

# THE TRYST

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to Danny, for trysts of past,  
and those yet to come.  
and to Steve, for all the  
encouragement. Love you, bro.

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## CHAPTER 1

London, May 1810

She watched as he slid his long, lean fingers down the female's smooth body, stared in envy as that one received his gentle caresses. He wore no shirt and his exertions were leaving an enticing trail of sweat making its way slowly down his hard back. The tight black breeches complimented his perfect form, his feet bare as he continued the tender ministrations. She gazed in fascination as the muscles in his back and arms flexed with every fluent movement. Anticipating the moment, yearning for that instant when his hands would finally rove her own body with such care. Her dark green eyes slid appreciatively down his strong body as she undid another tiny button on her bodice.

Yes, the time had come. The perfect opportunity to have him. To make him understand that he too desired her, though he'd most likely never dared given thought to that delicious notion.

She listened in impatience as his deep voice spoke softly aloud, told that one how beautiful she was. Crooned that he could barely wait to ride her hard and fast so as to put all thoughts and cares behind him. She could scarcely take it any longer, her dainty foot taking its first step from behind her hiding place in the nearby stall.

His instincts perfectly honed as ever, Derek heard the hay crumple beneath someone's careless steps. Keeping one hand steady upon the mare's back, he turned quickly to discover the intruder. Derek's eyes narrowed briefly at the sight of his aunt's approach. He wondered what the hell she was doing out in the far recesses of the stables at this time of day.

"Aunt Bethany," his rich voice greeted as he returned his attention to the beautiful mare named Lady. Bethany reached Derek's side and casually reached out to stroke the horse. Lady snorted at the unwanted intrusion and Derek was hard put not to chuckle aloud at the offended look that crossed Bethany's features as she took a step back.

"I would have thought you were at the party with everyone else," he commented. Derek was referring to the annual gala his aunt and uncle threw every year. It was an outdoor affair with quaint dancing about the maypole, refreshments and entertainment galore. It was more of a county fair really, and a delightful if rare thing within the realm of sophisticated London.

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Derek had first come to live on the immense estate with his aunt and uncle several years before, when his father had decreed him unmanageable and difficult at best. He'd been eleven at the time his mother died unexpectedly and Derek had never imagined such pain could exist.

Although his mother's soft touches and sweet hugs were rare, thanks to his father's feelings that such displays of affection were unacceptable, Derek knew that she'd been the one and only good thing in his life. The stark realization that he would never again have that goodness and purity surrounding him left a bleak void in his young heart. A rebellious nature soon took hold of Derek and it wasn't long before he was being kicked out of every prestigious boys' school in Europe over a two year period.

Unwilling to abide by his father's demanding laws and unable to curb the bitterness that had taken over his entire existence, Derek finally bore the brunt of his father's wrath once and for all. After a severe beating with the dreaded leather strap, Derek was coldly informed that he would be sent to live with relatives.

His father's brother and family. They lived on the edge of London, their estate massive. Derek couldn't recall their ever having visited his father's relatives and wondered why he was being sent to live with someone his father obviously held little if any regard for. No more formal schooling for Derek either, his father had proclaimed. It would be strict tutors for the remainder of his education and Derek's uncle swore he'd see that the boy never be let out of sight.

Derek eventually learned it was easier to go along with the rigid rules than to butt heads with his uncle, who was at least as temperamental as his father, if not more so. Schoolwork came easily once Derek put his mind to it, almost absurdly so. He breezed through his studies, dressed the part of the perfect young man, and minded his manners. It was only in the privacy of his own chambers that Derek remained master of himself, and that was more than fine. He knew that one day, one year, he'd be gone. That he would be old enough to live out on his own. No matter that his father had threatened Derek would never inherit the title of Haversham's earl, nor take over the reins of his thriving shipping business. Derek was determined he would make his own way in life.

And so things had been looking up for Derek, leastways until his sixteenth birthday. His young cousin, Lissette, was two years his junior, though one would swear she was as amorously experienced as any young married woman. She was an uncontrollable flirt, shameless in her pursuit of Derek, though she was careful to hide it from her parents.

Lissette had come to Derek's room the night of his birthday. He had already been abed and sleeping for a while when he'd felt the soft feminine body slide next to him beneath the sheets. Her forward kisses on his chest and neck had begun to awaken him, though not quickly enough to be rid of the troublesome wench. By the time Derek realized what was happening, his aunt and uncle had thrown his door open only to find their precious Lissette lying naked atop Derek, who was to all appearances an avid recipient of her brazen kisses.

Uncle Robert had been ready to kill him, especially after Lissette swore she'd been lured into Derek's bed during their conversation at his birthday dinner earlier that evening. It was only the exorbitant amount of money Derek's father was paying him each month that held Robert back from murdering his own flesh and blood.

The whole incident was over within a matter of minutes. Derek was ordered to never be alone with Lissette again, a stipulation he readily agreed to. His other punishment was that Derek become a stable hand during the remainder of his time living there. If he wished to act like an uncivilized peasant, his uncle had said, then he would be treated as one.

It was the return of a still naked Lissette not five minutes later that made Derek see red. He'd not had a chance to even utter a word to the lying trollop before in his groggy state, but he didn't hesitate to jump from bed this time, heedless of his own state of undress.

He snatched her by the arms and threatened heatedly, "Get out of here, Lissette, and don't ever glance my way again. Is that understood?"

Not waiting for her response, Derek literally tossed her from his room and locked the door behind him. It was bad enough that Lissette's girlfriends had always found it a challenge to win his attention over the years, but his cousin's brazen actions only served to embitter Derek's attitude toward women in general.

Not only the young females, but the married ones besides. It wasn't at all uncommon for Derek to be approached by several *happily married* women during the course of a social gathering, be it a huge ball or a cozy dinner party. The stark lack of regard with which the women held their holy bonds of matrimony hardened Derek's heart toward them all and he swore he'd never marry unless it was for purely societal or monetary reasons. He would never be an utter fool to allow himself to fall in love. He could scarcely utter the four letter word and chose to ignore the fear that he was slowly turning into his own father, spiteful man that he was.

It was his father that likewise made Derek swear he'd never have children. He knew he would be found lacking in the utmost where parental skills were required, and thanks to his father, he was ill-equipped in the area of any sincere affections. Derek refused to subject an innocent child to what he himself had endured, that being a loveless harsh upbringing where one was better off remaining silent and unseen.

And so he had grown into the hardened youth he presently was at the age of seventeen. A hard worker, he'd never given his uncle the satisfaction of complaining about becoming a stable hand, but instead excelled in any job given him, whether it was mucking out the stalls or breaking in a new horse.

Derek had grown hard over the years, both inside and out. He was rather tall and muscular for his age, a result of his hard daily work in the stables. The sun lightened his already blond hair, while darkening his skin. To any unsuspecting soul, Derek appeared almost angelic with his golden hair, crystal blue eyes and dazzling smile, rare though it was. But one had only to spend more than an hour in his company to discover that Derek was anything but a heavenly creature.

He had plenty of friends though, and it was only when he was in their fun loving company that he truly felt comfortable and at ease. And it was seldom that he was allowed an evening out with the other young cads since his uncle constantly held to the promise he'd made to keep young Derek under tight wraps. Rarely was he so preoccupied with other things that Robert would allow his nephew an occasional reprieve out on the town. And so his life had gone until that point.

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Derek couldn't recall ever seeing Bethany wear her dark hair flowing loosely about her shoulders. She always wore it up. There was a familiar look in her eyes as she fully turned her attentions toward him, and the faint suspicion of its reality was causing Derek more than a little alarm. His uncle's wife was certainly a beautiful woman. Indeed, she'd been a young bride and even now was barely thirty-five.

She had always remained distant to a certain point ever since Derek had first moved in with them. He didn't recall ever sharing a private conversation with her about anything meaningful. Thus the surprise to see her approach him while everyone else was at the gala. It could be a dangerous thing, and although Derek knew he was most likely just being overly suspicious, he thought it best to proceed with caution. She still hadn't replied to his question and Derek resumed rubbing the horse down.

Bethany reached out a hand and caressed Derek's back. He stilled at her touch. She trailed a path up the middle of his spine, wiping a line of his sweat as she went. Lingeringly she touched the wet fingers to her tongue and slowly licked its essence. Derek's eyes widened a bit as he turned and watched her provocative display. In truth, he was more than a little shocked. He'd had women do many things for him and to him, but never had a civilized lady seductively licked his sweat from her fingers.

"Aunt Bethany," he uttered questioningly as she splayed a hand across his hard male chest, her other hand loosening another button on her bodice.

"Derek, do be a dear and don't call me Aunt Bethany when we're making love." She rose up on tiptoe and placed her lips against Derek's mouth. His first instinct was to just close his eyes and enjoy the luscious female figure pressed so intimately against him. Her tongue was already inside his mouth, her hands greedy upon his body. Derek's mind was spinning from the magnitude of the horrific situation and he sought to set her away from him with hands shaking.

"What are you doing?" he managed, his eyes wide in disbelief. Bethany proceeded to undo the remaining buttons, her smile seductive as she remained silent. "Stop that!" Derek ordered, his fingers reaching out to redo her buttons. His fingers were shaking so badly he was unable to slip even one button back into its proper slot.

Bethany's soft laughter would haunt his ears for months afterward. A laugh of amusement, he perceived, a mocking laughter as she watched his clumsy attempts to correct her state of dress. She was so nonchalant about the whole damn thing, as if it were a normal everyday occurrence to seduce the stable hand, or more specifically the nephew beneath her very care. Indeed, she had performed a wondrous act, that of shocking the rakish Derek Montford into utter astonishment and dismay by means of seduction.

She reached out and yanked at his belt while he continued to right her dress, all the while telling Bethany she must leave. Remembrances of the night Lissette had attempted a similar sin coming to mind, Derek could only fear what might happen if someone were to stumble upon them in that moment. It would be catastrophic!

As if heaven itself were condemning the unlikely twosome, a bright flash of lightning blazed across the skies and a tremendous clap of thunder cracked and rumbled. Where only moments before the weather had been perfectly warm and pleasant, an abrupt storm was about to strike. Lady became skittish at the booming thunder and Derek soothingly shushed her, all the while wishing he was only imagining Bethany's unwanted presence.

Not one to be ignored, Bethany pulled his head down to hers and placed her mouth against his. One hand wound insistently about his neck, her other hand remaining steadfast within the length of his belt in attempt to loosen it and accomplish her seduction of Derek while there was yet time.

Thus it was that Derek's uncle found them in that instant. He thought he had grown used to his wife's infidelities over the years, but Robert dearly wanted to harm both Bethany and Derek as he interrupted their interlude.

"I must be late for the family meeting, eh?" The sound of Robert's irate voice brought Bethany to her senses instantly. She jerked away from Derek, ready to defend herself, but Robert said, "Don't bother lying, dear wife. I shall take care of you later."

"I swear my innocence to you, Uncle Robert," Derek insisted. "Please believe me."

Robert voiced aloud the fact that his wife's scarlet lip coloring upon his mouth betrayed any innocence he might proclaim, then continued, "Derek, the only thing keeping me from beating you within an inch of your life is the bad news I was just brought. After I relay the message, I want you to pack your things, get out of my home, and don't ever come near my family again."

His jaw remained tightly clenched as Derek's hands balled into fists at his sides. It was unbelievable that once again he'd been used and set up by yet another cursed female. An intense dislike toward the fairer sex wound a ribbon deeper through his dark heart. Fairer sex indeed.

"It would appear you have gained the title, young Derek." At Derek's look of confusion, Robert explained, "You are the new earl of Haversham. Your father, my brother, is dead. And although I shall sorely miss the generous monthly allowance he sent because of you, I will never miss your presence for even one second after you walk out of our lives, do you hear me? Not one little second."

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Fat tears mingled with raindrops cascading down the young girl's face as she stood staring at the wooden coffins. Her small hand remained securely tucked within Mrs. Taylor's plump hands as they listened to the minister ramble on. The rain grew thicker and the skies darker, fitting company for the gloom surrounding her heart. Her world was over and she was only nine years old. Not even blessed with a full decade of life with her parents, Dominique's mother and father had been cruelly snatched from her. Mrs. Taylor had stressed to Dominique what a blessing it was that she'd not been with them on that fateful stormy night nearly a week past when her parents' carriage had been held up at gunpoint by robbers, but Dominique wished that she too had been taken along with them.

How would she ever smile again? What could possibly ever make her feel like laughing out loud again? She hadn't even gotten to tell them goodbye. Had only been told in the gentlest of ways that her parents had both been shot after being robbed of their few possessions. The thieving murderers had thankfully been caught and would soon hang for their horrendous crime. Still, it was no comfort at all. No consolation, for never again would her mother's soft hands cradle her within their loving embrace. Never again would she hear her father's encouragement to continue her budding talent of drawing. He proudly swore Dominique would be a great artist someday and she had loved his confidence in her abilities so much she didn't want to hurt her father by confessing that becoming an artist was not what she planned. Rather she wanted to grow up and marry a handsome, kind man and take care of his castle and have little angels. It was what her parents called her, their little angel.

And now they had left her to become angels themselves, that's what Mrs. Taylor had said. That they would watch over Dominique and protect her forever, even if she couldn't see them or hear them. They would always be near and would always love her.

A seamstress and a mason, her parents didn't earn much money. They were barely able to afford the small home they'd recently moved into. Having splurged one night after saving up for weeks, Dominique's father had purchased tickets to take his wife to the opera in London. It had turned out to be a wonderfully romantic evening until their ill-fated ride home late that night. They'd had nothing worthy of robbing which had angered the thieves, and thus as they had lovingly clung to each other in life, Dominique's parents likewise cleaved together in death.

Mrs. Taylor, a close neighbor and friend, assured the authorities she would take young Dominique into her family and no one objected, thus saving the poor girl from an unfortunate childhood spent in a loveless orphanage. Her parents' home was quickly foreclosed upon, and it was with red-rimmed eyes and a broken heart that Dominique gathered up her few belongings and went to live with Mrs. Taylor, her husband, and their five children.

Mr. Taylor was not quite as generous hearted as his wife, and although he opposed Dominique's coming to live with them at first, he finally gave into his wife's Christian influence. With several mouths to feed already, they were scarcely able to afford one more, though Dominique ate very little and never complained about the tiny spot she was given to sleep up in the loft with the other children. Dominique learned to keep her cries inside, though the tears fell unhindered each and every night when she laid down to go to sleep. Whispers of love and goodnight to her parents touched Dominique's lips as she dozed off, her small stuffed animal clasped within her tight embrace.

## CHAPTER 2

October, 1820

“Bloody traitor, I say!” came the rowdy reply to a suggested toast for the soon-to-be groom. His compatriots joined in the laughter, and seemingly ignorant to the fact that no one had indeed executed the proper toast, tipped up their glasses nevertheless and eagerly drank.

The rakish foursome were oblivious to the appreciative female stares they’d been receiving since first arriving at the Boar’s Head Inn and Tavern well over an hour ago. Having already graced the more reputable men’s clubs during the course of the evening, they’d decided to continue their celebratory night at the Boar’s Head.

Not a place polite society was wont to attend, it was still a halfway decent tavern where one didn’t have to worry about having his throat slit for a coin or two, nor did the employed wenches have the completely filthy look of a whore as did other lowly establishments closer to the docks. It was a discreet place, dim enough inside so as not to be seen if a man didn’t want to be, yet large enough so he could enjoy a game of cards, a leisurely tumble upstairs, or an entire evening drinking with his friends. Whatever his preference and with that, the pleasure of not having to keep appearances up so tightly as one did in the formal clubs of sacred London.

Their cravats long since discarded, their shirts comfortably loosened and sleeves rolled up, the four young men seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely. Another pitcher of ale was delivered to their table and the pretty waitress seemed loath to leave their presence. As she finally made her way to another table, the rogues’ heads turned in unison to watch the seductive sway of her skirts.

“What do you think you’re doing, Earl?” one of them joked with the man that was the object of their merrymaking. “You can’t be looking at women like that anymore. Leave that to us randy single men, eh?”

The serious blond-haired man inhaled leisurely from the cheroot clenched between his straight, white teeth and blew a thick cloud of smoke into his friend’s face. “I told you not to call me that, Joel.” He was of course taking their ribbing all in good fun, although he did get a bit irritated when his friends called him Earl. He cared nothing about titles, nor the fact that he was one of the most infamous titled rakes in all London. Derek preferred informality, besides the fact that each of the other three were likewise wealthy, titled young men.

The rowdies he’d grown up with, Joel, David, and Phillip. They had been inseparable ever since Derek left Uncle Robert and inherited his father’s title and belongings, the estate included. His father had of course been bluffing when he’d threatened Derek would not receive anything. Thus he had taken over the shipping business with great fortitude and had made an even bigger name for the company under his own control.

After having been in residence with his uncle’s family those years, it had been a blessed thing to have his own home. The mansion was all but a castle, had indeed been partially fashioned after one of

his ancestor's castles from the past. There were numerous servants in his employ and Derek basically allowed the head servants to have their run of the place. They'd never been anything less than perfectly efficient and honest, and Derek saw no need to question or undermine their day to day actions.

It was a weekly tradition that the four rogue friends go out together and wreak havoc, though generally harmless. Occasionally they might get involved in fisticuffs, but normally they just went out drinking, carousing, and womanizing. Derek was the most serious of the four and tended to be the unspoken leader of the group, though he doubted his friends realized what a crutch they'd been to him through the years. For all his hardness toward the world and its unfairness, he felt a genuine camaraderie with them.

Derek was always in control. Of himself, of the situation at hand, and always where women were concerned. He held little respect for them, if any, and cared not whether their tender sensibilities were offended or not.

He had refused more than a dozen duel challenges over sleeping with married or taken women, caring not if he was branded a coward. Which he of course never was, for his reputation as a superb shot was well known. He simply chose not to place his life in danger over a mere woman, a creature he counted unworthy of his considerations outside the bedroom.

It was his astounding good looks and the challenge of winning his affections that continued to draw women by the score. Of course, by the end of any given evening, it was only the most impassive of females that remained clinging to Derek's side rather than turning their regard to one of his more charming and amiable friends.

Stifling a laugh at Joel's comment that he could no longer lust after other women, Derek set out to correct his friend on that matter. "Simply because I am engaged to Allison is no reason I can no longer look at other ladies."

The guffaws that rebuttal received caused a frown to mar Derek's features. They seemed to be enjoying themselves at his expense much too much, and Derek sought to enlighten them further. "I am wedding Allison for purely business and monetary reasons, as well you all know. The woman will have no say-so over my habits, be it within my home or without."

"The chap is sorely deluded, is he not?" David laughed, Phillip and Joel joining in.

"That beautiful lady you speak so casually of will be your downfall, Haversham, mark my word," Phillip predicted.

Joel chimed in, "He's right, you know. You may think this marriage thing is in name only, but the lady certainly has other ideas. And she may worship the ground you walk on, Derek, but she is no wilting flower to sit idly by while you go out on the town with your buddies week after week."

"Her willfulness is nothing to be concerned over," Derek countered. "If she dares beleaguer me for my given freedoms as a hearty young man of twenty-seven, I shall simply beat her pretty little backside." It was Derek's profound seriousness in that otherwise comical statement that convinced his friends he was making a huge mistake in undertaking the institution of marriage. They had already given up trying to talk him out of the horrible decision he'd made two months earlier when he'd proposed to the willful spoiled Allison.

She had set her cap for him upon first sight and Allison's wealthy parents set out to help their precious daughter get the man she wanted. All Derek's friends could do now was to humorously remind him what he would be facing in another few months once the condemning vows were spoken.

After their laughter finally subsided over Derek's declaration that he would beat Allison into submission, they pointed out that it would most likely be Allison beating him, or more aptly choking him with the short leash she'd undoubtedly have him on.

"She probably won't even allow you the traditional bachelor party, Derek," Phillip ribbed.

"Even now she might have someone watching you, making certain you don't ogle the barmaids too long, and reporting back to her every detail of your night out," Joel added.

"You are a bunch of moronic imbeciles," Derek retorted in a bored voice, much to their amusement. "I shall have a bachelor party before the impending nuptials, have no fear."

"You might wish to take this opportunity to share the company of a beautiful young lady while you can," David suggested.

"Yes," Joel agreed, "however, she would be more of a virgin sacrifice for our austere friend here than fun loving company."

"He is rather intimidating to the innocent ladies, is he not?" Phillip commented.

Derek was helpless to join in their laughter, shaking his head at the thought that he was frightening to the weaker sex, a notion that was all too close to the truth. Derek had long since lost count of the women who flocked to him in the beginning, only to watch them quickly scatter after becoming the recipient of his coldness.

Allison had been the only woman that was not only not afraid of his demeanor, but in fact challenged him with her own assertive personality. It was that, along with her quick wit and lure of even more wealth than Derek could ever imagine that had prompted the unexpected proposal of marriage. Derek had never given much thought to life after the wedding ceremony. He knew only that he was getting a beautiful bride to warm his bed and grace his arm amid society. She was bringing double the fortune he already had into the arrangement. His wealth and power would be great in London.

Derek still held to the decision that he would not have any children. No male heir to inherit a legacy. But he didn't think Allison would mind, for she had once mentioned that she detested the idea of ever growing fat with child. Yes, she would make a suitable spouse.

Of course, if it was grand love she or anyone else expected from him, they were sadly mistaken. He certainly lusted for Allison, but he couldn't imagine ever feeling that he would die without her or anything preposterous like that. And he certainly couldn't be expected to remain completely faithful for the remainder of his natural life. It simply wasn't possible.

His friends seemed intent upon making him face that fact, but what they obviously didn't realize was that Derek had no intention of becoming imprisoned by mere wedding vows. He would allow them to play their little word games, it didn't bother him.

"Come on, Derek, humor us. Let us give you a pre-wedding gift for this unofficial bachelor party," Phillip pleaded.

"Yes, Haversham," David added, "the night is still young and we can certainly stay down here playing cards and drinking for a couple of hours while you have your fill of...our gift."

"I'll pay for the room myself," Joel offered, a rakish smile claiming his handsome face. "All you have to do is go upstairs and wait like a good little boy. We shall send up the perfect candidate for your affections as soon as we all agree on one."

“This is ridiculous,” Derek interrupted, their badgering finally beginning to wear on his nerves. “I don’t need to pay for sex, and I certainly don’t need you idiots choosing my bed partners. For God’s sake, give me a little credit, won’t you?”

“I knew he’d be afraid,” Joel laughed. “Already fearing what the little lady will make out of sowing any last wild oats, eh?”

“A little thing like marriage will never curb any of my appetites or vices,” Derek bit out. Slamming his glass down on the wooden table, Derek stood, the slightest bit lightheaded, and acceded to their inane wishes. “Bloody hell, give me your money, Joel, and I’ll get the damn room. Go ahead and choose the virgin sacrifice, but if you pick an ugly woman I swear I’ll murder each and every one of you.”

Joel eagerly handed over enough money to get a room for the next couple of hours and the three friends watched in amusement as Derek paid for the room before disappearing up the stairs, leaving them with a disgusted look on his face.

“You’d think he was being sent to his own execution, the way he’s acting,” Phillip commented.

“He is,” Joel replied, “but that won’t happen until he speaks those two deadly words, I do.” They shared another round and laughed about Derek’s behavior. In truth, it was a wonder they’d been able to pressure him into doing such a thing in the first place. He was never one to succumb to anyone’s dares or mockery. Most likely the alcohol Derek imbibed during the evening had something to do with his giving into their unusual request.

“We’ve got to find a beautiful young maiden for Derek,” David said dramatically. “Someone who will set his hard heart to racing,”

“Not bloody likely in a place like this,” Phillip said.

A cold burst of wind swept across them as the tavern door opened. Thunder boomed in the near distance as rain poured down in torrents. An eerie whistling of wind sounded as another blinding bolt of lightning illuminated the person who’d braved the storm and reached the solace of the tavern. All three of them saw her in that same instant.

Her dark hair was soaked and lay in careless disarray about her slim shoulders. Her eyes flitted warily about the tavern, as if she were looking for someone, else afraid of being found herself. Her hands were nervously clasped in front of her and she shivered from the coldness of the stormy night, her clothes soaking wet. It was hard to tell the extent of her beauty, for the bonnet she wore partially hid her features.

“Perhaps I am drunker than I think,” David said slowly, “but I have a feeling we may have just found Derek’s present.”

“I don’t know,” Phillip countered. “She rather looks like a drowned rat to me, and scared besides.”

“I shall find out for myself. You drunken heathens stay here while I buy the lady a drink and find out if she’s suitable for our future groom.” Not waiting for them to agree, Joel left David and Phillip at the table and began walking across the tavern toward the young woman, but lost sight of her on the way across the crowded room.

Joel glanced about and finally spotted her speaking with a barmaid. He quickly made his way over and heard the maid tell the young lady she could ask about a job once the owner got back from wherever it was he’d gone. A nervous smile flitted across the young woman’s face and she reached up to remove her bonnet.

“Good evening, miss,” Joel said in his most charming voice. Dominique turned and looked into an extremely handsome face. Her experience with the opposite gender had been so confined and limited over the years, Dominique had never had the enjoyment of receiving a handsome gentleman’s attentions. Her heart fluttered at the realization he was actually speaking to her and flashing that alluring smile solely at her.

Returning a tentative smile, Dominique replied, “Good evening.” She finished removing her bonnet, helpless to reach up and attempt some semblance with her hair. Joel’s smile broadened at the purely feminine gesture and for the first time he noticed how pretty she really was.

“Amber,” he uttered softly.

Her heart fell a bit at the sound of another woman’s name on his lips. “I am sorry, sir, you must have me mistaken with someone else. My name is Dominique Harrison.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head and smiling. “I meant the incredible flecks in your beautiful brown eyes. They’re amber.” Joel was helpless to note the tightness of her dress, his loins tightening at the generous amount of bosom exposed above the low-cut bodice. Indeed, her breasts were straining against the confines of her gown and Joel perceived that she was indeed just what they were looking for. And being a professional, she certainly wouldn’t allow Derek’s domineering nature to intimidate her from fulfilling the job.

Joel ordered two glasses of bourbon, insisting that Dominique sit at a small table nearby and share a drink with him. She had never partaken of anything stronger than cheap wine, but the uncertainty of her present homeless situation, not to mention her hunger for a brief moment of companionship bade Dominique accept the kind stranger’s offer. She slowly sipped at the drink until Joel convinced her to just tip the glass and finish it all at once so as to warm her.

Dominique’s chest and throat burned after obeying his request, and she barely managed to refrain from choking aloud. After a moment she was able to resume normal breathing and speaking. She listened as Joel introduced himself and commented on the dreadful weather. His eyes never strayed from her face and Dominique was more than a little self-conscious about her bedraggled appearance.

She was wearing the only dress that still fit, and barely at that. After Mrs. Taylor’s death three months prior, life had been even less kind. The Taylors’ finances had dwindled from mediocre to nearly penniless. Mrs. Taylor hadn’t been able to sew Dominique or the other children any clothes in the last few years due to failing health, and they’d been forced to wear the same few outfits on a recurring basis.

The last several months, however, had seen Dominique’s figure turning more curvaceous, her chest filling out and straining against the seams she’d been fitted for as a sixteen year old. Upon turning nineteen, Mr. Taylor informed Dominique she was well past the point of needing to move out, as two of the other children already had. Dominique had been earning what little she could as a seamstress and giving it to the family, but still it wasn’t enough. And when Mr. Taylor had privately hinted that Dominique was welcome to stay were she willing to take his wife’s place in every way imaginable, it had been a shocking revelation and Dominique had left immediately.

Since leaving those two days ago, she’d spent her time hunting for employment. She had spent the last two nights hiding in out of the way places after dark, trying only to stay safe and manage a few hours of sleep. So far she’d been successful, but Dominique doubted her luck would hold up much longer.

Moments earlier, dejected and looking for another place to spend the coming night, Dominique had spotted the Boar's Head, and although not especially eager to enter a tavern, she was lured by its shelter from the storm and the possibility that she might find employment within. She was hungry too, though she'd managed to beg a half loaf of stale bread from a bakery the day before. Dominique knew she must look a terrible sight, and was shocked by the present kindness of the lovely man talking to her.

"Can I buy you some supper?" he asked.

The heavenly look on her face made Joel's gut twist in an unfamiliar emotion. For whatever reason, he found her lonely, though it was more than that. He felt a kind of goodness emanating from her, and she was certainly mannerly for a whore. It was a shame the girl was a prostitute, for she might have been made for better things had she not chosen that particular path in life.

"Oh, that would be so kind of you, sir," she replied gratefully. "I wish I could promise to repay you, but I find myself rather short on funds at this time."

"Don't give it a second thought," Joel reassured. Within short moments he managed to have a cozy dinner of shepherd's pie, bread and butter, cheese and wine delivered to the table. A quick glance toward David and Phillip prompted Joel to proceed more quickly with things, for it was obvious they were getting perturbed waiting. He gave them a quick nod and knowing smile to signal that she was indeed the one. After giving her ample time to savor the delicious fare, Joel began his request. "I have a proposition for you, Dominique."

She looked warily at him in mid-bite, suddenly wondering if she'd been too hasty in her favorable opinion of the young man. Swallowing her food, Dominique softly replied, "What do you want me to do?" Her beguiling eyes and soft siren's voice brought a lust to head that surprised Joel, for the sudden thought of what he would like her to do would have shocked her to the very tips of her toes.

Dominique's hair had begun drying a bit and Joel found it wasn't as dark as he'd originally thought. It was brown, lighter than her eyes, thick and lustrous. He watched silently as Dominique lifted the glass of wine to her lips and a drop of the liquid spilled onto her chest. Joel mentally shook his head clear of the tantalizing thoughts that one drop was bringing to head. He was asking on Derek's behalf, not his own, and he would do well to remember that.

"Well, seeing that you are in need of funds, and a close friend of mine is in need of your services for a little while this evening, I thought perhaps we might agree on an amount for said services rendered."

"I beg your pardon?" Dominique asked, the wine and bourbon giving her a lightheaded feeling. She didn't like where this conversation seemed to be heading and started to tell him so, but just then David and Phillip reached the table, plopping down on either side of Dominique. She looked warily about at the three handsome devils and their smiling faces, and the horrible thought dawned on her that they were hoping to pay her to perform some sick kind of perversion.

"I'm leaving," she cried, the chair scratching across the wooden floor as she stood abruptly. Joel reached across the table and grabbed her gently by the wrist.

"Our friend is dying," he proclaimed. Dominique stilled at that statement, though she remained ready to bolt. She thought she heard a snicker from one of the other two men and looked at Joel with distrust. "He only has a few months left before life as he knows it will end. And well....he was hoping to share the company of a lovely young lady this evening."

Dominique's eyes narrowed at Joel's obvious sarcasm, for she'd never been called pretty in her life, leastways not since her parents had died. The Taylors had never been ones to enhance the outward

appearance. No makeup was allowed, no fashionable dresses were affordable, and it was simply understood that such frivolities were advantages only the rich were able to partake of. She found her hair lifeless and plain, and on more than one occasion had been poked fun at by her foster brothers about the slight hint of a dimple in her chin.

“Why would you want me then?” she asked warily. The men all laughed aloud, the three of them proceeding to spout accolades of her loveliness at once. She was on the verge of running out again when Joel pulled out a wad of bills and tossed them across the table to her. Dominique’s mouth fairly watered at the sight of all that money. She could well afford to rent a halfway decent place and buy new clothes, besides having plenty left over with such a staggering amount. “What exactly does your friend expect from me? And which one of you is it?” she asked.

“Actually, it’s me,” Phillip joked, receiving a well-aimed blow to the shoulder from David.

“Our friend, Derek, is already upstairs. And he wouldn’t expect anything more than you normally do, darling. Although we did sort of tell him we’d try to find him a virgin. If you could just act like one at first, I’m sure that would be close enough,” Joel advised.

“You mean you think I’m a...a...harlot?” she stammered, her voice quivering in horror.

“Look, I thought you needed money,” Joel said, his patience beginning to wear thin. Pulling one of his calling cards from his pocket, Joel hurriedly scrawled something on it. Flipping the card between his fingers, he continued, “This is my address. I guarantee you a job there on my father’s behalf if you’ll only hurry upstairs before we change our minds. What more could you possibly ask for? I’m giving you a chance to make an honest living after this one last night if you’d like. Do you understand?”

Their words sliced through her heart and Dominique did her best to hold the sobs within her chest. The three sinfully handsome men with their fine clothes and sharp wit thought she was nothing but a whore, plain and simple. She ought to simply tell Joel where he could put his money and just leave, but the sight of it was too tempting. She knew what they expected her to do, and the thought sickened her.

Still, what good was her virginity if she was murdered during the night in an abandoned alley because she couldn’t afford shelter? She didn’t expect to ever find a man that actually wanted to marry her anyway, so what was the point of saving her virtue? Joel was offering her a life. And she probably wouldn’t even have to accept his offer of a job if she was able to use the money properly and keep looking elsewhere for a decent position, perhaps as a seamstress somewhere.

Dominique’s heart was aflutter as her conscience warred over what little purity was left in her miserable life. She saw the hint of aggravation on their faces as they impatiently awaited her answer. The rumble of thunder reminded Dominique what was waiting for her once she left the inn, and it was a surety she’d be leaving there before they closed for the night. And then where would she go? She was frightened beyond belief at what she would be facing once she left the Boar’s Head alone that night.

Her heart beating madly within her chest, Dominique’s eyes fell upon the huge wad of cash once more. She wondered how her life had ever come to this loathsome moment, and hated herself for considering the sale of her morality. How could one put a price on such a thing? And yet she had no choice. Exhaling a shuddering sigh, she softly said, “I’ll do it.”

Hearty laughter and thanks rang out at her acquiescence. Dominique’s mind was spinning at the realization of the transaction she’d just agreed to. The tavern was noisy and warm, the other patrons a blur as Dominique resigned herself to the knowledge of what she was about to do. Her heart was beating so loudly she wondered that no one else in the entire place could hear it. No one was paying any

attention to them at all. No one cared that she'd just agreed to become a whore, and she squeezed her eyes shut to force the tears back at the fleeting thought at what a grave disappointment she'd just become to her parents if they were indeed still looking down on her.

She was spared further immediate feelings of guilt as the young men proceeded to rush her along. Derek was not known for his great patience, and it would be their luck he'd be ready to leave by the time they sent up his virgin goddess, however lacking she might be. After finding out what room Derek was waiting in, Joel discreetly gave Dominique the location of the room and handed her the money and calling card bearing his address.

The three rogues watched Dominique slowly ascend the steps before returning to finish their drinks. After discussing her potential were she dried and dressed up, the friends got into a friendly game of poker, content to while away the next couple of hours in the crowded tavern.

Dominique slowly trudged up the stairs as if she were about to meet her demise. And how did she know she wasn't? Fool that she was, she hadn't even thought to ask a single question about the man she was about to surrender her virginity to. What if he was an ugly, cruel man who enjoyed wicked perversions? But then again, perhaps he had the look of his friends below stairs, young and hale and handsome. Her fingers shook as she slowly reached for the doorknob on the last room to the right. Joel had instructed her not to bother knocking, to simply go on in, that their friend would be waiting for her.

Still, it didn't seem quite right to just walk in uninvited, so Dominique rapped softly upon the door. She waited an eternal moment but no one answered. The hinges creaked as she finally got up enough nerve to open the door a bit. She saw that it was nearly dark inside the room and Dominique could hear her heart beating furiously as fear of the unknown assailed her entire being.

The dying flame of a lone candle on the table sputtered out just as Dominique took a tentative step inside. A small fire was burning in the fireplace and lent a cozy glow to the room, though it was still difficult to make anything out in the dimness.

Softly clicking the door shut behind her, Dominique cautiously looked about the room, her back against the door. A strange noise came from the direction of the bed and its methodical rhythm brought a nervous smile to Dominique's face as she realized it was someone gently snoring.

She softly stepped toward the noise, forgetting to breathe as she reached the bed. Her reticule fell soundlessly upon the carpet as her fingers shook at the sight of him. He was glorious. The most beautiful man she had even seen.

The thought of what she was expected to do with such an alluring specimen prompted the return of her breathing, feverishly so. He was fully dressed except for having removed his boots before lying down. His pristine shirt was partially undone, revealing what was undoubtedly a magnificent chest, and Dominique suddenly wished there was more light in the room. She wondered what color his eyes were. Without a doubt his hair was blond, that was evident even in the dimness. Shocked to find that her curiosity had led her to his bedside, Dominique continued to stare at the stranger as moments crept by. Before losing her nerve, she dared reach out a hand toward his hair. Just to see if it felt as soft as it looked. The man was surely sweet and kind, if his personality matched his saintly looks at all.

The abrupt remembrance of what Joel had said came crashing back to mind and a heaviness settled about her heart. This man was dying and had only a few months to live. What a travesty that someone so young and gorgeous should be handed such a sentence. Perhaps even now he was taking a brief respite from his illness in a much needed slumber.

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