to give you more of it.”

She could not suffocate the whimper that trembled in her voice as she scrambled to speak: “Thank you, sir. Th...tha...thank you. I... I... ask that you... discipline me again.”

The very pronouncement of the words struck her almost as forcefully as the next strap across her bottom. The ache in her knotted stomach spread to her chest. “Thank you, sir... m...master... I... please, will you discipline me again...” she said in a hoarse whisper.

Tears overflowed in her already wet eyes as Mr. Blackstone whipped her again, and her voice was a whisper as she begged him again for more. Her skin was burning now, like it had the night before, and the wetness from between her thighs was making its way, in a cooling trickle, down her left leg.

That was five, and as she whispered her gratefulness, she wondered if she should ask him for more: did he intend to ever stop, or would he flog her all morning until she could not walk?

But her lips formed the words as he had instructed her, for she knew that it was not her place to tell him that he had numbered her whipping at five, no more.

Instead of another smack of the whip, however, he placed a hand on her bottom, pressing the sharp heat deeper into her skin. “I suspect you will require a great deal more discipline, Miss Blanchet,” he said. “And we have much to accomplish today. Now,” his voice was slightly more distant, and she realized that he was returning to the wall of objects. “Leave your hands and your head as they are and place your knees on the edge of the bed.”

Lina tried to look back at him and was grateful that he was turned away and did not see her. “Sss...sir...?”

“Do as I say, Miss Blanchet. Lift one knee to the edge of the bed, and then the other. You are correct if you have concluded that this will place you in a most submissive, sexual position. But it is not your place to wonder, only to obey. It is I who mandates.”

Lina could scarcely believe her ears, but she slowly placed a knee on the edge of the bed, which forced her to push her bottom up into the air.

“Very good, Miss Blanchet. I am very pleased. Now the other leg. But you will part your legs wide, so that I may have access to your cunny and your bottom.”

It was far too much for Lina, who put her lifted leg down on the ground again. She remained with her face to the mattress but pulled her legs together closely. “Mr. Blackstone, sir, please,” she said. “I... I... I cannot—”

“You can, Miss Blanchet, and you will. You will lift your bottom, and spread your legs, and I shall have access to your cunny to do with as I see fit. You shall be trained to obey and submit to the will of your master. You have earned ten lashes with this display, and should you continue to disobey me, you shall find that there are other ways to punish disobedient girls. Now. Place your knees on the bed or you shall find out what they are.”

Lina obeyed, clumsily, and her face burned again as she pictured herself, what she must look like, her bottom thrust into the air and her legs apart as she had been told time and again to never, ever do.

Another long pause preceded Mr. Blackstone’s next step in her education, and it was more torturous than the previous one, for she had no idea what to expect next, or any way of imagining what it might be.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, and pushed herself up a few inches in surprise when she felt something cool against her wet *place*, what had he called it? “Cunny?” Was that the name for this part, a part that she knew only as “womanhood,” if this was in fact what it was?

And why, she wondered, did it feel so... so... strange? Almost good, even though it was so wrong. His fingers dipped into her wetness, and stroked the layers of her “cunny,” and then, unexpectedly, she jumped again, her whole body giving a jolt, as he touched upon something in the center of those folds that shook her like a small ball of lightning.

She exhaled sharply, and he did it again.

His fingers moved all over those secret, untouched places. When he circled her other hole, the one decidedly for her bottom, she gasped again and was shocked that the touch of his fingers was almost... pleasurable.

“When you become a mistress to my associate, Miss Blanchet, you will be expected to offer him the pleasures of your cunny, your bottom, and your mouth, whenever he demands them, for you are a servant to your master in all ways. You will submit to him and allow him to take his pleasure as he requires. He has requested that I give to him a trained girl, one who knows how to submit to him properly and accept his cock inside of her without modesty, with obedience and submission.”

Inside of her?

Cock?

Lina’s mind spun wildly, and although she could not be sure what any of these words meant, she suspected that she knew where this “cock” would be placed: in the very throbbing center of her, those places that cried out for his touch as much as she desired to hide them away.

His fingers were gone, and another whimper gurgled in her throat. His fingers grasped her right wrist next, just as his body brushed against the inside of her thigh. With a gentleness that contrasted with the force with which he was handling her before, he pulled her arm up to her back, and repeated this gesture somberly with her left hand. She knew, when she felt them, that the straps wrapping around her wrists were the same kind that she had seen dangling from the four posters of the bed.

When his fingers released her wrists, they dropped until they pulled against a countervailing force from above, and she realized that her hands were strapped to something hanging above her.

“In time you will learn to restrain yourself if your master requests that you do so. You shall be expected to remain motionless if this is what is asked of you, or to move as is required by your master. But sometimes you shall be tied down so that you understand your master’s power over you, so that you are humbled, and he may do with you as he pleases.”

As he said this, she felt him wrapping thick straps around her ankles, the force of them pulling down and to the sides. In combination with the arms restraints, she was paralyzed, spread apart with her bottom in the air, for Mr. Blackstone to do with as he pleased.

“Sir,” she panted, as the realization that he could do whatever he liked to her spilled over her.

“Miss Blanchet, I believe I mentioned to you that you will not speak unless I request that you do so, did I not?”

She sniffled and pondered whether or not to respond. “Sir, yes,” she said after a pause, “But sir, I m...m...must insist, I am not...this is most improper, I...I...”

Something cold, like polished stone, touched her in the very center of her anus, cutting her off mid-sentence with the shock of it. Her hole squeezed and pulsed as the object, with a sweetly agonizing ache, pushed a little bit inside of her.

“Oh, sir, Mr. Blackstone, sir,” she breathed. “It’s not... it is... most...”

“Miss Blanchet, it is most *improper* to gallivant about with a young man a fortnight before your own wedding. Surely, this is not so very improper as what you have already done.”

Lina opened her mouth wide at that moment to protest most strenuously, for while she was certain it would make very little difference to Mr. Blackstone, she was indignant at the suggestion, yet again, that she had done anything improper at all with Mr. Carrington.

“Si—” she began, but Blackstone was already near her mouth with a leather ball of some sort, and he popped it between her lips, pushing her jaw open, at the moment she chose to speak so brazenly. He tapped it in gently, over her protestations, until her jaw ached, as it was spread open so wide. The ball had straps sewn into it as well, and he tied these around her head so that try as she might to expel the ball, it remained in her mouth, stretching her jaw open a bit uncomfortably, and her words were muffled by it so that she knew they just echoed in her own skull and came to Blackstone as snuffed moans.

And then, the cool, hard object kissing her anus pressed in further, making her howl into her gag. A sharp pain made her yelp. She went stiff and silent, as the cold, long object slowly, slowly, pushed inside of her deeper. Slowly, inch after inch of cool smoothness sinking deep into her body, the cool ivory warmed after a few moments, until the only thing she could feel was the rock-hard fullness of it in her bottom.

Her eyes were wide, and she screamed into the gag, but even more strangely, she found her body craving the object inside of her. She wanted it even deeper, touching even more intimate places. Places inside of her that ached in ways she never could have understood were touched for the first time and awakened, and while the bright red of her cheeks revealed her humiliation, the damnable wetness between her legs served only to tell of the truth within her body.

Mr. Blackstone pushed and pushed, ever-so-slowly pressing the hardness into her deeper. Each inch that filled her made her legs tremble more violently, as the cacophony of sensations crashed together inside of her. The object seemed to get wider, stretching her open, making her eyes water, and then, suddenly, it plunged into her as though sucked inside. A lip seemed to plunge inside of her, and the object was narrow again. It seemed that it was secured inside of her by the lip of the object, which pressed against her anus from within.

It became apparent to her that still protruding from her bottom-hole was some part of the object, perhaps a handle or bauble of some kind. She recognized its presence when Blackstone began to push

it, slowly and gently, in small circles, which caused the long piece inside of her to press against her insides in opposite directions, stirring to life an ache like the one in her cunny in... that place.

“I intend to fuck you in your bottom-hole, Miss Blanchet, but first you must learn to accommodate the size of a man’s cock. And learn to crave it, obediently and submissively, so that when your master chooses to pleasure himself in this way, you will open to him and accept his attention willingly.”

Lina could do nothing but breathe heavily from her nostrils, and open her eyes wide, as a moan came from her throat without her being able to contain it.

“You will leave this object inside of your bottom-hole until such time as I remove it. Do you understand, Miss Blanchet? Nod in assent if you do.”

She did understand, and so she nodded.

His fingers went, suddenly and unexpectedly, to her wet cunny, and her eyes went wide as he slipped one inside of her, penetrating yet another intimate and forbidden place. One of his fingers brushed over the nub she had touched in the bath the night before, but as he did so, he pressed against its root from the inside.

Her whole body jerked violently against the restraints.

She heard Blackstone breathe behind her as his fingers played with her for a few moments, making her jerk violently, and then pausing in his attentions as her body shivered and cried out for another stroke from him. The pressure of the ache seemed to build, always rising, never abating, and all she could think of was that she wanted more.

“You have a very tight cunny, Miss Blanchet. So very soft, and hot.” He stroked the flesh against which the object in her bottom-hole pressed, and Lina felt as though she might faint. “I will enjoy teaching you to use it prop...erly.”

Was it her imagination, or had Mr. Blackstone’s voice suddenly changed, had he stumbled over what he was saying? His fingers clawed toward her hardened nub, from inside and out, and she screamed uncontrollably into the ball as another wave of terrifying pleasure overtook her.

His finger began to slide in and out of her cunny, and then he added a second one, which stretched her open with a sharp pain that slowly subsided. She was beginning to quiver everywhere: she could feel her cunny quivering, her bottom-hole spasming around the hard object inside of it, her legs trembling and her toes curling. Moans were escaping her throat, pouring into the gag, and she was no longer in control of herself.

The excruciating pleasure continued to intensify, always increasing, somehow giving her a promise of relief, but never delivering it.

Just as she reached an excruciating new high, his fingers slowed, and she whimpered.

She felt his body close to hers, as he leaned over her restrained body, the fingers of his free hand making lazy and arousing circles on her burning bottom. “Have you ever spent before, Miss Blanchet?”

Lina sobbed into the gag and let her head hang. She did not know. She only knew that she could not endure this torture, surely there must be something that would relieve it. She desperately wanted him to continue stroking her, stroking that place, though she wondered if she would only ever reach a higher plane and never ever be relieved of this ache.

“I am going to make you spend, Lina, so that you may know what it means.”

His fingers began to stroke her anew, quickly now, and the painful, thrilling crescendo continued. Lina lost control of her body and herself, and then, violently, it was as if her entire body hit a wall, but a wall of satisfaction, all at once, and she screamed and shuddered as the most pleasurable and frightening sensation she had ever felt took over her entire body.

She was unaware of time, of how long her body shuddered until it was weak and limp. During this time she could only feel the wild depletion of the fire that had been building inside of her, and then the reduction of herself to something exactly as he had described it, with that odd word: she was spent. A blur of multi-colored stars encroached on the edges of her vision, behind her tightly closed eyelids, until the feeling ebbed away.

When she at last returned to the moment, and became aware of where she was: restrained, in that humiliating position, on a bed of leather, she became aware that perhaps much time had passed. She did not know where Mr. Blackstone was. Her breath was heavy and rough, and when she opened her eyes, she could see only the dimly-lit room in front of her.

A whimper left her throat, and when it did, she realized that it was almost a plea, a desire to know where he was... strangely, though she could scarcely believe it herself, it was a desire to feel his hands again on her body.

When at last he touched her, he placed a warm hand gently on her burning backside. The burn of his touch against her sore skin grounded her, and she responded by pushing toward him, like a plant leaning toward the sunlight. He used his thumb to make another long, circular movement with the object in her bottom, and the gentle soreness that pressed on every intimate part of her from within reignited the cravings he had so easily dispensed of just moments before.

She sobbed again, but it was not a cry of displeasure, rather of longing, because she had come to understand something of what he planned to do to her even before he said, quietly and firmly:

“You are never to spend, or make yourself spend, unless you are explicitly commanded to do so by me, Miss Blanchet.” When he leaned over her body, she felt the heat of his bare skin against her back, and the understanding that he, like her, had removed his clothing, sent another shudder through her body.

He placed a hand gently on her throat, leaving it there long enough for the strength of his hands to sink through her skin and make her aware of their power, before he slid his fingers over her jaw, and in a fluid motion, loosened the strap that held the gag in place and pulled it from her mouth.

“Tell me that you understand me, Miss Blanchet, so that we may proceed with the next phase of your training.”

Lina gulped a few deep breaths, and then, with her face toward the mattress, sweat snaking down her temples, in a voice that was nearly a moan, "I understand, sir."

"Tell me what you understand."

"I... I... will... not..." her mind drew a blank, she could not think of the word he had used. "I will not... do the thing... the... sss..." She let out an exasperated sob.

"You will not spend," he urged her, though there was an unexpected gentleness in his voice. "No matter how much you so desire."

"I will not sp...spend," she repeated. "Sir."

He said nothing, and she heard him move behind her, his footsteps retreating and then returning. She wondered what he had retrieved from the wall of devices, what new and glorious torture awaited her. The fear that had gripped her before was not gone from her chest, but it had subsided and converted into something less monstrous. She could not lie to herself and pretend that she didn't want him to continue to use her body for pleasure, to feel again the same excruciating pleasure she had just felt.

The dim light of the room disappeared as though the lights had gone out, and it took a moment for her to connect this blindness to the heavy, raw silk that had descended over her eyes. Anticipation writhed in her chest as the fabric tightened around her head, and she was enclosed in a vulnerability even deeper than the one she was already subjected to.

"M...Mr. Blackstone?" she whispered, after several moments had passed. Her skin was covered in a fine sheen of sweat, and now she was beginning to feel cold.

The pressure on her wrists changed, and then her hands were free to fall to her back. He took each one in turn in his hands, and placed them on either side of her head again. "Remain as you are," he told her, before loosening the straps that held her ankles.

She did as she was told, her body trembling, every inch of her skin alight with a desire to feel his hand upon her. She was surprised when she felt his fingers beneath her chin next, lifting her head gently, so that she had no choice but to rise to her hands and knees with the guidance of his fingertips.

Once she was propped like an animal on all fours, his hands traveled to her shoulders, brushing over her electrified skin. Involuntarily, she sank toward his touch, leaning into the strength of his hands, not knowing why she might do such a thing. He pushed her up to a seated position, with her legs spread apart, so that her bottom sank between her splayed and folded legs.

His hands traveled down her arms to her wrists again, and he took them in his grip and placed them behind her back, drawing each wrist to one of her ankles, opening her fingers to place them around her ankle and close her fingers there. As he did this, his bare skin touched her, on her thigh, on her hardened nipples, along her ribcage. His skin was hot, and behind the flesh she felt a steely hardness.

"You will hold your ankles like this for your next session, and be a good girl, and not let go, or you shall be punished, Miss Blanchet."

She trembled, her thoughts swirling, racing ahead to wonder what he might do next.

He ran a finger over her lip, making her gasp. “Do you understand, my plaything?”

Plaything.

The word held no connotation for her, she could not recall where she had ever heard it, or if she had. Yet it sent a shiver through her, a slew of barely-formed and filthy thoughts. The seemingly endless liquid that poured from between her legs gushed hotly onto her thigh.

“Y...yes, yes, sir.”

His finger was still on her lip, heavy, pressing down. She tilted her neck with the pressure, not understanding what he might be doing, and he lifted the finger from her flesh to catch her chin and tilt her face upward.

She knew that he must be on the bed now with her, kneeling as she was. The position, with her legs still spread wide, became slightly uncomfortable as he pushed her down on the shoulder while tilting her head slightly up using the finger beneath her chin.

From her chin, his fingers brushed over her cheek, and then meshed into her hair, tightening a grip and pulling slightly so that her mouth fell open in a pained gasp. Without realizing it, she let one hand drop from her ankle to steady herself against the motion, and the fingers in her hair tightened until a tear squeezed from her eye. “Keep your hands on your ankles, Miss Blanchet. You are going to use your mouth now to pleasure me.”

Without knowing what that could mean, she placed her hand quickly back on her ankle.

She sensed that he was very near to her. The heat of his body radiated against her cheek, and some part of him pressed against one of her thighs. The scent of his body was musky, intoxicating her.

Something brushed over her lip, as soft as calfskin, as hot as Mr. Blackstone’s flesh. It was wet, and a liquid smeared over her upper lip.

“Taste it,” Mr. Blackstone said.

She was wildly confused, but obeyed: a salty, bitter liquid unlike anything she had ever tasted made her take in a sharp breath of surprise.

“This is the liquid that will issue from my organ when you pleasure me properly with your body. You must learn to enjoy the taste of it, to savor it, and to swallow it when you are so ordered. These are the first drops of a great quantity. Lick them now.”

The same heavy, soft thing landed on her lower lip, and then tapped against it. It was flesh, she knew, but the contours of it were like no part of the body she recognized. She was so stunned and lost in her thoughts that much time passed and she did not move her tongue, indeed, she barely remembered the command that had been given to her.

“Miss Blanchet, you are being disobedient,” he told her.

“I... I... sir,” she said in a panicked voice. “I know not what... what to... I don’t know... what you want of me!” This final proclamation left her lips with a bit of a cry: she desperately wanted to please Mr.

Blackstone and not be punished, but she could not imagine what he wanted her to do.

“My prick is before you,” he said, his tone approaching one of gentleness. The flesh stroked her lower lip. “Lick it, as you would a pudding on a spoon.” He pulled gently on her hair, tilting her head back.

Lina extended her tongue, and retracted it when she found the smooth round face of Mr. Blackstone’s prick, and then the sharp, salty taste of his essence spread across the blade of her tongue. In the center of the smooth part, which she pictured as a dome, her tongue encountered an indentation, which was so unexpected that it caused her to recoil.

But Mr. Blackstone pulled her toward it. “Lick it, do not be afraid. Move your tongue all over it, for as you do you will pleasure me immensely and I shall be inclined to reward you instead of punishing you.”

Lina moved her tongue over his manhood, exploring the strange contours of this part of his body, wondering what it looked like. She encountered a hard ridge, and when she ran her tongue along it, the whole thing pulsed and bounced, and she was certain that she heard Mr. Blackstone suck his breath in. When she moved back to the strange indentation, she found more of the salty liquid, which seemed to well from inside Mr. Blackstone’s manhood like the wetness that welled up between her own legs.

She licked obediently, wondering about the thing she was licking, for some time. When Mr. Blackstone spoke, his voice seemed to come from lower inside his chest than usual, and waver a little. “Open your mouth, Miss Blanchet. You will take my manhood into your mouth, as much of it as you can. You must learn to take it all inside of your mouth. When... the time comes... I shall train you to do other things... for now, you will take it all into your throat and I shall use your mouth to please myself.”

She hesitated but a moment, which barely mattered, for she felt both of his hands on her head, fingers working to the back of it, cradling her and pushed her forward, while the dome of his manhood entered her mouth. She had no choice but to open for him, as the long and hard flesh, soft and smooth, but strangely bumpy in places, stretched her mouth wider and wider.

“Be a good girl, and open your mouth wide, there, you must take it all.”

The thing slid in, the salty liquid smearing over her tongue and filling her mouth with the taste of his seed. Her jaw began to ache, and more of his flesh continued to fill her mouth, until it even bumped against the back of her throat. She gagged, as she might have from choking, and tried to pull away from the penetrating object, but Mr. Blackstone held her firmly in place.

“I shall train you properly so that you do not choke on a man’s member, even when it is deep inside of your throat.”

She breathed heavily through her nose, her eyes watering, and Mr. Blackstone continued to stuff his manhood into her further. The ache of the object in her bottom began to reassert itself, and oddly, the more he filled her throat with his pulsing muscle, even as she struggled to breathe and her jaw ached, the wetter she became between the legs.

When he reached a place where she was certain she could take no more, he pushed her hair from her face, and then wrapped his fingers around her head again to pull her further toward him. “Take it all, like a good girl,” he breathed, and she strained to open her mouth wider as he pushed himself deeper inside of her.

Her chin met with something soft, and she wondered what it was. Mr. Blackstone gasped. His thighs were now against her shoulders and her chest, and they grazed her nipples, sending a shiver through her. Her eye watered and her mouth was sore, and she did not know what to expect. The flesh in her mouth pulsed and tensed.

“Very good, Miss Blanchet,” Mr. Blackstone said. “Be obedient, and open your mouth wide for me to fuck. When I spend, I will do it in your open mouth, and you will wait until I command you to swallow my liquid.”

He began to draw his manhood in and out of her mouth, his hands holding her head firmly in place. He began slowly, and then began to thrust more rapidly, deeper, smashing against the back of her throat, as she obediently held her ankles and strained to accommodate him with her mouth.

He groaned, and held her by the hair, pulling his member out of her mouth. She heard a sticky, quick, slapping sound, and her sore jaw slowly closed.

“Open your mouth, Miss Blanchet,” he growled, and gave her hair a sharp pull to tilt her head back.

A hot, sticky liquid shot into her throat, then over her tongue. Some of it fell across her face, onto her throat, and then his member was at her lips, the liquid shooting to the roof of her mouth. It was hot, and its bitter taste made her long to swallow it, but Blackstone groaned and reminded her to leave her mouth open.

She obeyed, and at last he released his grip on her hair, instead drawing a finger to her lip and pulling gently on her jaw to open her mouth. He swiped up the liquid that had fallen on her face and throat, and slipped it between her lips. “Suck my essence from my fingers, and swallow it,” he said.

She obeyed, and then he pulled her jaw open gently again.

He moved on the bed, and pushed her head down, until she was forced into his lap, where his fist gripped the now semi-flaccid manhood that he had placed in her mouth. “Now you will lick it clean, Miss Blanchet. Clean it with your tongue, every side of it.”

She let go of her ankle, for the position she was in was difficult to maintain, and Mr. Blackstone swatted her gently on the hand. She strained to pull on her ankles as she licked his member, hoping that she was doing as he wished.

At last, he pulled on her hair and placed her back in a seated position.

Her heart beat wildly, and the ache between her legs had returned. More than the relief he had given her earlier, she craved hearing his approval, for she had tried very hard to please him, though she did not fully understand how to do so.

“That was very good, Miss Blanchet. Very obedient.”

Though she could never have imagined such a scenario before being brought to this room, she was surprised to find that she felt, more than anything, a sense of contentment for having pleased her awful master. Even if she knew that he was strict and sometimes cruel, and not to be her master forever, she could not diminish the flame of pleasure in her chest for having met his expectations.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, her voice shaking.

He had moved again to stand behind her, and with a tug of the fabric, he loosened the knot of silk and the soft fabric fell from her face, caressing her shoulders and breasts as it fell to her lap. Her arms tingled when he passed his fingers over them, from her shoulders to her wrists.

“Very good,” he breathed against the back of her neck, and her heart swelled. He peeled her fingers from her ankles and brought her wrists together in front of her. His body touched her back and sent gooseflesh running in waves over her arms and shoulders.

“Now,” he whispered, “I said that I would reward you, and I shall, but your reward shall also be discipline, for that is what you must have at all times, Miss Blanchet.”

He lifted her arms above her, and wound a strap around them, which he somehow fastened to suspend them above her head.

His body was against her back within moments, his warm breath against her neck. He stroked her from top to bottom, stopping at her aching nipples to squeeze them until she gasped. When he did, it felt as though a cord existed between her breasts and the nub that ached so divinely, and once plucked on either end, the other seemed to ignite with the same pleasure and pain.

He finally turned his attention to the place between her legs where her body ached to be touched, for now that she knew that there was an excruciating, exhilarating end to the building pleasure-pain, she desired to go there again, for him to touch her, and make her spend.

His fingers slipped into the folds of her womanhood, at the same time that he worked a knee beneath her bottom, and pushed her down onto it so that the projection from the object in her bottom moved with his thigh, as he made it go round in slow circles that pressed the ache everywhere inside of her again.

His fingers worked slowly on her nub, rubbing at an infuriatingly slow pace, so that the fire within her only raged, until her head fell back and she was sobbing. It seemed to go on forever, and when she came close to that glorious moment of release, he stopped, making her whimper.

“Please,” she whispered, and when she did, she knew that she had disobeyed him.

His fingers withdrew, snaking along her navel, between her breasts, and to her lips, where he brushed her juices over them, and tapped her lightly on the mouth.

His breath was hot on her ear, and it almost made her cry with desire. “Do you remember what I told you, Miss Blanchet? You shall not make yourself spend, or you will be severely disciplined.”

Lina was consumed by the fire that burned inside of her, and the thought of the time that stretched before her, unknown in its duration, during which she would be required to overcome it without

quenching it, so she said nothing.

Mr. Blackstone's hand swatted her bottom, delivering a burning wave that only made her wetter, her nipples more erect, and the fire within her more ferocious. She knew in that moment that she would be disobedient, that she would be unable to withstand the temptation to relieve herself of her craving. She also knew that, somehow, Mr. Blackstone would discover that truth.

"I must insist that you respond to me, Miss Blanchet, so that I may know you have understood."

Lina breathed her answer, and it caressed her from the inside out as she said it:

"Yes...s...sir..."

"Yes, sir, what?"

"I will not make myself... ss... spend," she murmured. And then she added, because saying it sent a delight through her body almost equal to his touch: "Or I will be severely disciplined."

Mr. Blackstone said nothing for several moments. The straps holding her hands loosened, and she fell to her hands and knees with the unexpected release.

"Dress. Dr. Doyle will collect you to take in your next lesson."

The mention of Dr. Doyle, as unexpected as nearly everything Mr. Blackstone had done, made Lina's blood run cold for a moment, and she was paralyzed by the surprise. She turned her head sharply as soon as she regained her powers of movement, her mouth open to ask about Dr. Doyle, and she was grateful that Mr. Blackstone had already turned toward the door of his strange room, and therefore could not see her. If he heard her sharp intake of breath, he made no sign of having done so, and Lina was able to bite her lip to silence herself.

Dr. Doyle?

Dr. Doyle?

She scrambled to her feet and looked for her frock on the floor where it had fallen, and found it instead hung on a hook next to the wall of curious objects. For a moment, her eyes could not be torn from them: the ache between her legs swelled and began to roar at such a volume that she could scarcely bear it.

She did not know what the objects were for—save the straps, of which there were an astonishing variety. As she gazed at the contours of the handles, the variety of straps attached to them—some thick, some narrow, some studded with metal—her bottom seemed to turn to fire where the strap had touched her flesh. Rather than making her wince with the memory of the pain, the heat sank into her body, to where this curious *something* was burning between her legs.

She removed the dress from the hook, and then cast an eye about the chamber.

It would require so little, so very little, to send her over the edge and relieve that need between her legs. She was sure that she knew just where, and how, to touch herself, and that it could be done in a matter of seconds.

She hesitated, shivered, and pulled the frock over her head, reaching behind herself to attempt to tie up the complicated stitching.

Footsteps on the stone floor alerted her to the presence of Dr. Doyle, and she knew it was him and not Mr. Blackstone, because the latter moved without sound. She turned briefly to confirm her suspicion, and when she saw Dr. Doyle, her cheeks flushed and she faced the wall.

An image of herself flashed through her head: her hair, damp with sweat, loose about her shoulders. Her dress, half-open at the back, and her composure so obviously... what was the word Mrs. Tilton would have used? *Lurid*. She looked, she knew, like one of the prostitutes that had worked just blocks from their apartment building in Paris.

“Mmmm, Mister Doyle,” she said, barely above a whisper. Her hands still floundered with her dress, and she was sure that her legs were shaking, and hoped he did not notice. “I cannot...” her voice trailed off, and she was unable to even think of the words to explain her predicament.

Dr. Doyle had moved across the room to stand behind her. “Allow me,” he said.

His fingers traveled over her back, lacing the dress together with almost as much expertise as a woman might have, except that he did it with a rough, masculine force that nearly took her breath away.

“Is it too tight?” Dr. Doyle asked, leaning quite close to her, his hands still upon the laces.

“Nnnn...no,” she said.

And then there was a long and terrible pause, during which Dr. Doyle did not speak, and Lina continued to stare at the wall, uncertain as to what she must do. At last, despairing, she turned to face him.

Though the light was dim in the room, she could see Dr. Doyle’s face much better. He had a square jaw, shaved cleanly, and a mouth that seemed, even at rest, to be smiling somewhat, in such a way that it almost comforted her in spite of all that had happened and the looming promise of Dr. Doyle’s “training.” His gray eyes hovered over a pleasant mouth, and he was, she realized with a pang, very dashing. His presence, while less terrifying than that of the mysterious and ever-enshrouded Mr. Blackstone, was still formidable in some way, and it, too, plucked at the string in her center. She lowered her gaze, unsure of what to do.

Dr. Doyle offered her his arm, making her step back slightly. With surprise, she took it, and Dr. Doyle guided her toward the doorway, but turned in a different direction upon reaching the landing. Through his suit she could feel the surprising strength of his arm, steely like Mr. Blackstone’s, though not quite as massive. She followed at pace behind him, her stomach coiled again with anticipation, the desire still ebbing inside of her like a tide.

Dr. Doyle followed the dark hallway a great distance. It was lit by the same gas lamps, and they traveled for such a long time that she was able to contemplate her fate when they arrived at wherever he was taking her. Would she be trained in another room like the one before, or something very different? Would Dr. Doyle touch her as Mr. Blackstone had? The thought made her recoil

intellectually, and yet her heart beat quickly with what she knew to be wicked desire. As she followed him, she was surprised to realize that she almost hoped she *would* be subjected to the very same training by Dr. Doyle, and was just at the point of wondering if she could get him to make her spend without breaking her promise of obedience to Mr. Blackstone, when Dr. Doyle opened the door and led her into a very sunny, well-lit room, in the center of which there was nothing more than a piano.

They crossed the room and entered a conservatory, where refreshments were set for two.

At the entrance, she stopped, her mouth agape. She gave a frantic look to Dr. Doyle, who had turned to face her when her arm slid from inside of his crooked elbow, for she had stopped so abruptly at the door and he had carried on.

He smiled warmly. "Miss Blanchet," he said quietly, gesturing at the table. "I am responsible for a training of an entirely different kind." He stepped toward her, and put his fingers on her bare chest, running the tips along the collar of the dress. Lina flushed but remained stone-still, unsure of what her reaction should properly be, and stunned that Dr. Doyle's fingers ignited the same pulsing need inside of her as Mr. Blackstone did. "As long as you are not disobedient," he said, gently. "Otherwise, I too, will be required to punish you."

"What... what... must I do?" she asked desperately.

Dr. Doyle smiled, stepping back to again gesture at the table. "For now, you are to sit, Miss Blanchet, and take refreshments, with proper etiquette."

Lina looked at him, somewhat confused, and he gave her a look in return that seemed to have something mischievous behind it. He pulled her chair out for her, and she sat, confused for only a moment.

Once seated, the mischief in his eyes was perhaps explained, for the tender flesh of her much-strapped bottom was roughly scratched by the material of the dress, and the knob protruding from her bottom was pushed around by her every moment, intensifying the ache inside of her. These two sensations had the effect of making the screaming need of her womanhood reawaken.

She was unable to avoid the crimson stain that crept across her face, and the small shake of her hand as she rested it on the table. She shifted in her seat, several times, trying to find a way to settle herself so that the object did not touch some part of her that craved release. Unable to find such a position, she stiffened her back to affect good posture, and pinched her lips together to lift her head and look at Dr. Doyle bravely.

"You aren't shifting about like that to make yourself spend, Miss Blanchet, I hope," he said. "One part of my training is to ensure that you do not."

She was so taken aback by this statement that she said nothing, and her mouth went slack for a moment before she even realized it. She could feel the color creeping across her cheeks.

"The other," Dr. Doyle said, drawing his fingers over her cheek, "is to cure you of the modesty that has been so imparted upon you, for while it might be considered appealing in proper society, the

Moulay requires a girl who does not blush at his every whim.”

“*Sir,*” Lina said sharply, before thinking. The admonishment escaped her without her thinking of it first, for it was the sort of thing she was supposed to say if conversation should turn unsuitable for the presence of ladies, and while she was uncertain of much, there was a deeply embedded fiber of morality inside of her that made such a reaction second nature.

Dr. Doyle poured her some tea, smiling. He then poured some for himself. “Naturally, Miss Blanchet, you have been instructed by your guardians in the proper behavior of a lady in society—that is, the society to which your guardians pertain, and the society to which a great number of men and women pertain outwardly. But there is behavior for when one is seen in such society, and behavior when one is behind closed doors. Surely, after your escapade with Mr. Carrington, you are aware that the two are distinct.”

Lina momentarily forgot the absurdity of the situation, the ache between her legs, the fact that she was seated upon a plug inserted into her bottom by a man who had strapped her and made her crave him doing so again—and the vestiges of her modesty and stubbornness rose to the forefront of her mind.

“I did nothing improper with Mr. Carrington, Dr. Doyle,” she hissed. For good measure, she jutted her chin, which made her whole body move and subsequently brought the object inside of her back to the forefront of her mind, making her lip tremble slightly.

Dr. Doyle regarded her seriously for a moment, head tipped to the side. He seemed to be thinking of something, and then seemed to clear it from his head with a swift shake that sent some of his dark blond locks tumbling.

“Mr. Blackstone reports to me that you have been most cooperative with his training thus far. Most... able.”

Lina blushed, struck dumb yet again.

“My training, I’m afraid, will be much more difficult, Miss Blanchet,” he went on to explain. “For I am going to assess your level of arousal, and train you to bring it about upon command, but I have been instructed by Mr. Blackstone to leave you unsatisfied throughout the day, so that we may assess your obedience.”

Lina sucked in her breath, her mouth agape again, her lower lip trembling like her thighs. The hot rush of pleasurable pain between her legs was almost unbearable, and she knew it was also humiliating, for she could feel the bright red as it crept across her cheeks. The back of her neck grew hot.

“Remember, Miss Blanchet: you have no choice in the matter. You will submit to your desires and your nature, which is to submit to your masters. When you do this, freely and without shame except for the shame your master wishes you to feel, you will become quite content.”

Blood pounded in her ears, and rushed outward to every ending of her nerves and her skin.

“For now, Miss Blanchet, you will take refreshment,” Dr. Doyle told her, serving a scone to her from the heaped tray.

They walked through the gardens following refreshment, Lina on Dr. Doyle's arm. As she walked, the object in her bottom moved and stimulated her in those deep, foreign, naughty places, and sometimes the pleasure of the obscene torture was so great that she felt like crying out. Her face went quite red, she was sure, with the effort of maintaining her composure, while Dr. Doyle walked her around and around in circles, saying nothing at first.

At last, he paused by a bench, and turned to her, studying her face with his keen eyes. "You look quite unwell, Miss Blanchet, how are you feeling?"

She shook her head, and diverted her eyes to the pond. "I am quite... well, Dr. Doyle. Thank you."

She thought she could see a smile form on his lips, but she kept her eyes on the pond.

"You do not wish to rest, Miss Blanchet? Perhaps the device Mr. Blackstone has placed in your bottom is making you uncomfortable?"

She could feel the rush of blood to her face. Her lips barely moved as she shook her head quickly. "It is not," she said, barely a whisper.

"Do you wish to continue walking, then, Miss Blanchet? Or shall we continue in my private surgery?"

Lina thought on the question a moment, and she had many, many questions about what might take place in his surgery that would not take place out here in the open. She was uncertain which fate might be better, or worse, and for a moment she despaired.

"As you wish, Dr. Doyle, sir," she said, in a sudden flash of inspiration.

Doyle placed a hand over hers and patted it gently. He leaned quite close to her ear, so that she could feel his breath, and smell the scent of tobacco and his masculinity, making another wave of goose-flesh travel over her neck, though it was quite different than the one delivered by Mr. Blackstone's arousing menace. "That is a very good answer, Miss Blanchet. Very obedient. All you must do to make it perfect, is to address me as master."

Lina's brow furrowed in slight confusion. "Are you my master, Dr. Doyle? I...I... th...thought...?"

"I am."

His voice was quite firm, even if it seemed warmer than Mr. Blackstone's.

"Say it again, and as you do, Miss Blanchet, enjoy the sensation of submission that it gives you. Even to speak of your submission to the will of your master will arouse you, once I have trained you. Try it now."

A flutter of mixed emotions scrambled in Lina's chest. Dr. Doyle could not know that this arousal he spoke of had already been attained, that Lina could not believe her body and the way it betrayed her. But—she steeled herself—she would not let that betrayal come from her mind. She would not allow herself to be aroused by the words of submission. That was too far, too... too what?

She would not do it. She would retain her will, and escape.

Her lips trembled and she said nothing, as Dr. Doyle watched her with interest.

“You know that you will be disciplined if you are disobedient, Miss Blanchet?” he asked her at last.

Another cool finger of arousal wriggled inside of her lower abdomen, and she bit her lip. Her bottom burned again with the ghost of Mr. Blackstone’s hand, the tendrils of the leather strap he had used on her. Her breath had quickened, and she knew she could not hide it from Dr. Doyle.

Disciplined.

She was at a loss: in some ways, she craved Dr. Doyle’s discipline. In others, she longed to feel the sinking, stabbing, cold-burning “thing” that wormed inside of her, that she knew she would feel if she said the words he wanted to hear. Beneath all of these feelings simmered the fearsome prospect of Dr. Doyle’s unknown methods: how *would* he discipline her? Or would he turn her over to Mr. Blackstone for that?

She chewed her lip for a moment. Dr. Doyle waited; there seemed no way of escaping the choice. Her silence would be submission to discipline, her words submission to his will. Either one, she knew, was something she craved, as much as she did not want to.

“Discipline it is, then, Miss Blanchet,” he said, almost tenderly. He drew his finger over her cheek. “I am not certain you have chosen as wisely as you might believe.”

* * *

Dr. Doyle’s surgery was much different than the room Mr. Blackstone had taken her to, though he led her to it through a maze of corridors and passages much like those taken to exit Mr. Blackstone’s room. Lina despaired as he led through the twists and turns of the immense estate. While her body might be betraying her, she was determined in some part of her mind to keep her plans for escape alive, as an option. She was at moments quite uncertain of the idea, and then, at others, it would rise up inside of her.

The room had a stunning white marble floor, better suited to a grand entranceway of some of the museums and government buildings Ms. Tilton had pointed out to the girls when they were in London. Light entered through a glass window of expensive appearance, made of interlocking stained and frosted glass pieces that formed a garden scene, most of it light gray and white to allow the sunlight into the room while maintaining the atmosphere of privacy.

Inside the room there was another bed, this one smaller and without posters, and Lina recognized it, though she could not say why, as a sort of medical examination table.

Dr. Doyle shut the door behind him after guiding Lina into the room, but unlike Mr. Blackstone, he did not order her about gruffly.

He also did not avoid the light in the same way as his friend and confidant. A wild curiosity about the two men itched inside of her, but she guarded her words for the time being. Dr. Doyle did seem more likely to answer her questions, and she feared him less—somehow his demeanor was more warm.

When he sent a chill through Lina, it was not as deep or frightening as Mr. Blackstone's.

Dr. Doyle opened a large cupboard on the far side of the room as Lina waited, hands clasped, heart stirring with anticipation and nervousness.

"I had so hoped to attend to your training, Miss Blanchet, but you leave me no choice but to discipline you instead." The cupboard was open, and a variety of mostly metal implements, organized neatly, stared ominously at Lina from the inside. The precise nature of these objects was naturally a mystery to her, but like the implements in Mr. Blackstone's room, she sensed the general purpose of them, and her lower abdomen again turned to molten liquid, the snake of arousal slithering through her body.

Dr. Doyle selected a curious object, a round ball about the size of a crabapple, made of metal, attached to a very long metal arm which looked a bit like a shoehorn. Lina's eyes went wide, for she could not imagine a use for such an item, except perhaps to beat someone about the head. She did not imagine that Dr. Doyle would do such a thing, or even Mr. Blackstone, for while the two men were certainly doing depraved things to her, she sensed somehow that they would not actually harm her.

"Do you know what this is, Miss Blanchet?"

She shook her head quickly. "I do not, sir."

"Master," he corrected, though a smile flickered at the corner of his mouth indicating that he not only knew she would not relent to him, but furthermore that he did not really want her to. Dr. Doyle, she could see, was desirous to discipline her, and she could not suppress the part of her, clawing at her chest, that very much wanted him to as well.

Doyle stroked the ball sensually. "You shall," he said.

A shiver traveled along Lina's spine. "Disrobe," he said to her.

Lina's eyes fell to the floor again, and a different kind of flush traveled over her cheeks.

She reached behind her to loosen the laces of the dress, though she knew she could not do it. "I cannot..." she said helplessly.

Doyle walked around her, the curious implement at his side like a riding crop. He tugged at the laces and the dress loosened around her, but unlike Mr. Blackstone he did not slip it from her shoulders. She stared at the cool marble floor as she pulled the dress down herself.

Doyle had come around her again and was facing her. She felt as though she could feel the touch of his sight upon her body, and her arms moved instinctively to cover herself.

Before she got the chance, however, Dr. Doyle commanded her to turn around.

Shaking, she obeyed, hands in front of her chest. It was chilly in the room and gooseflesh washed over her arms, though she was not entirely sure it was only from the cold.

"Bend over," Doyle commanded her.

Her eyes moving from side to side as if the answer to all of her burning questions could be found in

the air, hesitantly, Lina put her hands in front of her and leaned forward. The object in her bottom pushed against a new part of her body, and she exhaled at the overwhelming sensation.

“You have been quite the naughty girl,” Dr. Doyle commented. His hand was upon the skin of her rump as he made this declaration, reheating her skin, making the memory of the sting of Mr. Blackstone’s discipline rise to the surface of her skin, where it throbbed sharply. She could almost hear the crack of his cane in her ears, and a shudder gripped her.

Doyle’s fingers, like Mr. Blackstone’s, traveled to places she knew were forbidden, places she was not even supposed to touch. But they flitted over those parts and aroused her again, sliding into her slippery folds, and fluttering over the button at the center of it all that made her whole body jerk uncontrollably.

“The implement I hold in my hand is for discipline,” Doyle said quietly.

This alarmed Lina, and she looked back at him, taking in a sharp breath. “You are not... you will not cane me with it?” Lina said, panicked. She pressed herself up from the bent-over position she was in, but Doyle placed a hand on the small of her back and immobilized her.

“No real harm shall ever come to you when you are disciplined, Miss Blanchet. A true master must use discipline to correct, to punish, but not to harm. No, this is not an object for striking you. You may even grow to enjoy this discipline.”

She felt a wave of her juices well up and warmly rush between her legs. Her skin was hot with humiliation again. This wetness seemed to come whenever the two men disciplined her, or even spoke of discipline, and it was accompanied by a most pleasurable feeling inside of her. She wondered if they knew that the two were connected, and therefore, that they could also read her mind in a way.

The object in her bottom cut her train of thought short, for it was sliding from inside of her, roughly massaging her inner flesh as it was tugged along, leaving her empty as it did. She was surprised to be slightly distressed when it was at last gone, her insides throbbing in what seemed like a plea to have it returned. Her mouth was open again; she was strangely close to requesting that Dr. Doyle place it back inside of her.

But before she could even turn her head, before she could begin to beg, she felt something quite cold at the sore entrance to her bottom. She struggled to imagine what it was for a moment: it was so cold, and so smooth, and so much larger than—

“Oh!” she exclaimed, as it was suddenly pushing *inward*, but because it was ever-so-slightly thicker at its circumference than the object that had already penetrated her, she felt the searing stretch again, and it made her gasp. Her eyes watered, and the pain was just reaching a level that would make her cry out, when it peaked, and then, the object was simply inside of her. It twisted, and then the cool metal of the handle she had seen was laid against her back along her spine.

For a moment, Lina’s mouth was open in a curious “o,” for she could not fathom what the object might be for if it was some kind of discipline. Now that it was inside of her, she was almost relieved, for some of the fullness that had been taken from her had returned.

She heard the rattle of a piece of furniture as it slid across the floor and turned toward the sound to see Dr. Doyle scooting a footstool, covered in a fine blue fabric, toward her. He positioned it in front of her legs. “Kneel on this,” he told her, and so she obeyed.

The ball in her bottom rolled against her insides in new ways as she moved, but she would hardly call it a punishment.

“Rise up straight upon your knees, Miss Blanchet. Legs together, please.”

She obeyed, her stomach fluttering, wondering what he had in store for her.

He was doing something with the long rod that lay against her back. When he tugged on it, the ball moved and made her eyes flutter closed for a second. And then, suddenly, she felt herself being tugged upward, ever so gently, the ball pushing downward as the rod was pulled upward, so that she had to straighten her posture and rise up on her legs even higher to rid herself of the ache that the ball was imposing on her bottom-hole.

Doyle secured the rope he had used to pull upward on her to something above her. She waited, unsure of what to do next, or what would happen next, when Doyle slid something around her neck, a thick belt that felt like a collar. For a moment, a great fear seized her, for she was terrified that he might be hanging her, but he said, in a soothing voice, when she jumped in alarm, “Relax, Miss Blanchet, this is only to secure your hands.”

He lifted one arm and then the other to attach them, and not tightly, to the collar around her neck, so that her hands were immobilized next to her face, almost uncomfortably, and this is when the deviousness of the punishment began to reveal itself to her. For if she sank even a little from the kneeling position of the most strenuously erect posture, the metal ball was somehow pushed outward against her bottom-hole, causing a delightful but unbearable soreness and arousal.

“This device is called an anal hook, Miss Blanchet. When you slouch, even the tiniest bit, and you will want to after some time, to relieve your knees, or because your arms will become tired and you will allow them to hang rather than hold them up—the hook will do what I suspect it has just done, and deliver the sensation you felt against your bottom hole. It’s a very simple design really. I will leave you in it until you call me master, and beg me to forgive you for your naughtiness. Naturally, however, you shall be required to spend at least some time in this position so that you will learn your lesson. As such, I will be taking my leave and returning after an amount of time I hope will be sufficient to bring you to your senses.”

Lina could not move her head without causing the hook to abuse her bottom hole, and she could not think of anything to say, so she simply listened as Dr. Doyle exited the room.

This was not a terrible thought. In fact, she might even have smiled, for the worst that could happen was that the ball at the end of the anal hook would give her the dull, aching thrill that it did while she rested, and then she would simply rise up again, having had a nice little break and a thrill to boot.

* * *

Lina soon learned that this was not so simple. Her knees and arms grew very sore, much more quickly

than she had thought, and any effort to relieve the weight from one leg or the other made the ball press against her. It did not so much cause her pain, as a soreness that was too pleasurable to endure, and worse yet, which stimulated the craving between her legs that she could not satisfy.

She began to feel exasperated, her skin growing hot, sweat gathering at the roots of her hair. At one point she moved frantically up and down, and discovered that the motion mimicked, in some way, the rubbing against the sensitive nub Mr. Blackstone had used to make her spend.

But she was not to do that, she reminded herself sharply.

She strained to look behind her to the door, as if she could better detect through the thick walls and endless corridors if Dr. Doyle were approaching. As she did this, she felt a stab of arousal in her center, and so she twisted the other way. She pressed her legs together and bounced up and down, and though it was very, very remote, she could feel the tiniest stimulation on the bud between her legs. It seemed, coming to her most naturally, that if she continued to do this, to give it these little stabs of pleasure, she might again be relieved of the horrible craving, by spending.

But the harder she worked at the endeavor, the more it aroused her, and never served to cure the need building up inside of her. Rivulets of sweat trickled down her back, snaking over her spine, nestling into the valley between her buttocks, licking her pleasantly sore hole with the promise of attention that would never be sufficient.

How long did she exert herself in the attempt? She would never know for certain, but it seemed like hours. With her body screaming for release, riding a wave that only grew larger and never crested, she at last gave up. She would do as Dr. Doyle had requested, when he returned, for there was no other option. She endured time on her knees, upright, for as long as she could, and then slowly settled into pressured slump that so tortured and aroused her, for as long as she could endure that.

She was alerted to the arrival of Dr. Doyle by the cool air that caressed her sweaty skin when he opened the door. He said nothing, and Lina was afraid to speak, for if she displeased him and received another minute of this discipline, she was afraid she might not endure it.

When he swept his fingers lightly down her back, a feathery caress from her neck to her lower back, and then further, between her buttocks, to the raw opening of her bottom, she gasped. "Oh!" she could not help breathing. He gently teased the circumference of her bottom hole, the light touch of his fingers teasing the soreness and the pleasure back to raging life.

"Now, Miss Blanchet. Have you learned your lesson? Will you submit to me and call me master?"

Her voice was shaky, but she did not hesitate. "Yes, master."

"Are you very sorry for your naughtiness, Miss Blanchet?" His voice teased her, like his fingers.

"I am very sorry, master," she pleaded. She brought her lips together tightly, and pressed them closed, but could not stop herself from moaning, desperately, "Please."

He gathered her soaked hair to one side, sending a shiver through her as his fingers and her own hair caressed her upper shoulders. Playing with the back of her neck in the same lazy, teasing way that he was touching her bottom, he asked her. "Please, what, Miss Blanchet?"

Her head dropped forward. Her arms were almost shaking, and her legs had begun to tremble much as they had when Mr. Blackstone had made her spend. And yet she knew that she was frighteningly far away from any such release. “P...pp...please,” she whispered, and then moaned, for Dr. Doyle at that moment pushed on the center of the ball and dipped it inside of her. The change in sensation traveled through her entire body. “Ppp...please...”

What had she been intending to say?

“Master,” she whispered. “Please, I cannot... please, let me down, allow me to... to...”

As much as she wanted to, desperately, she could not form the words.

“This is what you must learn, Miss Blanchet. You must learn that your masters will grant you every wish you may have, but you must dispose of the modesty that you have been taught, for I shall not give you what you want unless you submit yourself fully to my will and ask me for it, as I have requested. When you say the words, you shall feel shame, but that is why I am making you say them, for you must embrace your humiliation and shame as part of your submission. It is what you give to me, so that I know you are obedient and willing to please me in all ways. You shall recognize, once you have learned this lesson, that submission will bring you intense pleasure. Then you will do it willingly. So, again, Miss Blanchet, say what you desire for me to do. Beg me to do it and call me master.”

As he spoke, he moved his fingers in slow, deliberate circles over her most sensitive places, and she trembled like a leaf, losing control of herself. Tears formed in her eyes as she struggled to form the words he had requested. She bit her lip and moaned. The ache in her bottom, and the ache between her legs, were both nearly unbearable now. She felt as if she might faint at any moment, if she were driven to further madness by this punishment.

“I want... I want... please, master, I www... www...want...” she mewled. “I want to... please, take me down from this device, I cannot bear any more. I www...www...want to sp...sp...spend. Please. Master.”

Saying the words indeed had the effect Dr. Doyle had described to her. As she pronounced the word she had never known to mean anything except to use money, a hot wave of shame engulfed her, and her already hot skin burned. The ache inside of her moved and kicked, and set even her abdomen to shaking like her legs.

For a terrible minute or two, Doyle said nothing, and she sank from her knees and howled as the hook pressed against her bottom. At last, she felt a slackening—of the restraints on her arms, and above her. She sank to rest upon her calves, shaking with relief.

He pressed his fingers against the small of her back, prodding her forward. “Lie down on the table, Miss Blanchet, but leave your knees on this stool. There, very nice, just as you did for Mr. Blackstone. Now, open your legs, spread them apart so that I may examine what lies between them.”

She did as he commanded, but when it was time to spread her legs, she did it slowly, in hesitant increments. The position was so very... scandalous, and improper.

“Do not be timid, Miss Blanchet. The time for modest, proper behavior has passed. Open your legs

wide, to the edges of the stool, and raise your bottom in the air for me. Present the holes of my pleasure to me to do with as I desire. This is the obedience you must learn.”

She scooted her legs to the edges of the long footstool, quite wide. The torrent of liquid arousal between her legs ran down both inner thighs. The hook, still embedded inside of her, shifted and made a low moan flutter to life within her chest.

Without warning, Dr. Doyle placed a finger on the center of her lady parts, and stroked it, making her yelp and then turn silent with overwhelming pleasure as the wave began to build again. He continued to stroke her, painfully slowly, but still, she was nearing the blessed juncture when she would go careening over the edge, she could feel it. All that was required of her was to bend over and allow Dr. Doyle to do this to her, and then she would be—

She was so very close that her chest had become tight and she was no longer breathing, when Doyle’s finger stopped moving. She let out a long cry, turning her face to the bed. “Oh! Dr. Doyle, doctor...mmm...master, please, I beg of you, I cannot... you must...”

He pulled the anal hook slowly, and it stretched her bottom as it was pulled from inside of her. The terrible feeling of emptiness returned to her. He used a single finger to trace the stretched and sore circle of her intimate ring, his finger dipped inside, rubbing places on her body she herself had never, ever touched.

Then, another object pushed inside of her, and she knew it was the piece she had spent the day with, the one that reached so far inside of her. Though she knew it was utterly ridiculous to feel that way, she closed her eyes in pleasure when the object was securely back in place, and she again felt filled.

But nothing had been done about the mounting ache. As the doctor took his time with her, slowly moving his fingers over her body, her legs, her intimate parts, Lina’s breath became wild and panicked.

He drove her to the point of madness with his fingers, and then retracted his touch, leaving her to fall back to normal on her own. This seemed to go on for hours, and she was sobbing into the bed when he leaned over her and whispered, “But Mr. Blackstone has given me instructions, and so they are yours as well. You are not to spend, nor are you to make yourself spend.” His fingers slipped into her wet flower and gave her one last jolt of pleasure before forsaking her to her pain. “Your body belongs to your masters. And so you must not relieve yourself. You will wait until Mr. Blackstone approves. Only with this discipline shall you come to understand what it means to be submissive. Do you understand, Miss Blanchet?”

She had to breathe out a sob of despair first. “Yes, Master,” she managed to say.

“You will thank me now for this session of discipline.”

“Bbbb...but,” she began, but realized she would be punished if she did anything other than what he commanded. Surely they would not leave her like this? Surely they did not believe that she would last all night? And how would they know if she had done such a thing?

“Yes, master. Thank you, master,” she whispered.

He released her hands and the collar about her neck. She rested her face breathlessly against the table.

“Dress yourself, Miss Blanchet. We will attend dinner together with Mr. Blackstone, so you must hurry to your quarters and change your clothing.”

He pulled on a cable with a wooden handle. Somewhere in the estate, her escort was summoned.

Chapter Fifteen

“She is quite surely a virgin,” Doyle said, before even sitting down. He poured himself a drink and looked pointedly at his longtime friend. “Have you considered that the girl’s story is true? For even if she exceeded the bounds of decency with this gentleman—”

“The wheels are in motion,” Blackstone said in his typically curt fashion. By this, he meant that Laroui was already en route to England, but Doyle knew him very well; he was thundering like this for he had some doubts himself.

“Pity,” Doyle commented, after taking a sip of whiskey and arching an eyebrow at Blackstone. “She *is* everything we might have wanted. While she is spirited, she is aroused by submission and discipline. It shall be a mere trick to make her yearn for it, and yearn to please us.”

“Laroui,” Blackstone said sharply, at the same time that Doyle said “us.”

“She’s very beautiful,” Doyle insisted.

Blackstone said nothing.

Doyle took a sip of his whiskey. “I believe her,” he continued, setting the glass down. He looked up at Blackstone. “About the young gentleman. She has never changed her story with regard to her behavior.”

Blackstone frowned more deeply and said nothing. He was sitting beneath a reading lamp and the scarred side of his face was visible to Doyle, from whom he did not hide it. Doyle, after all, had been the one to rescue him, and attempt to repair the damage from the accident.

The scarring was not terrible. It marred somewhat the striking, intense beauty of the man, but he was far from hideous, and in some ways, it gave his ethereal beauty a more masculine edginess than he had previously possessed.

But Blackstone did not hide from the light and the sight of society in order to keep his scar hidden; that was merely the story they had concocted. Blackstone hid in the shadows to hide the unmistakable beauty, and recognizability, of his countenance.

Now, he pressed his fingertips together and closed his eyes.

“An opportunity,” Doyle pressed, delicately, “like this one is most unlikely to occur again. Should you not consider—?”

“Doyle,” Blackstone said quietly, but in a tone of voice that was laced with the dangerous side of his personality. “I have naturally ‘considered’ everything you speak of.”

Doyle waited. Blackstone was a stubborn man. It would do no good to press him further, not at this moment. He was also certain that if the lovely Miss Blanchet had not yet worked her charms on Blackstone, it would not be long before she would, and then, surely, he would see the error of his judgment.

Laroui would be a problem, but Laroui was a mercenary man who surely could be placated with money.

Which Blackstone had a great deal of, provided that Laroui kept his secret.

Doyle guarded his silence, and Blackstone brooded for so long that Doyle was almost unsure what he referenced when he said, at last, "Perhaps."

The comment hung in the air, and then Blackstone inhaled deeply and rose to his feet. "Shall we go to dinner, then, my good friend? We shall see how obedient the young Miss Blanchet has been."

* * *

Lina had been escorted back to her room, and told to rest and change for dinner. A servant, she was told, would be along after her rest, to assist her with her dress and her hair.

When the door was closed behind her, Lina had the intention of pacing the room, for she found that she could not sit still or lie down; her body was too full of wild emotions and arousal to stay in one place. As she moved, however, the object inside of her made her even more desirous to spend, so much so that she could even feel a light sheen of sweat on her skin, as though she were playing sport.

With great difficulty, she wriggled out of her dress, and sat on the bed. She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes tightly.

Never in her life had she felt such a craving before. Certainly, the feeling itself was not totally new to her. Words like discipline, and manuals about flogging the maid, and thoughts like those, of spanking and punishment, had always caused a little thrill in her lower abdomen. But the place where she felt the thrill had been so improper, she had barely acknowledged it even to herself.

And never, ever, *ever* had the feeling felt anything like what she felt now. Her limbs were nearly shaking as she pressed her hands together and tried to push from her mind the thoughts of what Dr. Doyle and Mr. Blackstone had done to her.

In the pit of her stomach churned the desire to please them, and obey them.

Especially Mr. Blackstone, whose strappings and whippings had left her bottom sore, her skin burning at even the slightest touch. And yet, thinking of his hand on her bottom, disciplining her... it only drove her to want to slip her fingers beneath the shift she had slipped over her head, and stroke the center of her lady parts as he had done, and feel the sweet release of "spending."

Her heart was beating rapidly. She reclined in the bed and placed her hands properly on her abdomen, still clasped together.

How would Mr. Blackstone know if she disobeyed him? she wondered. Could he know such a thing?

She shifted in the bed, and the object inside of her moved around, making her mewl softly. It would be so easy to disobey... and perhaps delightful to be punished...

She squeezed her eyes closed. At the same time, she did not want to further vex Mr. Blackstone. She

wanted to obey him, to show him that she was capable of being obedient.

And yet, she very much wanted to be defiant, to show them that they had not conquered her entirely.

Her eyes flew open.

Would it not be more defiant, in a way, to pretend as though she did not even desire or need the pleasure it would give her to seek release?

She could do that. She could pretend, she could keep herself from doing this naughty, disobedient, but delicious thing. It would not be easy, but she would resist Mr. Blackstone, and he would know that even if she had no choice but to accept her fate in this “harem” he spoke of, she was not entirely broken, or entirely submissive.

In her bed, Lina jutted her chin and closed her eyes with the determination to rest.

It did not come easily to her.

* * *

There was something quite different about Miss Carolina Blanchet that evening when she arrived in the dining hall for dinner.

She was dressed in a beautiful gown he had chosen to be made for her while she was in London, and he was privately pleased to see that, in spite of her hasty departure from the city, this particular gown had made it into the trunks that had been packed so haphazardly and which had given his head maid fits when she had opened them.

It was a rich blue that matched the color of her eyes, and he was also privately pleased with his recollection of their color, for he had seen them only in a portrait and the dim light of the Harlowes’ dining room. The dress had been fitted to her lovely, svelte figure, her small, firm breasts pushed up to the low neckline, her narrow waist requiring no corset, and the new raging fashion of the bustle accentuating what he knew to be the very lovely shape of her bottom and her slender hips.

Her eyes glinted in the candlelight, and she entered with a faint smile upon her lips—one he had not seen before in her expressions. It was subtle, hardly noticeable, but the lift of her lip carried with it the features of her face, so that one could not help but retain the impression that she was quite pleased with *something*.

Blackstone looked to Doyle as though for an explanation, but his friend was pulling a chair out for Miss Blanchet with an expression upon his own face that indicated he was thinking much along the same lines as Blackstone.

Miss Blanchet, for her part, kept her eyes lowered demurely, but absent from her body language and her expression were the traces of confusion and fear which she had brought with her from London.

It was curious, and it piqued his interest in much the same way that Miss Blanchet’s wild hair and rosy cheeks in the fields by Green Grove Manor had captivated him. He could see in her the spirit he had so admired and wished to tame.

He cleared his throat.

Had wished to tame, he reminded himself. Miss Blanchet's outrageous behavior had changed everything, and his decision to send her to Laroui could not be undone. And whatever Doyle might say, they could surely find, somewhere in the world, a suitable bride to share their secrets and their lifestyle.

It *was* a pity that it could not be this captivating creature—

He stopped himself from following that train of thought, one which inevitably led his chest to tighten and his heart to beat wildly.

“And so, Miss Blanchet,” he said, an almost cruel tone in his voice, in order to cover the wobbliness of his thoughts and his feelings, which he did not want to reveal to her—or to Doyle—”Did you have an enjoyable rest?”

“Quite, Mr. Blackstone,” she chirped, with a flicker of that same smile. “Master, sir,” she added quickly. “Thank you.”

Doyle gave him a look, his own lip repressing a smile. He would be amused by this situation. It was so like Doyle to be contrary.

What could her smile mean? Perhaps she believed she had outwitted them? Perhaps she had been very naughty, and made herself spend, and would require more punishment. He enjoyed disciplining Miss Blanchet, but in some ways he dreaded it, for she seemed quite capable of making him lose control of himself. In truth, he was considering turning over her training entirely to Dr. Doyle, for he could not dislodge thoughts of her from his mind after spending time with her. Even as he thought about her, the scent of her neck appeared, the ghost of a smell, in his nostrils, as though he had placed his face close to her skin.

He unfolded his napkin stiffly and grumbled. “I trust you behaved yourself, as Dr. Doyle and I instructed?”

Miss Blanchet smoothed the napkin on her lap and looked up to meet his eyes, which she could see over the glaring candlelight placed deliberately to block her view of his countenance. She did so with an unflinching calm. “I did not spend,” she said crisply, though she stumbled slightly over the word that was so unfamiliar to her, a mere hesitation that affirmed her naivety, not necessarily discomfort.

“You require no discipline after dinner, then, Miss Blanchet?”

There was a pause, and the air between them seemed to turn to liquid as it does in the heat of the desert, before she blinked slowly and steadily. “I should think not, masters, at least for having disobeyed your instructions not to spend. However, if you believe I require discipline of another kind or for another matter, I shall submit to it as you desire.”

Doyle, who had lifted a fork to adjust its setting next to his plate, let it drop from his fingers in surprise, and exhaled in a steady stream while staring stiffly ahead. Blackstone's heart felt as though it might fall through his body to the floor, and his cock grew stiff within a moment.

The butler and two servants entered with the first course as the trio simmered in the peculiar silence, but the spell was broken as they lifted the lids of a delicious seafood soup.

* * *

Lina smiled once the door to her room was closed, and bit her lower lip. She felt certain that she had managed to rattle the unflappable Mr. Blackstone, and it had given her a very peculiar thrill. The two men had seemed to not know what to do with her, and she felt that she had obtained the upper hand.

Their meal had proceeded with all feigning a most ordinary and proper dinner, replete with polite conversation. Mr. Blackstone was most interesting to talk to. He had clearly traveled a great deal and seemed to enjoy her curiosity. Had it not been for the intense relationship that hung among them, making the air thick with tension, the dinner would have been most pleasurable.

She relaxed in her enormous and comfortable bed, thinking of the two strange men, and the mysteries that surrounded them. Why did Mr. Blackstone choose to hide his face in the shadows? She could see the contours of his face shifting in the shadows as he moved, and she had felt his skin upon hers; while she could not be certain of the fidelity of her senses, Mr. Blackstone's skin was not rough, or grotesque. It felt as she had imagined it might and sent shivers along her spine. He did not seem truly disfigured, and certainly not "monstrous."

As for what he had done with her... well, that *was* truly depraved.

Wasn't it?

Her stomach flopped and flipped again, and her heart had begun to beat wildly.

Perhaps it was depraved, but how could she know if it was or was not?

And even more disturbingly, *what if it was depraved?*

For as she touched her stomach absently, and the queer feelings again snaked through her lower parts, she could not deny the truth: she craved more of it.

She enjoyed it. She wanted to feel Mr. Blackstone's firm hand on her bottom again, his fingers on her intimate parts again, and... though she did not know if this was something that could be done, or that he would do... she wanted to feel the heat of his body, that organ he'd called his "cock" inside of her.

Her mind turned over to wild fantasy, and she imagined scenarios with Mr. Blackstone and Dr. Doyle that—if this was truly "depravity"—made her decidedly depraved.

She tried not to think the thoughts, for she knew that they were, at the very least, most immodest.

Not only that, the craving between her legs began to rage again, and she was soon in nearly the same state as when she had been sent from Dr. Doyle's surgery.

She wanted, desperately, to relieve herself, and she believed that she knew how to do it... and however would they know if she had?

But she also wanted to be obedient.

And defiant.

And, she thought with a shudder, she didn't detest Mr. Blackstone's discipline, not entirely.

For several fitful hours she tried to sleep, tossing and turning, the wetness pouring between her legs and her body pulsing around the object in her bottom while her "cunny" throbbed and ached, each moment more forcefully than the one before. The images in her mind grew more vivid, and she pictured them together with her, touching her, inside of her, making her please them in all sorts of ways, without knowing if such depravity was even possible.

She would confess tomorrow, she thought, in desperation, and be punished as Mr. Blackstone chose and saw fit.

Her fingers found their way to the sensitive nub, and she had but to stroke herself in the slick flesh lightly and only a few times, before her body shuddered and seized up, and the great cascade of sensations washed over her. The object in her bottom began to emerge, and she pushed it inside, biting the pillow next to her so that she would not scream.

After she spent, she was damp with sweat, and the realization that she had disappointed Mr. Blackstone began to creep over her. She felt guilty, and ashamed, even though her skin tingled and she could, she felt now, give in to the exhaustion that also seemed to be claiming her...

She would tell him tomorrow...

Chapter Sixteen

She was escorted to the room with the secret passageway as her stomach twisted in knots. Upon entering, she was unable to suppress a sharp intake of breath as a cool shiver traveled over her bare arms and she trembled slightly.

Already, her cunny was wet and quivering with anticipation, and her cheeks burned as she thought of her confession to Mr. Blackstone. When she thought of how she would disappoint him, her heart seemed to fall through her body, and her bottom burned as she contemplated the strict punishment she might receive.

But coursing through her veins, always, was the need within her body: she wanted to be disciplined, she wanted to feel Mr. Blackstone's hands upon her, she wanted, very much, to submit to him.

He was standing in the shadows as always, his silhouette pleasing as she remembered the contours of his body, the strength of his arms and his chest against her bare back.

“Miss Blanchet. You slept well, I trust?”

Lina inhaled, intending to respond affirmatively, and found that her mouth moved to form the words but no sound left her lips, at least nothing which could be considered words. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Miss Blanchet?”

“I...I...” she blubbered. “I...I must... confess something t...to you, Mr. Blackstone...” she said, nearly sobbing. “Master,” she added. She was looking at the floor, and she lifted her gaze with great difficulty.

Mr. Blackstone was standing, hands clasped in front of him, and he seemed instantly darker, as though the light had shifted. Her chest felt cold again, that same strange mixture of fear and arousal brewing inside of her.

He cocked his head slightly. “Confess?” he asked. He shifted. She thought she could make out a smile upon his lips, but she could not be sure. “What is it, Miss Blanchet, that you must confess?”

Her eyes returned to the floor.

Mr. Blackstone waited, and the only sound in the room was the ticking of a great clock she had not, until then, noticed.

“Miss Blanchet?”

She was unable to speak. She chewed her lip, unconsciously, as all words she had ever known in English seemed to evaporate from her mind.

“Miss Blanchet, confess now, or I shall exact the confession from you with the use of a riding crop.”

Lina's lips moved again, and her voice was a mere whisper. “I...I have been... disobedient,” she said

hoarsely. She could not go on.

Mr. Blackstone said nothing. She lifted her gaze after a long silence passed in which he did not move, or speak.

When she met his eyes, he stepped toward the open passageway, one arm swinging out as a butler might to show her the way.

“If you have been disobedient, Miss Blanchet, then you must be disciplined. Come.”

And then, he disappeared into the passageway, without waiting for her to move.

Lina looked behind her, at the great wooden door, as though an answer might be found there.

And then, for she did not know what else to do, feeling very much like running away and also very much like descending to his room to confess her behavior and be punished, she stepped, gingerly at first, and then with hurried steps, toward the passageway, to follow him.

* * *

As he had the day before, he ordered her to disrobe and face the wall of unusual objects, while he stood in the shadows and watched her. A silence preceded him approaching her, and before he even touched her, the fine hairs on her neck had risen to attention, and she knew that her flesh had turned into a sea of tiny bumps along the backs of her arms and her shoulders, merely anticipating his hands upon her body.

She felt less ashamed than she had the day before, though it still seemed strange to her to be standing, naked, in the presence of a man. She wondered what he could see as he looked at her: the rounded knob of the strange object in her bottom between her buttocks, the still-red imprints of yesterday's discipline, the sheen between her legs, and the shiver that traveled over her back.

When he placed his hands on her shoulders, gently, but with the great, coiled strength in his hands evident in his touch, she jumped ever-so-slightly. But she did not feel fear so much as a crescendo of anticipation, desire clawing inside of her as though it were a wild animal sewn into her chest.

“And what is it, Miss Blanchet, that you have done so naughtily?”

She thought that she could hear, in his voice and his tone, something akin to her own desires. There was a playfulness beneath his words, and though she knew very little about the ways of men, it seemed to her that a tenderness was present as well.

She turned her head slightly, without even realizing that she was doing it. She could see his shoulder and his arm. They were bare, and at the sight of his muscled biceps and solid shoulders, another flutter of emotions stirred in her chest and her hairs rose on end so that she could feel them. Her mouth fell open slightly, her breath escaped her.

His fingers traveled along her neck with a feather-light caress, to her jaw, where they pressed her, very gently, to turn her face back to the wall of straps and other instruments.

“What did you do, my—Miss Blanchet?”

She closed her eyes, for she had heard distinctly some term of endearment nearly escape his lips, one that began with “my.” The possessive pronoun and all it implied poured over her like warm water.

“I... I disobeyed you. Master. After dinner. I could not... wait... for... you,” she said, and only at the end of her sentence did her eyes fall to the floor, for speaking such naughty things still cost her dearly. A blush made her cheeks warm, but she had to force her lips to hold their serious expression, for something in her wanted, even if just a little, to smile.

His fingers snaked down her neck, along her spine again, and to the protruding knob nestled between her buttocks, which he moved delicately in a circle, pushing the object so that it stretched her deep inside, probing the soreness of her most intimate places. Her lips trembled and she made a sound, for she could not stop it escaping her throat.

“So you have come to be disciplined,” he said quietly, his breath on her neck. Close to her ear, close enough that she could feel the movement of his lips as they brushed against her delicate lobes, he whispered, “Then I insist that you choose the instrument of your discipline, Miss Blanchet.”

She began to turn her head, in confusion and surprise, but he nudged her cheek with his jaw, and the fingers of his left hand closed around her neck, his pointer finger over the hollow of her throat, where she could feel her own heart fluttering about beneath his fingertips like a bird. He did not squeeze, but his message was clear.

She looked at the instruments upon the wall, her eyes growing wide as she contemplated them with a new interest: what would they do? How would they be used to punish her?

Even without knowing the use of some of them, she was becoming aroused. The wetness between her legs was trickling down her inner thigh, and the ache she had broken his rules to quench had returned already, as fierce as before.

“I don’t... I do not know what they...” she stammered, unable to finish her sentence. “I would not know how to choose, sir.”

She could not be certain, but it felt as though his lips brushed over the back of her neck as his hands moved down her arms to enclose her wrists gently. Holding her hands at her sides, he pushed her forward, toward the wall.

“Point to any object you like, and I will tell you how it will be used, Miss Blanchet.”

She scanned the objects. Many of them were like the object inside of her now, only larger, so of course she knew what they were for—or at least she could imagine. There was an object like the anal hook Dr. Doyle had used on her, and she did not wish to undergo that sort of torture again, for she did not think she could bear it. She saw a series of beads, connected by a fine chain, almost like a very large piece of jewelry. She reached up to touch it, and Mr. Blackstone’s breath was warm against her neck as he explained. “Those are beads, to be placed inside your bottom. But you are not ready for them, and they are not so much a form of discipline... although, I could invent something. Choose another.”

She moved her fingers to a large, flat object with a handle, and a strip of leather in the center of it.

“A paddle, Miss Blanchet. For spanking. It’s quite severe. You should not be able to sit until evening.”

He explained, in turn, the canes and whips, the belts and paddles, and how each of them would deliver a very specific type of punishment. As he spoke of them, two feelings turned within Lina, swirling at times together and at times opposed: fear, naturally, of the pain, but also, a desire to feel it, to submit to Mr. Blackstone, for she sensed in his explanations a sort of protective tenderness.

“I know not which one to choose, sir,” she said breathlessly, and again she turned her face slightly, without realizing she was doing so. This time he was slower to stop her, and his lips brushed over her cheekbone before he used his hand to turn her gently back to face the wall.

Her lips moved, shaking with the desire to ask him why he always hid in the shadows, but she said nothing. Blindly, to stop herself from speaking improperly, she reached for a cane with an exquisite ivory handle. She had never been caned before, but she sensed that it would bite viciously, and she had read of canings in schools, in books in the attic, and they had inspired in her the same feelings that she had now.

Now, however, she was not only free to embrace those inclinations, she had no choice but to endure them.

“A cane, Miss Blanchet,” he said, taking it from her hand. His fingers lingered on the back of her hand, stroking her skin. “That is a most severe choice.”

Her voice shook as she breathed, “I have been most disobedient.”

Saying such a thing made the animal clawing inside of her go wild, and her cunny throbbed.

“Well,” he said, cracking the cane through the air with a snap that made her jump again, and sent a thrill through her. “A caning you shall have, then. Turn and walk to the bed.”

She obeyed, her skin tingling with anticipation.

“Assume the position of discipline, Miss Blanchet. As you did yesterday.”

She did so, trembling, the skin on her bottom reminding her suddenly of the searing pain of the whipping she had endured the day before, almost throbbing with heat as though it had been set on fire anew.

“Your bottom is quite red from the discipline you received yesterday, Miss Blanchet,” he growled behind her. The cane sliced through the air, making a terrifying sound, but when it touched her, it was laid upon her skin gently, as a caress. The cane traveled over her bottom and down her legs, a feathery touch with the promise of stinging bite. “This is going to make you cry, Miss Blanchet. But I promise that I shall not mar your lovely skin, except to leave a bit of a welt, that you may feel to remind yourself of your disobedience.”

The cane whipped through the air again, singing, and she shivered.

“Will you remain as you are, submissive for your punishment, or do you require me to restrain you?” he asked her, one hand gently pushing her lower back down, so that her bottom tilted up into the air. Lina curled her fingers against the leather.

“I shall remain as I am,” she breathed, and then held her breath, hoping that she could in fact obey, for she wanted to show Mr. Blackstone that she was obedient, even if she could not be sure whether the drive within her to do so was one of defiance, or of true submission.

“I shall cane you five times, Miss Blanchet, provided that you are well-behaved.”

The cane again sang in the air, and her spine tingled before the searing stripe of heat reached her senses. Unlike the spankings she had received, or the whipping, the power of the cane was so concentrated that at the moment it touched her skin it was so intense she could not feel anything at all. Then, like an insect bite, it screamed across her skin, and blossomed into a searing heat, making her breath leave her chest in a silent scream. The heat spread slowly, while the strip burned intensely. Her eyes watered immediately and uncontrollably, but she managed to keep her voice within her chest.

It was, after all, the punishment she had chosen for herself.

The second crack landed in a stripe below the first, and tears were expelled from her eyes, but she still made no sound. The wave of the heat of the two welts crashed against each other, spreading, biting, but the third, and then fourth canes lashed into her in quick succession, right after the now-familiar slicing through the air.

Upon the impact of the fourth stripe, she heard herself whimper. She began to push herself up, to attempt to stand, to beg for just a moment, but she stopped herself, and paused, partly raised, trembling.

“Miss Blanchet, return to your disciplining position, or I will be forced to punish you for your further disobedience.”

She slid slowly back to the leather, now damp with her sweat, and closed her eyes tightly as she tilted her bottom up for Mr. Blackstone’s final caning. The cane swept through the air, singing, and she let out a yelp, but the cane never landed on her bottom. Her eyes flew open, and she trembled, staring at her hand through the blur of her tears.

Mr. Blackstone’s fingers landed gently on the first welt, and followed the swollen skin along the strip to the end, heating the already burning welt and making Lina’s whole body shake. Though the pain was intense, the pleasure that throbbed in her cunny was more so, and it almost seemed to be enhanced as Mr. Blackstone traced each of the four welts, lighting them on fire again with the touch of his fingers.

“Ask me to give you your final stroke, Miss Blanchet. Use your most polite words, and call me master.”

Her voice was shaking as she spoke, and each word seemed to actually touch her cunny, stroking her as Mr. Doyle had done until she was screaming with pleasure.

“Please, Mr. Blackstone, sir...m...master. Cane me again.”

“As you wish,” he said softly.

And he delivered the final stroke, another neat line below the other four, so that no welt crossed over another, and her skin burned in five, hot slashes, neatly arranged.

She was panting and could feel sweat rolling along her ribs. The waves of heat on her bottom had been overcome by the ache between her legs. Mr. Blackstone’s fingers danced over the final welt and then slipped down, to where she ached most, brushing over her little button and making her gasp.

His touch was light, and he played with her, driving her wilder, providing no relief. Tears welled up in her eyes again as she realized that he might not yet have delivered his true punishment. The true punishment might be to tease her, and never give her any relief.

But she could do nothing about that.

He moved his hand to the object in her bottom, lightly pressing it in different directions to remind her it was there, and to cause the need inside of her to flare. She knew, now, that he knew exactly what his touch would do to her.

“Today you are to get a new plug in your bottom, Miss Blanchet. A bigger one, one that, with your red bottom, will make it very difficult for you to sit. Climb up, place your knees together on the bed and lift your lovely bottom.”

Lina obeyed, lifting her bottom upward, the cool air of the room licking at her dripping cunny.

Mr. Blanchet tugged at the object in her bottom, and slid it slowly out, then back in, and, pumping it very gently, he began to speak.

“Today I will also spread your legs open and fuck your cunny, Miss Blanchet. So it is very, very good that you have enjoyed your discipline. You must learn to enjoy the feel of a man’s cock inside your mouth, and here, and in your cunny. Do you understand, Miss Blanchet?”

“Yes, master. I understand,” Lina murmured, her eyes blank as her mind was consumed by the ache in her bottom, the twisting and pulling of the object inside. How much larger would the new object be? She hoped it would press on her as this one had at first, that she would be even more full than before...

Mr. Blackstone abandoned her bottom, and she sensed that he was moving behind her—away, to the wall of sexual devices. Cautiously, she edged herself to a slight angle, so that she could, if she strained hard enough, see a glimpse of him as he turned around.

“Do not be so foolish, Miss Blanchet, as to believe I do not know when you move and attempt to look at me,” he said, without turning his back. “You wouldn’t want to be punished yet again, would you?”

She didn’t answer, because her heart had stopped cold for a beat within her chest.

“Or perhaps you would?” he said, and she heard that he was returning. He touched her burning welts again.

“No, sir,” she said quietly.

“Get up on your hands and knees again, my pet,” he said.

He did not seem to notice that he called her by the affectionate term, and Lina’s heart swelled as it had before, only even more so, for he had possessed her in his speech.

He covered her eyes again with the blindfold.

Lina turned her chin, as though to look back at him. The temptation to ask him why he wanted her blindfolded was bubbling up inside of her, and she had to resist very hard to keep herself quiet.

“Now lie down, Miss Blanchet, face up upon the bed.”

She obeyed him, and several moments passed without him saying anything or touching her. But she was certain that he was devouring her with his eyes, and the thought of it was as powerful as if he had actually touched her. She wanted to cover herself, especially the betraying parts of her—her nipples, which had become hard and sore, and her cunny, which was throbbing so wildly and so wet, that she was sure even Mr. Blackstone would be aghast.

“When your master wants to fuck you, Miss Blanchet, he shall choose the way you are to lay your body out for him. I want you to do as I command you, and then I will restrain you so that you cannot move, but you will first obey me, so that you understand your actions must be submissive and obedient.”

Her lips parted, and she whispered, “Yes, sir.”

“Bring your hands together at your navel,” he said quietly, his voice the calm and commanding tone which had first made her shiver pleasurably so many weeks ago at Green Grove Manor. “Now bend your knees, and bring your legs up to your chest, spreading them so that your hands are between your thighs. Yes, just like that.”

Lina could feel her cheeks getting red, especially as she spread her legs and pictured herself, wide open, with Mr. Blackstone looking on.

“Hook your elbow under your knee, on each side, as though your leg is a dance-partner,” he said, his voice a rumble now. She obeyed, hesitant, unclear what he might want of her.

“Very good. Now, use your arms to spread your legs wide open to me, Miss Blanchet.”

“I—” she began, but cut herself off, even though Mr. Blackstone was talking over her as well.

“You will obey,” he said quietly.

She obeyed, and sniffed quietly as a sob of humiliation caught her unaware and threatened to escape. The air of the room was cool where she was wet: between her legs, on the insides of her thighs, snaking down to her bottom-hole.

Mr. Blackstone secured her, one appendage at a time, so that her wrists were pulled down and to the

sides, prying her legs open, and her ankles were also secured, so that the lower part of her legs could not bounce up. She was completely immobilized, her legs spread wide, her cunny exposed and dripping before Mr. Blackstone. And she could not see him, where he was, what he would do to her.

The very next sensation she felt was so unexpected that her whole body strained against the ropes holding her. When the seizure became trapped inside of her she shrieked. It took her a moment to realize that the sensation was pleasure—a pleasure so intense it burned like the crack of a cane. She tried to place it, to figure out what was causing it, for it felt very much like Mr. Blackstone's fingers on her cunny, and yet softer, faster, wetter.

Warmer.

“Oh!” she shrieked. “Oh, my! Oh!”

By the time she realized that Mr. Blackstone had placed his mouth on her cunny, and by the time the obscenity of such a thing had caused her face to turn red, he was no longer attending to her. She gave a gasp of exasperation, for now the need that throbbed between her legs was as excruciating as she had ever felt it.

A warm, smooth, hard something was now between the wet lips of her cunny. It pushed against her hole. It was too big, and seemed to be stuck, but Mr. Blackstone continued forward. A sharp pain grew as he pushed against her, and she heard him make a sound, a bit like a sigh, a bit like a moan. “Your cunny is so tight,” he breathed.

The heat of his body was close to her, and she longed to feel it against her, to feel the big thing she had taken into her mouth inside of her cunny, which throbbed and ached to be filled, even as it stung where he pressed against her. “It's too big,” she said, whimpering, but her voice was filled with disappointment.

He covered her skin with his, and his cock pushed in, making her whimper in pleasure and pain. His hand swept through her hair, and his lips were close to hers, smelling like the juices of her cunny. And then, suddenly, she felt a searing pain, and the hard, hot muscle of his cock began to slide inside of her, quickly, stretching her wide, filling her up, pushing against the object in her bottom.

Lina might have screamed, except that yet again the air was sucked from her lungs and the pain and pleasure exploded so intensely that she had no words and no breath to make a sound.

As he moved slowly in and out of her, Lina began to toss her head from side to side. She was being taken to a new high as he rubbed inside of her, and her body tensed almost everywhere.

“Hold still,” Mr. Blackstone breathed, and Lina wondered what he meant, for she was tied down completely, but she was unable to spend long contemplating it because she was going up, up and over the height of pleasure. “You're so tight, Miss Blanchet, do not move...”

His voice drifted away, and Lina felt faint as her body seemed to turn to liquid and roll in waves, while at the same time tensing up to where she was sure she felt like stone. She only realized that she was screaming as the wave ebbed away, but by then Mr. Blackstone was pounding his manhood into her, and muttering things like “Don't, you're too...”

And then his body was tense, deep inside of her, and he groaned loudly as the hot wetness of his seed filled her.

Lina was still shuddering from the height of her own pleasure as Mr. Blackstone lay on top of her, his member still turgid and pulsing inside of her. The sensation of fullness that encircled her did not leave, even as her pleasure diminished in jagged waves. The heat of his body was still atop her for a long time: solid, heavy, and somehow protective. His hands went to her head, his fingers meshed in her hair, and she sensed that he was looking at her, his lips very close to her face, as he breathed heavily and descended from his own pleasure.

“Carolina.”

She could not be certain that she heard correctly, for he whispered it hoarsely and low, and very suddenly withdrew from inside her, almost as though some emergency had called him to another place.

Unsure of what to do, she waited, her heart pounding, wondering if she should say something. The sound of him moving around her was difficult to decipher. Was he preparing yet another aspect of her torment and pleasure?

Without any comment from him, she felt the restraints loosen, first on her arms, and then on her ankles, though he did not pull them away from her limbs.

His voice seemed to come from near the door, and it was toneless and quiet.

“Extricate yourself and... wait here,” he said, and then, almost stammering, he added: “I—someone—Dr. Doyle shall be... come for you.”

Lina opened her mouth to say something, though as so often occurred, she did not know what it was and no words passed her lips.

But it did not matter, for she heard the closing of the door, and then only silence: Mr. Blackstone was gone.

* * *

She did as he had ordered her, though the way it was delivered had been so strange she was not sure if it could be called an order. By wiggling her arms and legs she was able to loosen the restraints and pull her arms free, sit up, and slip the scarf from her eyes, to confirm what she knew to be true: Mr. Blackstone had left her alone.

It was cool in the room, and she pulled her legs and arms to her chest and hugged herself as she contemplated the strange interaction with Mr. Blackstone. Between her legs, his seed was warm and wet against her thighs.

Why had he left so abruptly, she wondered? Had he not told her that she would receive her next step in her training, a new object for her bottom? It made no sense.

Her dress had been hung upon a hook on the wall, and the cane that had scorched her bottom so

pleasantly replaced upon the wall of objects.

How long was she to wait? Why was she to wait? And why had he freed her and not done what he had promised?

The minutes dragged by in the soundless chamber, and she grew cold, so at last she rose from the bed and lifted the plain frock over her head, leaving it unlaced, simply to be warm. She sat on the bed, and waited, but so much time went by that she began to wonder if she should leave.

But no, no; perhaps this was another test of her obedience. A strange one, one that unsettled her. But a test, nonetheless.

It must be, she thought sleepily, as she leaned to the side and lifted her legs to the bed. Her eyes became heavy, and so she closed them, and fell asleep.

Chapter Seventeen

“Miss Blanchet.”

Her eyes flew open and she lurched to sit up straight, her mind reeling, attempting to reconstruct the moments that had happened before she fell asleep, but as always when she dozed during the day, she was disoriented in both time and place.

The voice was Dr. Doyle’s, but until she turned toward its source and saw him, standing near the closed door and removing his fine jacket, she could not place it.

“Dr. Doyle,” she murmured, sliding to a standing position. “I... I fell asleep... Mr. Blackstone left, and he ordered me to stay, so I...”

Her voice trailed off, as she watched Dr. Doyle roll up his sleeves in a fashion that was, for some reason, arousing, and perhaps even sinister.

“Am I to be punished?” she said weakly.

Dr. Doyle, who had always been a more cheerful man—which was not much of a task given Mr. Blackstone’s temperament—gave her a small smile and shook his head. “Have you been disobedient?” he asked her, rolling the final part of his right cuff up to his elbow. His steely eyes met hers, and a cool stab of pleasurable fear went through her torso.

“Not that I am—that is to say, I *was* disobedient, and I confessed to Mr. Blackstone, and I was disciplined... but then...”

She could not be certain of why, but tears welled up in her eyes. She tried very hard to fight them back, but it did no good, and her vision blurred. She could feel that the water was going to spill over, so she looked down, and the tears spilled over her cheeks. “I feel I must have done something terribly wrong,” she said.

Dr. Doyle came close to her and lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. His expression was friendly, almost amused. “None of that, Miss Blanchet. Now, turn around and let me see if you have been properly disciplined for your disobedience.”

Lina had ever so many more questions, and could not understand why the doctor was smiling, but she was certain that she did not want to be disobedient again, especially as she did not know if Dr. Doyle was here to discipline her further, perhaps for the unknown offense she had committed causing Mr. Blackstone to leave so abruptly.

She leaned over the bed, and Dr. Doyle lifted her skirt, exposing her bottom and throwing the material over her torso, so that it covered her head. Where she was still wet—and since Doyle had mentioned “discipline,” she had become more so—her skin grew cold.

His fingers moved like feathers over the welts left by the cane. Her skin ignited at his touch, and the dull soreness that had been present turned to a throbbing heat. Her cunny became wet again as he moved his fingers over the marks of her discipline, almost as though, like Mr. Blackstone, he was

admiring them. “You comported yourself very, very badly, I take it, Miss Blanchet.”

She swallowed, unable to understand how Dr. Doyle’s touch had so quickly brought her body back to the tormented state of desire the two men so often made her suffer.

“Yes, master,” she breathed, and her cunny pulsed.

“It seems sufficient to me,” Dr. Doyle said, taking his hand away and making the declaration as a doctor might make a diagnosis. “Remain there, Miss Blanchet.”

She heard him move around the room, near the wall of objects, and then return to his place behind her. He pushed on the object in her bottom, and she gasped as a sharp ache again roared to life, and then moved around inside of her as he played with the end of it.

He slid it slowly from inside of her, and as it was pulled there were patches of it that almost scratched, a bit like the bite of the cane. But the emptiness that consumed her quickly overran that sensation, and she howled softly when he pulled it at last from inside, leaving her empty.

He drew his finger through the wet slick of her cunny, taking with it some of the silky slipperiness, so that when he began to make circles around the edge of her bottom-hole, his fingers glided gently.

“Oh!” Lina could not help saying. The empty canal of her bottom ached like her cunny, and pulsed like it as well. She closed her eyes, trying to be still and quiet, for she sensed that was what Dr. Doyle required of her.

She could not stop her thighs from shaking, no matter how much she balled the fabric of her skirt in her fists. Another gasp escaped her when Doyle inserted his finger and probed her insides, pressing up and down, touching places that were sore from the presence of the object, and yet felt as though they had never been touched.

A cool, hard object kissed her between the lips of her cunny, and Doyle rubbed it over her engorged knob, making her squeal and lift her head to gasp for air. She could not hold still, she thought. She simply could not.

“Now,” Dr. Doyle said. “I am going to push this next plug inside of you, Miss Blanchet. It will slide easily, if you relax, and accept it inside of you. It is wider, and longer, and it will stretch you so that you may accommodate my cock when the time comes. Will you enjoy that, Miss Blanchet? Feeling my member inside of you?”

“I will,” she breathed, her chest cool again with anticipation. The cold object was now pressed against her bottom-hole, partially inside of it, teasing the ache that gnawed at her.

Slowly, Dr. Doyle pushed it inside of her. A sharp pain announced its girth, as she was stretched much wider than before, and she gasped. But for as sharp as it was, she wanted to feel it being fed inside of her, pushing in, filling her up.

Slowly, the many inches of the object pushed in, deeper, deeper, until she was certain it could not go any further. Still, it went in, and she mewled until she felt the narrow notch that marked the end of it. Dr. Doyle tugged gently at it, and it pulled like the anal hook had pulled, sending a delicious ache

throughout her body.

He pushed on it, and pulled at it, a few more times, as Lina howled very softly into the bed.

“There,” he said at last, and pulled her dress down, over her bottom. “Very good, Miss Blanchet. You are now to sit upon a chair in the library, with your back straight, and think upon how you shall be more obedient in the future. Stand up now.”

She stood up, at first quickly, but when, as she straightened, the object pushed itself about inside of her and ignited again a deep soreness, she slowed.

“Dr... Dr. Doyle,” she whispered. “*Sir*, master... am I being punished now? Please tell me what I have done to displease Mr. Blackstone.”

He adjusted the dress on her shoulders, and began to tie the laces, pulling them tightly, making her gasp. “I do not believe ‘displeased’ is the proper word for Mr. Blackstone’s current state of mind,” he said cryptically, and she was certain she heard the smile in his voice. He pulled her laces, and she held onto the bedpost. “You are not being punished, Miss Blanchet. You are being trained. And perhaps you might think of it as being used, for our carnal pleasure.”

Lina stared at the bedpost, as a flush of heat traveled over her chest and her neck.

“I shall do my best, then,” she said quietly, “To obey.”

Doyle finished tying her dress without comment, but when she turned her head ever so slightly to see his face, she thought she could see that he was smiling.

* * *

Doyle, he could see, was feeling smug, for he had upon his face that very same self-assured smile as he so often wore when he had concluded something, thanks to the new and bizarre science he called “psychology.” Blackstone detested Doyle’s “conclusions,” particularly those about which he donned such smugness because he was usually—infuriatingly—correct in his assumptions and derivations.

Blackstone held up a hand to silence the man, but Doyle was not the type to be silenced, and he was one of very few men who did not fear Rohan Blackstone.

Doyle inhaled sharply, and it did nothing to make his smug grin fade.

“Before you speak,” Rohan began, but he left enough of a pause at the end of this proclamation to give Doyle even more confidence, for Rohan himself had no idea what, exactly, to say.

“The girl is being properly disciplined,” Doyle said calmly, taking a seat and pouring himself a healthy snifter of whiskey, which he did not sip. “As you requested.”

Blackstone became impatient. “But?”

Doyle lifted his eyebrows but said nothing.

“Good God, man, speak your mind,” Blackstone said irritably.

Doyle lifted the glass to his lips and paused, as if contemplating whether or not he wished to sip the whiskey. Blackstone rolled his eyes; he knew his friend far too well to be fooled by the display.

“You quite evidently wish to discuss some matter,” Blackstone said irritably, collapsing in a chair. “So speak your mind and be done with it.”

Doyle let a long pause linger in the air, which irritated Blackstone and made him glare sullenly at the wall as he waited. All the while, the scent of Miss Blanchet’s skin lingered in his mind, as though she were just beneath his fingertips. The thought of her was arousing him, even as Doyle was arousing irritation, and he very much wished for the moment to get going and be done with.

“I only wonder,” Doyle said quietly, sipping his whiskey at last with great affect.

“If..” Blackstone prompted, ever more impatient, his arousal stirring up a great unease in his body.

“Well, I wonder if perhaps you have been too hasty, perhaps even a bit harsh with Miss Blanchet. I wonder if perhaps you do not regret your choice.”

Blackstone was cold and silent, even as a fire raged inside of him. Of course he *regretted* having canceled his marriage to Miss Blanchet and turning her over to Laroui.

“I wonder if there is nothing to be done,” Doyle said, when Blackstone said nothing.

Rohan stood up, a great fury seizing him inside, a storm with no direction or purpose. “There is nothing to be done,” he said reflexively. “You know as well as I do that—”

“I know as well as you do that you have strong feelings for Miss Blanchet. That you recognize her perfection. And I know as well as you do that a man such as yourself, a man who has built a fortune from almost nothing and who has deceived so much of the world for so long, for a man like yourself, nothing is impossible, if that was, perchance, what you were about to say.”

Blackstone turned upon Doyle imperiously, ready to pounce upon his words and tear his arguments to shreds. When he saw that Doyle, as opposed to looking at him smugly as he had expected, wore an imploring look upon his countenance, Blackstone hesitated.

“Rohan,” Doyle said. His voice was unwavering, serious now. “The girl is striving to please you, and I believe that she speaks the truth about what transpired between herself and this Mr. Carrington. I know you very well, and I can see that you want the girl for yourself.”

Blackstone fumed.

“I want the girl for us as well.”

Rohan said nothing.

“I implore you,” Doyle said. “If you cannot find a solution to this problem, I am afraid I must put my foot down. I will not forgive you should you send such a perfect specimen to Laroui, not when we can have her for ourselves.”

Blackstone stared at his long-time friend and confidante, unable to believe what he was saying. In

many ways, it was a relief to hear Doyle say such things, as shocking as it might have been to hear him be so determined and recalcitrant. It was unlike him, but it provided Blackstone with the cover he needed to back down from his own recalcitrance.

For what he did really want, which Doyle seemed to know, was to keep the lovely Miss Blanchet for himself.

And while he could not know what Laroui would do, having come so far with the hopes of taking another lovely girl with him for his collection, the solution, as Doyle had pointed out, was hardly impossible for man such as himself.

“Whatever are you proposing, then, my dear Dr. Doyle?”

The grin returned to Doyle’s lips, though subtly. He set his drink down. “Shall we see if Miss Blanchet has received her discipline well? And supposing that she has, I think we might divulge some confidences to her, as a reward for her discipline.”

Blackstone mulled it over.

“And,” Doyle added, “as a preamble to our taking complete possession of her.”

* * *

They made her sit upon a very hard chair, facing the wall of books opposite the door of the passageway, for what seemed like hours. The new object inside of her bottom was pushed deeper by the surface beneath her, until the ache was nearly unbearable in its hopeless, depraved pleasure. Her sore, welted skin began to burn and throb. As she sat, she seemed to experience her pain and her pleasure in waves, and each time she was certain she would not be able to continue for a moment more.

Somehow, she found the strength. She did not know if they were even there, or if they could see her, but she dared not disobey their orders. Not when she had done something to send Mr. Blackstone storming from the room, not when he had claimed her as his pet and then become disappointed in her. She must do something to regain his... whatever it was that she had felt between them just hours before in his training room.

The ache in her bottom was so sore and intense when the two men returned, that she let out what she intended to be a sigh of relief, and it ended up as more of a strange howl.

Still, she would not disobey, and she was determined to show them that she would not. Particularly Mr. Blackstone, for it had become a strange obsession of hers, given his treatment of her, but she desired more than anything to show her willingness to obey him. She *needed* it, as if something inside of her strangled her heart, and the only way to release its grip was to do what he asked of her, whatever it was.

A shiver traveled along her spine.

“Miss Blanchet,” Dr. Doyle said, and his voice was gentle as always. “I have shared with Mr. Blackstone what you confided to me earlier today. But I wish for you to repeat it here, that he may

hear for himself.”

A rush of fear washed over Lina, and then a humiliation quite unlike the desirable humiliation she had felt during her disciplining and training. This was a much colder, more fearful sensation, for while she was not even certain what confidence Dr. Doyle referred to, she was certain that it was a far more vulnerable thing than even her bared bottom, or her most intimate places.

“Speak freely, Miss Blanchet,” Doyle said.

Mr. Blackstone was behind her, standing, and she turned slightly, for she desired to look at him, but remembering that he did not wish her to do so, she stopped the turn of her head with a sudden jerk and glued her eyes to the floor in front of her.

“Sss...sssir,” she murmured. “Dr. Doyle. I am... I am not certain of what you ssss... speak.”

“No?”

“Of my... confidence, sir.”

“Ah, yes.” Doyle seemed quite cheerful now. “I do sometimes forget that what others communicate to me is not entirely clear even to them. I refer, Miss Blanchet, to the fact that when I trained you after Mr. Blackstone, that you seemed most concerned that you may have somehow displeased him. Correct?”

Lina’s cheeks burned, but she managed to nod and say quietly, “Correct.”

“Why is that, Miss Blanchet?”

Lina looked at Dr. Doyle questioningly. Her eyes began to grow wet, for she did not know what was expected of her. “Wh...why? Sir?”

“Why did you believe that Mr. Blackstone was displeased with you?”

Lina blushed again, and the skin on her chest burned with the wave of heat that swelled from her heart and washed over her face and the back of her neck until her ears burned with its touch. “I... I... because... I am uncertain, Dr. Doyle—sir—if I should... should speak...”

“Speak in earnest,” Dr. Doyle said. He seemed... almost cheerful.

Lina glanced one final time in the direction of Mr. Blackstone, but averted her eyes quickly enough that the image reaching her mind was brief and quickly distorted. He had looked, in that instant, like a very handsome man, with wild blue eyes and dark, thick hair, and a face marred only by the faintest of scars...

“I thought... he... was displeased,” Lina stammered. “He left so... with such haste.”

Her cheeks burned at the memory of him leaving her, as though she had done something most disappointing. The cold sensation in her chest grew, spreading to her limbs, and she felt almost certain she would swoon like Evangeline any moment.

“Rohan,” Doyle said cheerfully, addressing Mr. Blackstone. “Do you care to share with Miss Blanchet the reason for your hasty departure?”

There was a terrible and long silence, so long that Lina looked up uncertainly at Doyle for guidance but saw only his confident smile.

“He does not. I take it Mr. Blackstone has as much difficulty expressing himself as you do, Miss Blanchet.” Doyle smiled again. “A fine pair.”

Doyle stepped closer to Lina and pushed her hair delicately away from her face. “Would you,” he said, and Lina thought he was speaking to her, for he was looking deeply into her eyes as he spoke, “be so kind to at least explain to Miss Blanchet that you did not leave with haste because you were displeased with her?”

Lina blinked in confusion. Her mind was still struggling to understand whether or not Doyle was asking something of her, for he was looking at her almost imploringly, when she felt Mr. Blackstone’s fingers in her hair, sifting through it, a gentle caress. She looked at Doyle’s hands, unable to understand how they had come to be where they were and did not understand at all until Blackstone spoke.

“My pet,” his voice purred. “I did not leave in haste because you had displeased me.”

Lina’s body went stiff, as confusion and pleasure clanged together in her chest, and she struggled to understand what Mr. Blackstone was saying. She turned her head, and he did not try to stop her; in fact, his finger was upon her chin and turning her to face him.

Her lips parted as she let a gasp escape them.

“But you’re...” she whispered, a great tremor passing through her body.

For Blackstone was not a monster at all. His features were rugged, not refined, but his countenance was beautiful and achingly masculine. Only the faintest scar marred his skin, along a high and aristocratic cheekbone. The lips she had felt on her body were sensual and serious, but did not form the terrifying, bestial snarl she had imagined. He shocked her further by—almost—smiling. For in his face there was a tenderness that she had not expected, and she found it quite difficult to reconcile the man she had imagined with the man now before her.

In confusion, she whipped her head back to Dr. Doyle, her eyes imploring him for an explanation.

“I don’t understand,” she said quietly, when neither of the men spoke.

Doyle looked at Blackstone, and the two men seemed to exchange something in their look. Dr. Doyle reached for her hand. “I believe Miss Blanchet has been sufficiently disciplined, do you not, Mr. Blackstone?”

“Indeed,” he said, his breath warm on her shoulder, for he had come up behind her as Doyle made her rise from the chair, and his arm encircled her waist. Lina’s heart beat wildly at his touch, at the presence of the two of them so close to her, the swirling confusion of their intentions. Her mouth was open, but she did not know what to say or do.

“Come, Miss Blanchet. I think it is time we explain everything to you,” Dr. Doyle said. His eyes looked up at Blackstone’s over her shoulder.

She felt Blackstone’s lips on her skin and her entire body shuddered as the tender, dry, warm kiss brushed over her and he pulled her closer to him with the same formidable strength he had shown before. This time, however, it was different: as if a need stemmed from within Mr. Blackstone, one he would sate with tenderness.

“First,” Mr. Blackstone said, “we shall attend to another, more pressing matter.”

And then he was guiding her, and so was Dr. Doyle, both of them holding her and pushing her forward. Their lips were on her hands and her shoulders, and thankfully, their own hands holding her up, for her eyes had shut and the world was spinning in a delirium she had never imagined experiencing before.

* * *

After another confusing trip through the dimly lit passages hidden behind the extraordinary rooms and corridors of the grand estate, and ascending many staircases rather than descending, the two men guided Lina to a room she had never been in before. It was a smaller chamber—at least by the standards of the enormous home. Walls, painted a lovely shade of rich red or covered over with luxurious paper, enclosed a space occupied largely by an enormous bed. A cozy fire crackled in the hearth, keeping the room a pleasant temperature.

But she could scarcely take in her surroundings, for her sensibilities were immediately commandeered by the attentions of the two men. Dr. Doyle entered first, and, standing by the bed, began to unbutton his crisp shirt as Mr. Blackstone restrained Lina gently by the arms, his fingers traveling along the length of her limbs with no more weight than a feather. It sent shivers along the backs of her arms to crash with the waves of pleasure radiating from her spine and her shoulders, where his lips grazed her skin, warm and dry.

She wanted to close her eyes, as if doing so would make it possible for her to anchor herself in the spinning, wild world of sensations that she found herself. She could not, however, take her gaze away from Dr. Doyle’s simmering stare, for he was devouring her with his own eyes and held her captive with whatever burned behind them.

His shirt fell away to reveal his smooth skin and the contours of the sculpted muscles beneath his chest and abdomen. Lina blushed, for she had never gazed upon a man so brazenly, and yet she could not take her eyes away. She could not know why, but she enjoyed the sight of him, however inappropriate it might be. She could not be sure what Dr. Doyle had in store for her, why he and Mr. Blackstone were acting together to stir her into this delirious state. She only knew that, however wrong it might be, the feeling that clawed at her from the inside was drawing out all reason or protest, and she could only comply with whatever they seemed to want of her.

Mr. Blackstone’s fingers moved over her shoulders and nimbly along the buttoned bodice of her dress, pulling the loops from the hooks with slow deliberation. Each soft sound of the loops releasing drove the cool spike of desire into her belly further, and she could feel longing and anticipation

making her cunny wet, making her bottom squeeze the object inside of her, making her pulse race and her chest tighten.

Dr. Doyle removed his trousers, still holding her in his burning gaze. She held her eyes rigidly upon his face, forcing them not to wander to take in the things below his bare chest. But Mr. Blackstone's lips were close to her ear, sending another ripple of pleasure sliding down her neck like a droplet of water. "Do not be afraid to look at Dr. Doyle, and look at his prick, for he wants you to take pleasure from his body the same way we will take pleasure from yours."

We.

Lina again found her lips parting, thousands of words at the tip of her tongue: questions, proclamations, worries, protestations. But no words left her mouth, only a puff of air, for she could not retain a thought in her head long enough to form them. Mr. Blackstone's fingers were traveling down her bare back, lightly tracing the curve of her spine, coming to the lowest part of her back where the round of her bottom began, and they continued, into the fabric of the dress, between her buttocks. She ached for him to press upon the knob between her cheeks, to make the object inside of her bruise her tender flesh in any direction, but he did not. His fingers moved back up her spine and to the parted folds of the dress, which he slipped from her shoulders so that the material peeled away as one would peel a tropical fruit, and her bare torso was exposed to Dr. Doyle.

Shamefully, as Mr. Blackstone aroused her so, her eyes had drifted to Dr. Doyle's manhood. It, like the objects in Mr. Blackstone's dungeon-like room, was long and smooth, with a ridge at the end of it, and the curious hole she had felt with her tongue when Mr. Blackstone had put his cock in her mouth. But it pulsed, and seemed to grow before her, and was made of flesh, not a cold stone. She remembered what it felt like to have Mr. Blackstone's prick inside of her, hard and hot, and a liquid poured from between her legs, trickling down the insides of her thighs.

Mr. Blackstone peeled the rest of the dress from her body, taking her drawers with it, but quickly caught her wrists as he stood up behind her. His lips closed on her skin again, on her neck, just above her left shoulder, and her eyes felt too heavy to keep open. A murmur fluttered in her throat; she could not stop it.

Dr. Doyle climbed onto the bed, still watching her. Mr. Blackstone's hands moved over her chest, cupping her breasts, rubbing a thumb over her erect nipples. The feeling of his fingers on her nipples seemed connected, as if by an internal string, to the pulsing cunny between her legs, especially that button that made her jerk so wildly. She craved his touch there, but he instead rolled her hardened nipples in his fingers, held up her bounty for Dr. Doyle to watch, sitting upright on the bed, his prick full and pointed straight above his lap.

Mr. Blackstone was moving her forward all this while, so slowly she did not realize they were moving until her thighs brushed against the bed, so transfixed was she by the scene before her and the feel of his fingers.

"Go to him, my pet," Mr. Blackstone breathed against her neck, just as Dr. Doyle held out his hands to take her wrists, which Mr. Blackstone lifted toward him as if choreographed. Lina could not have willed her body to do anything but what they wanted it to do, even if she had been able to think of

such an idea. Her arms went limply to Dr. Doyle, who encircled her wrists and pulled her onto the bed, rising up to meet her mouth with his.

Dr. Doyle's hands moved down her arms, as tenderly as Mr. Blackstone's had, guiding her to be situated atop his lap. She could feel his male part against the insides of her thighs, but her thoughts were pulled to Dr. Doyle's kiss: his lips were soft, dry, and warm. His tongue pushed insistently into her mouth, and her body melted as he kissed her. It was the only thing she could think of until he pulled away from her mouth, her lips gently nabbed between his teeth. He met her eyes, and kissed her again, pressing the small of her back so that her naked body was against his hot skin and hard muscle.

He moved a hand between her legs, brushing over her cunny, a finger sliding into her slippery folds and over the nub, making her body buck against him. He held her in place, curling a finger up inside of her and pulling her gently toward him, so that a terrifyingly pleasant ache held her steady against his chest as his mouth moved insistently over hers.

"I am going to put my prick inside you now, Carolina," he breathed, with his lips very close to hers. "And then we are going to take you together, and claim you as our own."

Lina's eyes went wide. "But—" she murmured, but Dr. Doyle kissed her, and she could feel his smile on her lips as he did.

"You will do fine," Dr. Doyle breathed. "You will be a very good girl and take us both. You're doing very nicely, Carolina, and we will be gentle if you submit yourself completely. Will you do that, Carolina? Submit to your masters and allow us to pleasure ourselves and spend in your pretty cunny and your little bottom?"

Lina found her mouth open again but unable to form the words. Dr. Doyle had made the coiled ache in her belly tighten so that she felt as though she might burst. She knew that she must say it, that she must submit, but a flash of fear gripped her as she imagined the two men inside of her.

"B...bbboth... of you?" she whispered weakly. Her head was already moving side to side, very tremulously. "It's... too much," she whispered. "Is it not? You will be... too big..."

Behind her, as she spoke, she could hear in the trembling pauses of her voice that Mr. Blackstone was removing his clothing. He, too, would be naked, and she longed to look at his body as she had Dr. Doyle's, and to see his manhood, to feel it...

Dr. Doyle brushed his thumb over Lina's lower lip. "We will be very gentle with you, Carolina. Perhaps later, when you have been trained, we shall take you however the mood strikes us, but you will desire to please us and your submission will bring you your own pleasure. As it already has. Now tell me, will you be a good girl and submit to your masters at last, so we may claim you as our own?"

Mr. Blackstone was behind her on the bed now; she felt his weight shift behind her. His hands gripped her gently at her ribcage, then slid down to her hips, his thumbs into the valley between her buttocks, until they nudged the object in her bottom.

Lina mewled and closed her eyes. Dr. Doyle's mouth closed around her right nipple, a wet heat that made her body shiver.

"You must say the words, Lina," Mr. Blackstone breathed near her ear. "Say that you will submit to being taken."

Lina heard herself as though from far away. "I submit to being taken," she mewled. "By my masters."

"Sir," Mr. Blackstone prodded, and she thought she heard a smile in his usually stern voice. She could certainly feel Dr. Doyle's lips as his expression changed.

"Sir," Lina breathed.

She could not know whose hands did what next, for there were four of them and they seemed to move in concert. Hands pushed her thighs apart, hands moved into her hair making it tumble from the carefully arranged style, and hands pulled her locks firmly as Dr. Doyle's mouth claimed hers again. Hands cupped her breasts, fingers moved over the object in her bottom, and then she was lifted by hands and pushed against Dr. Doyle's chest as his manhood was guided to her cunny.

He swallowed the sound she made as his thick member slid into her body, hot and firm, pressing against her, filling her up. The hand on the back of her head lifted her gently, but she wanted to move, and so she rose and then fell, riding the thick column between her legs, her mewling sucked into Dr. Doyle's mouth.

His body moved beneath her, while his hand on her back pressed her to him, and then they were sliding until they were horizontal on the bed. She could feel Mr. Blackstone's hands, parting her legs, moving the object in her bottom. As it rolled inside of her, it pressed against the throbbing heat of Dr. Doyle's cock, and she squirmed but could not move, for she was pressed against him by one of those strong hands that held her in place.

The ache between her legs was building, and Dr. Doyle moved her so that the place between her legs that gave her so much pleasure was squeezed again and again, and she could feel herself very nearly going over that cliff of pleasure.

But then she felt the object in her bottom, sliding out, leaving her empty, her body throbbing with disappointment. Just as she began to cry out and turn her head to see what Mr. Blackstone was doing, the smooth, thick heat of his prick kissed her throbbing eyelet.

"Oh!" she moaned, as he pushed inside of her. He was far larger than the plug, but the sharp, stretching pain was momentary.

"Shhh," Dr. Doyle whispered in her ear, cradling her head to his shoulder. "Submit your body to our will. Relax."

His fingers played with her hair, and her eyes went wide and her body stiff for a moment, but then she melted against his embrace as Mr. Blackstone slid inside of her, filling her completely, until the hardened muscles of his chest, damp with sweat, were against her own.

Between them, enveloped in the strength of their bodies, filled with their manhood, Lina's body

seemed to become almost liquid. She was encircled by their protective desire and could not escape it—nor did she want to. Soon the ache between her legs was overpowering her again, and she could hear the moan in her chest as it blossomed, fluttered in her throat, and a rushing sound filled her ears. But the two men moving against her body left her no room to squirm.

The pleasure that overtook her nearly made her lose consciousness. She was screaming in pleasure, but heard herself as though from far away. Her legs shook against theirs, among theirs, and her body squeezed and pulsed against the two pricks inside of her.

But they were not done, they only slowed as she spent away to a shuddering limpness between them; slowly, plunging deep inside of her so that she was entirely full, then teasing her as they rubbed against her insides, pulling out, then thrusting deep inside again.

“I cannot,” she murmured, breathlessly, “it is too much, I cannot...”

But what she “could not,” she could not know. She could not have more pleasure, and yet she could. It mattered not, for they slowly moved against her body until again the pleasure between her legs began to claw inside of her and rise, like a swell. Stars began to form at the edges of her eyes, and she was certain it would be too much this time. Too much pleasure, and she would not be able to withstand it.

The second time she careened over the edge of that tidal pleasure, she could not scream. Her mouth was open but her body seemed to freeze, and no sound could leave her lips. Vaguely, through the haze of that terrifying pleasure, she felt the seed of first Dr. Doyle, and then the deep, thick thrusts of Mr. Blackstone’s fat prick in her bottom, before the hot wetness of his seed filled her there as well.

For a long time, they remained entangled in each other’s arms. They were both inside of her, around her, and she felt as safe and fulfilled as she had ever imagined she could feel in her life.

But when Dr. Doyle stirred, and pulled away from her to look her in the eyes, she remembered that beneath all of this bliss there were unsettled questions and what seemed like dark secrets. Her expression clouded, and Dr. Doyle, always sensitive to her troubles, touched her cheek.

“What is wrong, my darling Lina? We have not hurt you, I hope?”

Lina chewed on her lip, and shook her head lightly. Behind her, Mr. Blackstone was also stirring, though he did not release her from his arms, but instead wrapped them more tightly around her and entwined his fingers with hers. His lips grazed her shoulder.

“Then what, my pet?” Dr. Doyle asked her.

“I’m just...” Lina began. She found herself, as so many times before, tongue-tied, and unable to finish her sentence. So many thoughts and feelings sprang up in her mind and heart, and they all collided together. “I’m just... so happy... and you’ve made me... I don’t understand why... and haven’t we done something so very...? And I don’t... I simply do not understand!” She finished with exasperation, for she was very much aware that what she was saying made very little sense.

Dr. Doyle kissed her on the forehead. “I promise to you that we shall explain everything, and that all will be quite well, and we shall take care of you and keep you as our bride. For now, I recommend sleep.”

Sleep. Sleep *did* threaten to claim Lina; it made her eyelids heavy, her limbs felt like stone. The warmth of their two bodies enveloped her in a haze, but she resisted the urge to drift away into her dreams. “But... how... what...?” she heard herself saying.

She still didn’t understand, just as she had understood nothing since Mr. Blackstone had come to Green Grove Manor, and she had seen his blue eyes through the hedge.

“Sleep now, my love,” Dr. Doyle said.

* * *

When she awoke, they were both dressed. Mr. Blackstone was seated on the edge of the bed, his fingers moving along the length of her arm to stroke her gently awake. “It is time to begin the day, Lina, darling,” he said. “I wanted to wake you before I began my work.” He leaned over to kiss her. “And Callum says I must remain here to explain matters to you,” he added, glancing at Dr. Doyle.

Dr. Doyle was holding a dressing gown of fine white silk with black embroidery so that Lina could step into it as she left the bed. A marvelous breakfast had been arranged on a table in the dressing room, which Lina had—for very clear reasons—not noticed the evening before.

Dr. Doyle slid the gown over her shoulders, and Mr. Blackstone kissed her again, and then they escorted her to the table, where they nearly fell over each other making sure her every whim and desire was taken care of immediately.

“Well,” Dr. Doyle declared, as she bit into a scrumptious toast with rose hip jam slathered on it, “I suppose we should explain... matters to you plainly.”

Lina nodded and covered her lips to murmur, “I should very much like that,” without the toast falling from her mouth.

“Rohan—Mr. Blackstone, but you shall, whenever we are not engaged in our intimate games, call him by his first name should you desire, and me as well—and I discovered our predilection for sharing women when we were soldiers in the war together. A man has a great deal of time to talk to his brothers in arms during the long hours of idle waiting that are so prevalent in a war.” Dr. Doyle stirred something into Lina’s tea and handed it to her. “This will be quite refreshing after a night of such exertion,” he told her, smiling.

Lina sipped the tea, and found it to be so. But she wanted the rest of their story, so she looked at him expectantly.

“Naturally,” Dr. Doyle said, with a glance at Mr. Blackstone, “such arrangements are disallowed in this rather... conservative society. Rohan was to inherit a great fortune from his uncle, but only upon the condition that he marry respectably. And naturally, no woman who would live such an unconventional lifestyle would conform to such a definition.”

“Fortune, however, smiled upon us when we were both injured at the front. We were sent back to England with several soldiers who were plotting a scheme to legitimize their marriages to the women they loved, and we listened to their plans. These men had wild plans, which involved stealing the

identity of another man who looked very much like them, for they had both been horribly disfigured in their relative misfortunes.”

“Now, Rohan had no such injuries, nor did I, but he *had* been cut severely across the face. We bandaged him long before our arrival in this country, and I pretended that his injuries were so severe that he was horribly disfigured and must become a recluse with a personal surgeon always at his side. Thus the myth of Rohan Blackstone the monster was born, and we have employed various methods of... shall we say, perpetuating this myth. The idea was that his uncle might see fit to pass his fortune on to Rohan without a valid marriage, for he could hardly be expected to marry with such a disability, and a physical deformity which had caused him to become a recluse.”

“And yet, the old man instead secured the money for a distant relative, after making an allowance for Rohan’s well-being.”

Lina looked at Mr. Blackstone, who was silent as always. Then she looked around the grand room, evidence aplenty that *some* fortune must have been inherited.

Dr. Doyle chuckled, having read her thoughts.

“Mr. Blackstone found other ways to secure his fortune, for he is a very clever man indeed. He might have abandoned this other ruse, that of being deformed and reclusive, if not for one thing: he very much wanted to obtain a woman for us to share, one who would be his bride and allow for our... proclivities to be satisfied.”

“And that, my dear Lina, is where you have come in. At last, he believed we had found such a woman—a woman who held no title, no fortune, and indeed, no family reputation to protect—but who was charming and beautiful, and of good enough upbringing to be easily adjusted to a life in a manor such as this. We believed that your circumstances, and your upbringing, and your much-famed tendencies toward rather feral behavior, would all combine splendidly for our purposes. In you, we thought we had found the perfect bride.”

“And we have,” Rohan said softly, sending a shudder of pleasure down Lina’s spine again.

Dr. Doyle slid his hand across the table and touched hers. “Carolina, we were disappointed when we heard what happened with you and Mr. Carrington. We allowed that disappointment to lead us to rash decisions. But we have changed our minds, for we cannot live without you, and we realize our grave error. If you will have us, you will marry Rohan, and we shall live our lives together, here, all three of us. We shall share you as we always wanted, and in exchange for your... flexibility... you shall never want for anything, for two men can better care for a woman than one.”

Lina’s eyes were wet with tears whose provenance she could not be sure of; she was filled with wonder, confusion, joy, and curiosity, and she could not determine which of those sentiments so overwhelmed her.

“But... but...” she said, looking back and forth from each man to the other almost helplessly.

“What is it, my darling? Whatever it is, we shall correct it. All that we ask is that you submit to our sexual desires, and I believe you do so willingly. Anything else that you desire you shall have,” Dr.

Doyle said.

“For you are perfect, Lina,” Mr. Blackstone said, his hand on her shoulder, gently at first and then with possessive squeeze. “And we shall give you all that you desire. If you will only give us what we desire, should you accept us.”

Lina still could not speak, and the tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks.

“Are you unhappy?” Dr. Doyle asked, with concern.

Lina shook her head furiously, and the tears did fall to her cheeks. She wiped them impatiently away. “No, no!” she said, sniffing. “I’m so very...”

But she could not find the right word for what she was, so instead, she collapsed into Dr. Doyle’s waiting arms, and he kissed away her tears.

* * *

It all seemed like a fairy tale, at least momentarily.

By the afternoon, Mr. Blackstone had retreated to his study to handle his many business affairs and had promised to arrange a rapid wedding ceremony. She would be married to Mr. Blackstone, for he was the holder of the greater fortune between the two men, and they desired that she be taken care of should anything befall him. The wedding would be quaint, and essentially private, but as Mr. Blackstone had struggled with how best to convey the end of their wedding arrangements and Lina’s subsequent delivery to Mr. Laroui in a manner that would have been acceptable to society and Lina’s guardians, it had not yet been announced. Since he was a renowned eccentric, they would merely be required to announce that the wedding had taken place, and all concerned could assume that no uncomfortable questions would be asked of them.

“Besides,” Dr. Doyle had assured her with a smile, “Mr. Blackstone is in possession of such wealth that few are willing to question his choices, particularly with regard to what appears to be a conventional marriage.”

And so Lina had remained, blissfully assured of her good fortune and feeling very much in love—however strange a love it may have been—to take tea with Dr. Doyle in the conservatory.

Dr. Doyle was ever so much more of a conversationalist and interested in discussing his very many interesting adventures as a doctor. Lina was pleasantly surprised to find that he did not consider any topics inappropriate to share with a woman, and was beginning to realize that her fortune extended beyond that of mere financial security, for between the two men she had ample delights awaiting her: the intellectual stimulation of conversation with Dr. Doyle, from whom she could learn ever so much, as well as his tenderness and patience. Mr. Blackstone was a darker and more tempestuous man, but she could not deny that he inflamed in her a far more profound physical passion, and that she loved him very much precisely for his darkness and mystery. She even found herself confessing as much to Dr. Doyle, who explained to her that this shared care and love, which encompassed all of these gifts for her, was even better than a traditional marriage. She could not agree more, nor could she really believe the great fortune that had been bestowed upon her.

No sooner had she settled into this blissful state of acceptance, however, than it seemed it might all be torn away from her.

“I should be very happy, if you wish, my dear Lina, to instruct you in whatever may interest you of medicine, or biology,” Dr. Doyle was telling her. “Perhaps we could even—”

“Dr. Doyle, sir, I beg your pardon for the interruption,” a butler said, hurrying into the conservatory at that precise moment. “Mr. Blackstone has asked that I request your presence forthwith, as a Mr. Laroui has arrived unexpectedly and the matter requires your attention.”

Lina bristled, and her eyes went wide. She had forgotten about the “Laroui,” to whom she had been promised.

Dr. Doyle reached for her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. “My sweet Lina, worry not,” he told her quietly. To the butler, he barked, “Assure Mr. Blackstone that I shall meet with our guest promptly.”

He waited for the butler to leave before turning to Lina. He stroked her cheek tenderly with the back of his hand and pulled her face close to his by the chin. “Do not be worried, my sweet Lina,” he told her, before kissing her with passion. “We have agreed upon a plan to console Mr. Laroui, and whatever his reaction may be, we shall not give you up to him, at any cost. I apologize that I must interrupt this lovely afternoon with you. Please stay here, enjoy your tea, and I shall return in due time.”

Lina smiled for him, though her heart felt as though it had been flung again into the heavens. The doctor excused himself just as a maid entered the room with a sumptuous cake they had decided to share, which Dr. Doyle instructed Lina to enjoy alone.

The conservatory had a lovely view of the immense gardens, and a bookcase with several dry books in it. She enjoyed the view and entertained herself with the books as the sky darkened and the gas lamps magically lighted themselves—a trick she should very much like to learn more about. But as the minutes became hours and time seemed to move even more slowly than normal, her heart sunk with each passing second and she found herself dismal and anxious. The maids and butlers had not returned, and she supposed that she was forgotten.

She left the conservatory in search of a powder room, for she was fairly certain that she knew her way about this wing of the estate sufficiently to locate such a room and return. Once in the corridors, however, curiosity overcame Lina, and she began to open doors to peer inside the enormous and richly decorated rooms, if only for the sheer joy of seeing such interesting and beautiful things.

After a few rooms, she quite forgot herself, and her troubles. The thought flitted through her mind that she was being a bit naughty, but it was such fun and so in her nature to go on adventures, that she quite handily dismissed the thoughts. After all, she would soon be married to Mr. Blackstone and the estate would be hers, and Dr. Doyle had told her that she would be free to explore as she wished, provided that she followed all of the rules Mr. Blackstone would set forth. If she did not, he had added with a gleam in his eyes, she would of course be disciplined.

Lina did not find discipline to be a very good deterrent; she might even break rules purposely in order to receive such delightful “discipline.” For she was coming to understand herself, and what she

wanted and needed, and was no longer ashamed of her own proclivities... at least not as ashamed as she was upon her arrival.

She was turned around and quite lost, and thinking of the burning spanking that she would receive with great pleasure after she was discovered. Seeing nothing she recognized, she entered a great room that appeared to be a ballroom and was marveling at the interior of richly painted frescoes and a massive chandelier in the dim light, when she heard the voices. They were muffled, and it took her some time to discover that a service hallway was behind a cleverly disguised door in the far corner of the great room.

She opened it without hesitation, for that was her nature. When she did, she heard the voices more distinctly: she recognized Mr. Blackstone's voice, though it was inflamed by a far greater passion than she had ever heard. He seemed quite angry, which reassured her momentarily. Another voice spoke, and she could not make out what it said, and then another.

She crept down the stairs, for the voices became louder as she did, and when she reached the end of the flight of stairs in the very narrow passageway, she understood that the voices were coming from behind the door at the bottom.

She hesitated but a moment, before placed her ear against the door.

A man was speaking in a foreign tongue of great complexity, and he spoke for a long time. She guessed this was the infamous Laroui, for he was a foreigner. She could make nothing of what he said and despaired of overhearing the conversation in full. After all, it concerned her future. She lingered, and just as she was about to turn away, she very distinctly heard the voice of Dr. Doyle.

His voice grew louder as he spoke, indicating that he was nearing the door, so Lina listened as long as she felt she could, but when his voice was quite close to the door, her heart was beating so fast and she became gripped by such fear and panic that she fled as soundlessly as she possibly could, back to the ballroom, shutting the door behind her quickly and quietly. In the ballroom, which had become considerably darker, the blue light closed in upon her and her rushing blood filled her ears with a tinny ringing. For she had heard, before fleeing, Dr. Doyle very distinctly saying:

“Perhaps, then, we could come to an arrangement. Perhaps... we could... if we consent, allow the Moulay to take his pleasure with Miss Blanchet before our wedding, then the Moulay might see fit to forgive the debt...”

Lina closed her eyes, as if doing so would remove the echo of Dr. Doyle's words from her mind. For a moment, she tried to believe that she had heard him incorrectly, or that the voice was not his own. But it was his voice, and she had heard him clearly, and he had hesitated as he spoke, as though he were thinking out loud.

Hot tears welled up in Lina's eyes. She was crushed, and as they spilled to her cheeks and ran down her face, she allowed herself a moment of self-pity. She teetered in the ringing silence on the verge of utter despair. She had been so certain, so believing, so trusting—the two men had spun such an intricate web of deceit, and she wanted to believe it.

Her heart hardened suddenly.

She had been a fool to believe it.

She opened her eyes and stared into the dark ballroom. Was this to be her life forever, in a gilded cage, striving for the affection and love she had been promised, but given away to wealthy friends as a favor? They could not truly love her as they had promised if they considered doing such a thing.

A sort of panic overtook her. It was not like anything she had ever experienced before. She did not feel as though she would faint, or even as though she might lose control. Instead, her mind became sharply focused as her heart closed up, and she was several moves ahead of herself as she methodically—quickly, but methodically—walked at almost a dead run, into the corridors, her mind always on the next turn, on the way to leave a labyrinth, on the outside light, on descending the stairs, on finding hidden doors, on how to find the carriage house she had seen on her walks, on where the kitchen might be so that she could steal food.

And so, drawing upon her years of experience sneaking about the vast ruins of Green Grove, she managed to find the servant's quarters, take from the kitchens several loaves of bread and the coat of an unfortunate maid. And then, with the same determined quickness, she stole toward the carriage house, though what she would do there, she was not entirely certain.

Chapter Eighteen

Doyle had become quite tired of translating for the implacable Moulay Laroui by the time Mongrave interrupted their meeting, which had, by that time, become at least neutral in tone, with Laroui willing to accept the settlement they had been hashing out for several hours. Doyle had not realized how much time had passed until Mongrave burst in, apologetically, bowing, and with a most serious expression upon his face.

“I beg your pardon, good sirs, Moulay,” he said gravely, “but a most urgent matter has arisen which requires the presence of Master Doyle.”

Mongrave was a seasoned butler of the most impeccable type; he would not interrupt for all but the most urgent of matters. That he did so with the regal tone he imparted was all showmanship: Doyle immediately intuited that something quite terrible had happened, and in his heart he felt it must have to do with Lina, though he could not say why.

Blackstone, who had grown quite annoyed with Laroui, seemed to sense the same. He glowered at Mongrave for a moment, as though appraising whether the time-honored traditions of Mongrave’s family might have suddenly evaporated in fecklessness, and having concluded that such behavior was impossible, he said, “Mongrave, Dr. Doyle is unfortunately quite occupied, as he is the linguist of the two of us and must remain here to interpret for the Moulay. Are you quite certain this matter requires only the attentions of Dr. Doyle, or can I not attend to it?”

For the first time in Doyle’s recollection, Mongrave was at a loss for a few moments. But he recovered quickly. “Sir, I believe such a decision should be informed by your own discretion, but I assure you that one or the other of you is required most urgently.”

Doyle glared at Blackstone as he left, but knew enough of Mongrave’s discretion and training to conclude that a scene should not be made, and the man had faithfully communicated that only one of them should attend to the matter. Naturally, Doyle concluded with his sharp mind that something must be happening which in some way involved Laroui, and he only hoped it was not something damaging to the Moulay’s mood or means of transport, for Doyle was quite anxious to rid the estate of this guest as soon as possible.

* * *

“It is Miss Blanchet, sir,” Mongrave told Blackstone as soon as the two had walked briskly to a landing far from the study, where they could not be heard. Mongrave, impassive as stone, betrayed no emotion as he spoke. “I’m afraid the stable hand was asked to saddle a horse for her and was concerned that something inappropriate might perchance be taking place, as Miss Blanchet requested that one of Moulay Laroui’s horses be prepared for her to ride.”

Blackstone furrowed his brow, finding he had nothing, immediately, to say.

“And of course, it is very dark,” Mongrave added.

Blackstone could scarcely believe what he was hearing. Doyle had conveyed to him that the afternoon

had been lovely with Miss Blanchet, that she seemed very content and spoke continuously about how happy she was.

“And where is Miss Blanchet now, Mongrave?”

Mongrave, who could not hide the glimmer of a prideful smile for his own discretion and forethought, bowed slightly. “I instructed the stable hand to take his time preparing another horse for Miss Blanchet, until you or Master Doyle arrived to speak to Miss Blanchet. They are, as such, in the stable.”

Blackstone could not help himself, for he had not always been a wealthy man, and he had spent so much time as a soldier, that he occasionally forgot his position and those of other men. He tapped Mongrave lightly on the shoulder twice. “Good man,” he told him.

The butler, ever the bastion of refined behavior, did not react. Blackstone would not have known, however, for he was making his way down the stairs two at a time to see about Miss Blanchet.

* * *

She knew he had come to the stables before she even saw him. It was as if everything in the stables, from the horses to the bales of straw, sensed his imposing presence and bent to his will. A hush fell over the place.

She didn't bother calling out to the stable hand; his treachery was now making sense to her. He had been so willing to help her, so trustful of her story. He had just needed to send someone back to the house for something, and then he had been so incompetent and slow. Of course, he had only been stalling, keeping her busy, waiting for someone to alert Mr. Blackstone.

And now, she realized with an ever-sinking heart and a coldness that was flowing through her veins like icy springtime water, she was trapped, and he was coming for her.

She waited, her hand on the magnificent horse she had chosen to steal. He was the only light-colored horse in the stable and had somehow seemed more friendly and easy to handle than all the enormous black horses that filled the other stalls.

The enormous black beasts, however, ceased their stomping and unease as the footsteps of Mr. Blackstone neared the stall where she remained, her breath caught in her throat, with her hand on the steel-colored horse. She saw his hand reach out to one of them, and the horse nuzzled his palm as he passed.

But still. Still, she reminded herself. He really was a monster, and so was his “friend” Doyle, and she was not going to be passed about to foreign men. On this matter she was resolute, no matter how hurt she was, she would not show him, and she would not bend to his will.

He was suddenly in the light of the stable, his face stern, caught in a window of light instead of the shadows as he had always presented himself to her. She jutted out her chin, furious with him, and furious with Doyle, ready to tell him to go straight to hell.

But his blue eyes, though she knew it was a trick of the light, looked tender, and it caught her off

guard. The hot tears she so desperately wanted to be anger spilled from her eyes and she knew, when they did, that she was hurt. She didn't want him to see that, so she let them spill without wiping them away. These, she told herself, were tears of defiance and anger and she would not wipe them away.

The words were trapped in her chest, but she was pushing them up, forcing herself to say them.

But Mr. Blackstone spoke first.

“Lina.”

His voice was not what she had expected, even if she could not be certain of what she expected at all. It was all that he said, dripping with tenderness, and it broke her apart into a million pieces. A sob left her throat, and she could not hide her misery. She knew he would hear it, and she wanted to hide it from him, hide her foolishness for having loved and trusted him so absurdly—and for being, at this moment, so capable of retreating to that same love and trust.

But she knew what she had heard, and so her weak desire made her angry enough that she was she was able to spit:

“I will *not* be passed around like a whore, Mr. Blackstone, I shall have you know. And now I am leaving, and there is nothing you can do to stop me!”

Even as she said this, she was aware that it was untrue: Mr. Blackstone, whose strength she had felt so often, could easily stop her from leaving. But he could not stop her from leaving in the abstract sense. She would leave in her mind and seek a way to escape forever. She would not be a fool again.

He did not do what she expected. Through the blur of her hot tears she thought he wore an expression she had never expected to see on him: confusion. His brow was furrowed, his lips drawn in a frown, and he shook his head. “Lina, my dear, sweet Lina, whatever—?”

“Don't! Don't attempt to...to... assuage me with your... your... lies, and your... your... oh, just do not!”

“But Lina, please help me to understand what has overcome you!”

Lina shook her head. “I have been such a fool to believe you, and believe Dr. Doy... Doyle...” As she said his name, returning to the formal surname they had bade her to dismiss in place of their first names, a sob was caught in her throat again. Dr. Doyle had seemed even more caring than Mr. Blackstone, and it was he who had spoken of her so... carelessly.

She could say no more.

Mr. Blackstone approached her, slowly stepping into the stable, saying her name, attempting to calm her as one might calm a horse. “Lina, Lina, please tell me whatever has so upset you,” he coaxed.

It all happened in quite a blur. She saw an opening and a moment of weakness, so she took it. Spooking a horse, after all, was much easier than calming one, and so that is what she did to the gray horse, who whinnied frighteningly and rose upon his hind quarters, sending Mr. Blackstone dashing to one side to avoid the great beast. This gave Lina an opening to escape, and she ran through the stable doors.

It was dark outside and there was very little moonlight, so she knew as soon as she headed onto the great lawn of the garden that there was nowhere she could run to. Yet perhaps she could make it to the hedge, and dive into it, and disappear into the surrounding woods. It was a terrible idea, she knew, for the woods were easy to lose oneself in, and she did not know this area at all. She was frantic as she ran, thinking of where she would go, and what she would do, but love and anger were a potent mix that went straight to her mind and robbed her of any sensible thought.

It was, therefore, somewhat of a relief to hear the hooves of the horse that followed her, and the voice of Mr. Blackstone calling her name. The inky darkness only increased as she ran, and the sounds on the ample lawn were distorted, so she turned her head to gauge the distance from the estate. That is when the ground turned uneven beneath her feet, and a wrenching pain seized her ankle, and the dim gas lights, and the stars, and the black ground all entered a nauseating spin, until the cold, damp grass rose to slap her squarely across the left cheek.

“Lina!” Mr. Blackstone was saying as the horse hooves slowed and the horse snorted, and she heard his feet on the ground. His strong hands seized her by the shoulders and pulled her close to him, and his arms encircled her. He was warm, and she inhaled his scent and was dizzy again with affection. The pain in her ankle burned violently, but it was her heart that made her eyes overflow with tears.

“What *has* possessed you? Lina? Are you hurt?” Mr. Blackstone pushed her away to look at her face, but she knew he could not see her any better than she could see him. He placed a hand against her forehead. “Are you feverish? What has *possessed* you?!”

He sounded angry now, and Lina sobbed, shaking her head.

“Come, we shall return to the estate and you shall explain yourself fully,” he scolded her, as he lifted her beneath the arms.

Lina winced as she tried to stand on her ankle.

Mr. Blackstone pulled her to him, and she did not have the will to resist. She fell into his embrace and cried softly.

“You petulant girl,” he said, though his tone was not as harsh as it might have been. “Have you hurt yourself? Does it hurt very much?”

Lina could only nod.

And so he lifted her, easily and as though she weighed nothing, and set her upon the horse. He had evidently made peace with the gray horse she had intended to steal, and finished saddling him, all in but a moment’s time. When he looked up at her, his expression seemed partially bemused, though it may have been a trick of the light. “Are you able to ride this way?” he asked her.

She wanted very much to say no, or to fight him somehow, but it was occurring to her that her plans of escape were now senseless, and that she had no choice but to return to the estate.

She nodded, her lips pressed together.

She would return, but she would not be broken by her foolish sentimentality again.

“Let us return, then, and Callum shall see to your injury,” he said. It was then that she saw he was out of breath, and he paused to breathe deeply before asking her again, “Lina, my pet, what on earth has possessed you to do such a... reckless... thing?”

Lina pressed her lips together, and her heart burned. She only managed to say, “I do not wish to see Dr. Doyle.”

Mr. Blackstone looked at her for a moment, quite confused, and then, shaking his head, he began to lead the horse back to the stables.

* * *

But he took her to see Dr. Doyle anyway, or rather, he must have called upon him to attend to her in the surgery. Mr. Blackstone had carried her from the stables to the room, and Lina had no choice but to hold him around his strong shoulders with her nose close to his neck, inhaling the sweet, masculine scent of his skin. He said only, “You will be quite all right, you silly girl,” but several times, almost as though he repeated it for himself rather than her.

“You will not tell me what has happened?” he asked her, after setting her upon the bed.

Lina turned her head to the wall and pressed her lips together, for she must remain resolute before Mr. Blackstone’s charms. She had grown weaker in her resolve as he carried her, but when she felt she might seek his mouth with hers, she repeated Dr. Doyle’s vile words in her mind, over and over again, to harden her heart to the two men she had only hours before loved so much.

Perhaps... we could... if we consent, allow the Moulay to take his pleasure with Miss Blanchet before our wedding, then the Moulay might see fit to forgive the debt...

“But what has she told you?” Dr. Doyle hissed outside of the surgery when Mr. Blackstone met him in the anteroom. “What has she done?”

“I cannot coax a word from her now. She is talking nonsense. Perhaps she has a fever...”

The two men entered, and Lina attempted to turn her face away and cover it, but Dr. Doyle encircled her wrists and pulled her away from the wall.

The same look of concern clouded his face as well.

Well, Lina thought. How do you like that? Both of them, playing her for a fool!

“Lina,” Dr. Doyle said, looking into her eyes, his expression now clinical, examining her as a doctor might. He felt her skin and put his fingers on her wrist to feel for her pulse.

“Where are you injured, my love?”

Lina pursed her lips and closed her eyes to indicate that she would not cooperate with him. It was the only stand she could make.

“The matter seems to be with her right foot,” Mr. Blackstone said.

With her eyes closed, she could feel Dr. Doyle's hands upon her body, squeezing her gently, pulling her clothing away to look at her leg, fingers pausing before they reached her throbbing foot. "She's sprained it quite violently," Dr. Doyle said, without touching it. "My dear Lina, whatever could you have been thinking? You shall have to rest your foot for weeks, my darling, and the wedding shall be delayed."

This made Lina sob, a great howl which she attempted to contain but which warbled up in her throat anyway, and so she brought her hands to her face to cover it.

"Lina," Dr. Doyle's voice was saying, and she heard the two men speak to each other, though in snippets, for her own sobbing, trapped in her chest, was making it difficult for her to hear.

"Well, what has she said?!" Dr. Doyle snapped. "She does not suffer from a fever."

"Could it be that she is delirious, or somehow gone mad?" Mr. Blackstone wondered.

Lina opened her eyes and pushed herself up on her elbows. "I have not gone mad!" she almost shouted.

The two men looked at her, silent.

"Lina," Dr. Doyle finally said, very gently. He reached for her hands, and she recoiled.

"Please, my darling, tell me whatever has possessed you," Mr. Blackstone coaxed again.

Her eyes flew from one to the other. How concerned they managed to look, how deceptive!

She glared at Dr. Doyle, and his words again surfaced in her mind, making her anger flare wildly.

"I heard you," she heard herself hissing. And then it came pouring from her, louder with each word, rage building as she spoke. "I heard what you said to your friend! I heard you offer me to him! And I shall not be a plaything to... to..." her fists were balled up and she was furious, and then a great feeling of sadness swallowed her whole. "I loved you!" she shouted, imploding. She fell back on the bed. "I am such a fool for loving you, you are so... very vile..." her crying consumed her words, for as much as she wanted to be strong and filled with rage, her sadness consumed her.

"But Lina, what...what are you speaking of? What is she speaking of?" she heard Mr. Blackstone say.

"I heard you," Lina muttered, shaking her head. "I know what I heard..."

The two men exchanged glances, and Lina cried, not caring what they discussed.

"Lina," Dr. Doyle said, addressing her, grasping her wrists and forcing her to look at him. "Where did you hear this? What did you hear?"

"I heard you!" she said. "I was in the... stairway. I heard your voice, I heard what you said. I shall never forget it. You said... 'perhaps we can come to some arrangement, perhaps allow the Moulay to take his pleasure with Miss Blanchet...'"

Doyle sat back, still holding her hands. For a moment he looked perplexed, as if he were reaching

into his memory and not finding such a vile offer. What acting, Lina thought bitterly, and it angered her further. “Do not pretend you know not of what I speak, for I shall not—!”

But Lina was interrupted by laughter. Her face turned icy and she glared at Mr. Blackstone, from whom it emanated. He was shaking his head, and he reached out and caught Lina’s wrist as she wrenched it free from Doyle’s confused grip and lifted her hand to slap him.

“What was the last thing you heard, my little mouse? Those words?”

He looked at Dr. Doyle, a smile on his lips. “Do you know that when I first visited the Harlowes, Miss Blanchet was out in the grove, sneaking up to spy upon me as I approached? Her guardian warned me of her habits.” He looked at Lina, still holding her wrist, and brought her hand to his warm lips. “You have been quite naughty, my dear Lina. And you have been quite misinformed. I do hope this teaches you a lesson about sneaking and spying upon your lovers.”

Lina was ready to continue her diatribe, but confusion caught her words in her throat, and she stared at Mr. Blackstone.

“What you heard, Lina darling,” Dr. Doyle said, his face lighting up with sudden recognition, “was my voice, darling girl... but if you ran away before the conversation ended, you would not have realized that I was acting as a translator for the Moulay, for his English is quite garbled.”

Lina stared at Dr. Doyle, and then her eyes flew to Mr. Blackstone, who was still smirking slightly, but was now sitting on the edge of the bed to stroke her arm. “You do not believe that we would entertain such an idea, do you, my dear Lina?”

“But I heard...”

“You heard me translate Laroui’s words, my dear Lina. You quite evidently did not stay to hear Mr. Blackstone’s reaction. I assure you,” Dr. Doyle said, smiling, “it was most... unrepeatable in its vulgarity. Fortunately, I did not translate it all,” Doyle added, looking at Blackstone, “and so we were able to come to an alternate arrangement with Mr. Laroui. One that does not involve you, sweet Lina.”

Lina’s arms went limp in their hands. She was crying again and could not stop herself.

“Lina, darling,” Mr. Blackstone said, pulling her tightly to him. “I would never let another man have you. You belong to us now. What more can we do to assure you of that?”

“I feel so...” Lina whispered. “I am so very...”

But she was unable to finish, for now her heart was exploding with relief and love again.

“I feel quite foolish,” she said at last.

Mr. Blackstone—for it would take her some time to think of him as Rohan—kissed her forehead and, unbelievably, smiled. “We acted rashly once, based upon a misconception, so I believe it is gentlemanly to forgive the same foolishness in our beloved bride.”

He pulled her close to him, his strong arms encircling her. “But you must promise to never, ever doubt our love again.”

Lina nodded.

“There is,” Mr. Blackstone added in a low murmur, “also the other matter, of your disobedience.” His hand traveled along her back, and to her bottom, which he patted gently. “That sort of naughtiness requires discipline. Though I believe Dr. Doyle will ask me to delay your punishment until your ankle has healed.”

He kissed her again.

“I shall await my punishment with great anticipation,” she told him, and the now-familiar coils of pleasure in her lower body moved delightfully.

She hoped her ankle healed rapidly.

Epilogue

Dearest Evangeline and Anna,

I hope this letter finds you quite well. I send my deepest apologies for failing to write to you, for I realize that our final goodbyes were most hasty and incomplete. For that I can only apologize, for Mr. Blackstone is a man of action and decisiveness, and I have been quite preoccupied since my arrival here at Blackstone Estate.

I do not know where to begin, so I shall simply begin, with the hope that you shall decipher from my excited scribblings the intent of my letter.

Mr. Blackstone is a most marvelous companion, and a very good husband, but as rumored, he is also quite eccentric. I attribute his eccentricity to his high intelligence, and wealth, and disabilities, for it is true that my dear husband was injured in battle and is most uncomfortable in public settings. As such, we were married in a most private ceremony, though I do assure you both that great attention was given to the ceremony in order that it be as grand and beautiful as any large wedding.

You simply must come for a visit, and with Mr. Blackstone's permission, you may come any time and stay as long as you wish.

However, we intend to travel extensively upon the continent, including my beloved homeland, for it turns out that Mr. Blackstone is quite fond of France, and in any case wishes for me to have whatever I desire. Anna, you will remember how much I wished to travel? Mr. Blackstone has said that we may go anywhere I choose, provided that his trusted personal surgeon accompanies him to all places.

And so, I arrive at the most wonderful news of all! We shall be arriving at Green Grove Manor in less than a month, by way of our journey to London. At that time, I shall be very delighted to see both of you again.

Mr. Blackstone has told me that I may invite you to travel with us to France, and wherever else we may wish to go. He will of course cover all expenses for the voyage. You need only to desire to accompany us. I ask you to consider my offer as you await our arrival.

Oh, but please do join us. I have also invited our dear cousin Charlotte, and I so hope you both shall come. I assure you there will be a great many balls and social parties, and Mr. Blackstone shall ensure that you attend them in the finest regalia.

Anna, we shall at last see France as we dreamed!

With my warmest regards, and great joy in my heart that we shall see each other soon,

Lina

The End

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More Stormy Night Books by Samantha Madisen

The Warrior's Mate

For generations maidens of Adena's people have been taken as brides by the powerful men of the Tlani clan, in tribute for their continued protection, and when she comes of age Adena is given to the mighty warrior Lor Quinn. Stripped bare and displayed before the assembly, her suitability as a mate is tested and confirmed for all to see before she is claimed publicly by her new husband to consummate their union.

Lor's dominant lovemaking excites Adena far more than she ever would have thought possible, but it is only when she is led to Lor's training chamber after the ceremony that she begins to fully realize what it means to belong to him completely. He will explore her body thoroughly, punishing and pleasuring her as he wishes until she is left blushing crimson with shame yet still aching with need and longing for him to take her in any way he pleases.

Adena soon discovers that Lor's plans for her extend beyond their bedchamber, and as part of her training she is brought to a doctor for an intimate, humiliating examination as often as her husband feels it necessary. Any defiance merely earns her a hard, bare-bottom spanking, yet though his firm-handed dominance often leaves her with flaming cheeks and a sore bottom, as Lor's mastery of her body deepens Adena's passion for him burns hotter every day. But can she truly learn to embrace life as a warrior's mate?

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His Captive Mate

When her ship crashes on a foreign planet during her first hunting trip, Dazea shudders at the thought of being captured by the barbarians who inhabit this wild, primitive world, and her fears are soon realized when she is caught and taken captive by the ruggedly handsome Captain Hawk Agnon. His civilization turns out to be more technologically sophisticated than she had expected, but this only increases her shock when she finds out that Hawk plans to take her as his mate.

Among Hawk's people, women obey or face the consequences, and Dazea soon learns the hard way that defying her future mate will result in a long, hard spanking on her bare bottom. To make matters worse, she discovers that a sore bottom is far from the most humiliating experience in her future, because when the time comes for Hawk to claim her, it will be done in public.

After a thorough, intimate examination proves her ready to be mated, her training begins. In spite of everything, with each firm punishment and each helpless climax the intense need Hawk's dominance has kindled within her burns ever hotter. Soon enough she will be on display, naked and blushing, as her handsome, dominant mate publicly demonstrates his complete mastery of her body. But when that day comes, will she be able to resist the shame of begging for more?

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Hunted and Caught

Despite owing some big debts to some powerful and dangerous people, Rena has always managed to stay one step ahead of everyone who comes after her, but her luck finally runs out when her ship breaks down and bounty hunter Jonas Riks catches up to her.

Her attempt to resist capture merely earns Rena a painful, embarrassing spanking, and her humiliation deepens when she is subjected to a thorough, intimate medical examination to ensure she is fit for space travel. Rena is horrified to find herself helplessly aroused by Jonas' firm dominance, and to make matters worse, she knows full well that her naked body's shameful response to her treatment is fully on display for the handsome bounty hunter and his men.

Jonas does his best to think of Rena as nothing more than a package to be delivered, but the feel of her writhing over his knee during a well-deserved spanking and the sight of her blushing crimson as her beautiful body is examined make that quite difficult indeed. When Rena disregards an opportunity to escape in order to save a member of his crew instead, the decision is made for easy for him. No bounty is big enough to make it worth giving her up.

Rena quickly discovers that even though she is no longer his prisoner, Jonas is still more than ready to dominate her completely, and his masterful lovemaking brings her more pleasure than would have thought possible. But with formidable enemies still seeking to settle scores with Rena—and now with him as well—Jonas knows that it is only a matter of time before they are hunted down. He hatches a risky plan to keep them both safe, but will his gamble pay off?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Doctor Preston's Little Bride

When nineteen-year-old Priscilla Payne's guardian realizes that her ward is in desperate need of strict discipline if she is to have any hope of ever marrying well, she brings the recalcitrant girl to an academy for young ladies run by Doctor Charles Preston.

Within moments of her arrival at his door, Priscilla is pulled over the stern doctor's knee for a painful, embarrassing spanking on her bare bottom. That shameful chastisement is only the beginning, however, and soon enough she has been stripped naked for an intimate, incredibly humiliating examination in front of Doctor Preston's medical students.

Though he typically approaches the correction and treatment of his charges with a purely professional mindset, this spirited young woman's helpless response to his dominant touch ignites a fire within Doctor Preston that cannot be ignored, and he wastes no time in asking her guardian for Priscilla's hand.

After she is informed that she will be married to Doctor Preston and that during the engagement she will be confined to the nursery and treated the way she has been acting—like a spoiled, naughty little girl—Priscilla decides to feign obedience as she plots her escape. Yet despite her plans, with each

passing day she finds more and more pleasure in the handsome doctor's arms. When her wedding day arrives, will Priscilla decide that it is time to take her place as the lady of the house, or will she choose to remain as Doctor Preston's little bride forever?

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Chosen by the Doctor

Each year Dr. Sheldon Renshaw offers a place in his home to a young woman who has just come of age and would otherwise face a life of poverty. With patient tutoring and, when necessary, strict discipline, these girls are transformed from wards of the state into respectable ladies suitable for Victorian society.

Eighteen-year-old Tennie Butler harbors little hope of being chosen by Dr. Renshaw, and she's certain that whatever chance she had is lost after her defiant attitude earns her a sound spanking from the handsome physician during his annual visit to the orphanage. To her shock, however, that very evening she finds herself in a carriage heading for the esteemed doctor's home.

It doesn't take long for it to become clear that Tennie is quite different from the girls who have come before her, and when she is stripped bare for an intimate medical examination her helpless arousal cannot be overlooked. The wanton display leaves Dr. Renshaw yearning to claim Tennie, and soon enough she is begging for more as he dominates her completely. But can a doctor and an orphan truly forge a lasting bond, or will their passion burn hot and then flare out?

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The Correction Academy

After a revolution sweeps across the Earth and the rich and powerful are overthrown, Portia Casson is captured by the authorities of the new regime. After a shameful public spanking, she is whisked away by Dr. Daniel Damas and taken to the Correction Academy, a facility where the young women of the old upper class are taught their place in the new society.

Portia soon finds herself naked and blushing as she is thoroughly and intimately examined by the handsome doctor, but despite her protests she cannot hide her helpless arousal. Before long she is yearning for Daniel to claim her in any way he pleases, and surrendering to his masterful lovemaking brings her pleasure more intense than she would have ever dreamed.

Though her bond with Daniel grows stronger with each passing day, when one of the men who runs the Academy becomes aware of their romance it puts Portia's safety in jeopardy. Will Daniel do what it takes to protect her, even if it means putting his own life at risk as well?

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The Commander's Pet

Nineteen-year-old Alana hates her life on her uncle's merchant spaceship, and she is used to his lack of concern for her happiness, but she is nonetheless quite shocked when he agrees to offer her as a gift to Galath, a powerful alien commander who plans to make her his pet.

Moments after she is brought aboard Galath's ship, Alana is ordered to disrobe completely. From now on, she will wear nothing but a leash and collar, so that her beautiful body will be available for her owner's enjoyment any time he pleases. Galath makes clear that he will expect absolute submission from his pet, and disobedience will earn her a painful, humiliating spanking.

To Alana's surprise, Galath's stern discipline arouses her intensely, and soon she is quivering with desire as she is brought to a blushing climax by her handsome master. Over the coming days she is taught what it means to surrender fully to a dominant man, but when the time comes for her to be publicly claimed in the most shameful way possible, will she be ready?

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Shared by the Doctors

Dr. Amy Wenders has spent years studying time travel, but it still comes as a shock when a mishap in her research facility sends her back to the Victorian era. To make matters worse, she arrives on the doorstep of Andrew Chambers and Richard Stevenson, two physicians who run a clinic devoted to the practice of corrective therapy for naughty young women, and the strict, handsome doctors mistake her for a new patient in need of treatment.

Amy's defiant protests merely earn her a painful, embarrassing spanking, and she is informed that if she is going to behave like a child she will be treated like one. Her shame increases when the two gentlemen bring her before a dozen of their colleagues, where she is stripped bare, cleansed thoroughly, and then brought to a blushing climax in front of the entire group.

In spite of her shame at being punished and displayed in such a humiliating manner, Amy cannot deny her body's response to Andrew and Richard's stern, skillful dominance, and when they take her in their arms and claim her completely she is left more satisfied than she could have ever imagined. But when they decide to make her their shared bride, will she abandon her efforts to return to her own time and embrace her new life as their little girl?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Training His Mate

Twenty-year-old Astrid Elcroix has no interest in being taken as a mate by one of the aliens who recently invaded Earth, and she does her best to avoid that fate, but the huge, handsome trainer Darghon tracks her down. Her efforts to resist merely earn her a painful, humiliating strapping on her bare bottom, and soon enough she is on her way to his world to begin her training.

Upon her arrival, Astrid is stripped bare, shamefully displayed, and intimately examined. Her continued defiance is rewarded with ever more humiliating punishments, but despite her blushing cheeks and burning backside she cannot deny her body's response to Darghon's stern dominance, and before long she is yearning for him to claim her hard and thoroughly.

Though he has trained many women as mates for his people, Astrid is the first to capture Darghon's heart. When he takes her in his arms and teaches her to surrender her body to his masterful touch, he begins to wonder if he'll ever be able to let her go. Will Darghon be forced to give Astrid up to be sold to another man, or can he find a way to keep her as his own?

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Corrected by the Doctor

When her wealthy parents finally tire of her delinquent behavior, nineteen-year-old Virginia Adams is sent to England to live under the care of Dr. Alexander Cleveland. Within moments of stepping off the ship, Virginia's sharp tongue earns her an embarrassing public spanking, and she soon discovers that the humiliating chastisement is only a small taste of what is in store for her.

Over the coming days, she learns what it means to be thoroughly punished in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable. Yet even though the handsome doctor's stern correction leaves her blushing crimson, she cannot deny her body's response to his firm-handed dominance, and before long Virginia finds herself yearning for Alexander to claim her completely. But will he ever see her as more than merely a patient in desperate need of his particular form of treatment?

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His Captured Mate

As a member of the human resistance, the last thing scientist Milla Orel wants is to draw the attention of Commander Tanin, the captain the Cylothian ship on which she is stationed. Unfortunately for Milla, when it is discovered that her genetic testing results were falsified and she is actually suitable as a mate, she is given to Tanin as a breeding slave.

After an intimate, deeply humiliating medical examination, Milla is brought to her new owner's quarters so that he can begin preparing her for his use. Tanin makes it clear that he will demand her absolute submission as he claims her beautiful body in the most shameful of ways, and she quickly discovers that any disobedience will earn her a thorough spanking on her bare bottom.

In spite of her fury at being treated in such a manner, Tanin's bold dominance arouses Milla intensely, and it isn't long before she finds herself surrendering ever more completely to his mastery of her body. But when an attack by the resistance puts Tannin's life in great danger, will she abandon her loyalty to her own species to come to the aid of her mate?

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Mated to the Barbarians

Princess Helena's life is changed forever when her half-brother, the newly crowned king, offers her as tribute to a band of barbarian raiders in return for a halt to their pillaging. Though she does her best to view the arrangement as a sacrifice for the good of her people, Helena is shocked to discover that she will be claimed as a bride by not one, but two of the tribe's warriors.

Not only do Helena's new husbands prove more than ready to correct any disobedience with a firm hand applied to her bare bottom, the two huge, handsome brutes have no qualms about enjoying her beautiful body anytime and anywhere they please, even in full view of the rest of the tribe. But when custom demands that they share their new mate with the other warriors, will they follow tradition or risk tearing their society apart to keep Helena for themselves?

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The Slavers' Pet

When she is captured by alien slavers, Vadera quickly finds herself stripped bare for an intimate, deeply humiliating examination, but her defiance during the routine procedure convinces her captors that she is not suitable for sale. Her fate will be far more shameful. She will become their shared pet, to be trained, punished, and used as thoroughly and as often as they see fit.

Her captors quickly set about taming Vadera, fitting her with a tail, making her obey their every command, and teaching her to surrender her beautiful body to them completely. But when it becomes clear that the bond between them is not merely one between owner and pet, will Vadera's masters defy the laws of their people to claim this feisty little human as their mate?

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Correcting His Ward

When she is caught by her guardian while spying on him late at night, eighteen-year-old Charlotte Halpine feels the sting of his riding crop on her bare bottom and is forbidden from wearing undergarments the next day to ensure the stern, shameful lesson is not soon forgotten.

Sir Brown is well aware of his responsibility to see to it that his young ward is properly trained for her future role as a gentleman's wife, and when Charlotte defies his warnings against engaging in acts of self-pleasure her bottom is thoroughly punished both inside and out.

Despite his best efforts to prepare the beautiful, headstrong girl for the attentions of a suitor, however, with each passing day the idea of allowing another man to court and ultimately claim Charlotte becomes ever more distasteful to Sir Brown. Will he cast aside his hesitation and take her as his bride before he gives in to his baser instincts and enjoys her virgin body as he pleases?

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Blushing for Her Masters

After her parents squander the family's fortune, eighteen-year-old Jane Peaton is left with no choice but to take a job as a maid for wealthy gentlemen August Hunter and Dr. Finn White. Upon arriving at the estate of her new employers, however, Jane is shocked by the scandalously revealing uniform they have provided for her, and a painful, humiliating bare-bottom spanking soon follows when she refuses to cooperate during an intimate, shameful medical examination.

Before her ordeal is over she has been thoroughly cleansed, fitted with a plug, and brought to an intense, shattering climax by the handsome doctor while his ruggedly sexy stepbrother looks on. Despite her blushing cheeks and burning bottom, Jane is left desperately aroused and longing to be taken hard by both of her masters, but when she discovers that she must be properly trained before they can claim her, will her reckless impatience end up getting her in way over her head?

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Bride to the Beast

Thanred knows well that there is only one way to keep the lust-driven madness which afflicts every male of his kind from consuming him, and when he catches the scent of a human female who has been chosen as a bride for his tribe he wastes no time in ravaging her, wringing more intense, helpless pleasure from her quivering virgin body than she would have thought possible.

Though being rutted by Thanred left her utterly spent and satisfied, the idea of belonging to the huge, fearsome beast-man terrifies Royla nonetheless, and it isn't long before she decides to make a run for it. Despite her best efforts, however, her escape attempt fails and she quickly finds herself held in place over his strong thighs as her bare bottom is thoroughly spanked.

Thanred's plans for Royla include much more than merely using her to keep his lust at bay. She will be his mate and bear his children. But to end his exile and take back his place among his people he will need to master his little human completely, claiming her publicly in even the most shameful of ways and leaving every potential rival in no doubt that she is his and his alone.

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The Warrior's Pet

After she is captured, enslaved, and sold, Aveera's first introduction to her new owner comes in the form of a humiliating inspection and a bare bottom spanking, and she soon discovers that this shameful ordeal is just the beginning of what is in store for her in her new life as an alien's pet.

Though Drak is forbidden from breeding with a female of another species, nothing prevents him from enjoying Aveera in any other way he pleases, and he intends to use her beautiful body very thoroughly. But when his dominance awakens an uncontrollable urge to mate within his pet, will Drak cast aside law and custom and risk his life to claim Aveera before her need consumes her?

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His for the Taking

I didn't come here looking for a dance from a pretty girl. I came to take someone, whether she wants to come with me or not. A girl who belongs to me, even though she doesn't know it yet.

Natalie Paulson is mine, every single inch of her, and I don't share what's mine. It's time she learned what happens to bad little girls who put my property on display without permission, and when I'm done it won't be just her cute little bottom that is well-punished, well-used, and sore.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken and Mated

After years spent hiding from the Imperial Guard, Katalana Scott has been captured. She is to be sold, but first she will be trained to satisfy even the most shameful demands of her future owner. Despite her best efforts to remain defiant, before long she is blushing crimson and quivering with need as she is punished and tamed in ways more humiliating than she could have ever imagined.

But someone wants Katalana too badly to let her be auctioned off, and after the ship transporting her is attacked she soon finds herself standing before the throne of an alien warlord. The huge, handsome brute plans to claim her as his mate, but the rituals of his planet must be followed, and before he can make her his own he must share her virgin body with his fiercest warriors...

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