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Silent in the Sanctuary

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Extract

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I stood motionless for a lifetime it seemed, although I know it cannot have been more than a few seconds. I summoned a deliberate smile and extended my hand, forcing my voice to lightness. Rather unexpectedly, both were steady.

"Brisbane, what a surprise to see you. Welcome to Bellmont Abbey."

He shook my hand as briefly as courtesy would permit, bowing from the neck, his face coolly impassive as Plum's beloved Carrara marble. He was exquisitely dressed in evening clothes even Ly would approve, all black-and-white elegance, down to the silken sling that held his left arm immobile just above his waist.

"My lady. Welcome home from your travels."

My smile was polite, wintry, nothing more. Any observer might have thought us the most casual of acquaintances. But I was deeply conscious of Father and Portia watching us intently.

"Thank you. Did I understand Father correctly? Are congratulations in order?"

"The elevation is a very recent one. In fact the letters patent have not yet been read. His lordship is overhasty in his compliments," he said mildly, but I knew him well enough to know this was no façade of modesty. Brisbane himself would not care about titles, and I could only imagine he would accept one because it ensured his entrée into the highest circles of society—a useful privilege for someone in his profession.

For my part, I was impressed in spite of myself. I was one of the few people who knew the truth of Brisbane's parentage and upbringing. To rise from that to a viscountcy was little more than miraculous. It meant whilst I had been sunning myself in Italy, Brisbane had busied himself investigating something very delicate and probably very nasty for someone very highly placed.

"I did not realise you were staying at the Abbey, my lord. I confess I am surprised to see you here."

Brisbane's eyes flickered toward my father. "I might say the same of you, my lady. His lordship declined to mention you were expected to return home before next summer."

Father's eyes were open very wide, a sure sign he had been up to mischief. He was incapable of feigning innocence. I looked from him to Brisbane, fitting the pieces together swiftly. My appearance was as much of a surprise to Brisbane as his was to me. He was pale under the olive of his complexion, and I realised he was attempting to compose himself. Whatever he had expected of his visit to Bellmont Abbey, a reunion with me was no part of it.

I had just opened my mouth to tease him when he looked past me and beckoned sharply to a lady hesitating shyly on the edge

of our circle. I had not noticed her before, but now I wondered how that was possible.

"My lady," Brisbane said smoothly, "I should like to present to you my fiancée, Mrs. King. Charlotte, Lady Julia Grey."

I know that I put out my hand, and that she took it, because I looked down to see my fingers grasped warmly in hers, but I felt nothing. I had gone quite numb as I took in the implication of what Brisbane had just said.

"Mrs. King," I murmured. Recovering myself quickly, I fixed a smile on my lips and repeated the greeting I had given Brisbane. "Welcome to the Abbey."

"And welcome back to England, my lady," she said breathlessly.

She was a truly lovely creature, all chocolate-box sweetness with a round, dimpled face and luscious colouring. She had clouds of hair the same honeyed red-blond I had admired on a Titian Madonna. Her eyes were wide and almost indescribably blue. She had a plump, rosebud mouth and an adorably tiny nose unadorned by even a single freckle. Only the chin, small and pointed like a cat's, belied the sweetness of her expression. There was firmness there, perhaps even stubbornness, although now she was smiling at me in mute invitation to befriend her. Unlike me, she wore widow's weeds, although touches of purple indicated her loss was not a recent one. The black suited her though, highlighting a certain fragile delicacy of complexion no cosmetic could ever hope to simulate. She was a Fragonard milkmaid, a Botticelli nymph. I hated her instantly.

"I am so very pleased to make your acquaintance, my lady,"

she was saying. "Lord Wargrave has told me simply everything about you. I know we are going to be very great friends." She was earnest as a puppy, and I had little doubt most people found her charming.

"Has he indeed? How very kind you are," I said, fingering the pendant at my throat. It had been an involuntary action, and I realised as soon as my fingers touched the cool silver it was a mistake. Mrs. King's bright blue gaze fixed on the piece at once.

"What an unusual pendant. Did you acquire it on your travels?" she asked, peering closely at the coin.

"No. It was a gift," I said, covering its face with a finger. I turned to Brisbane, who was watching our exchange closely. I nodded toward the sling. "I see you have managed to injure yourself, my lord. Nothing serious, I hope."

He lifted a brow. "Not at all. A nasty spill from a horse a fortnight ago, nothing more. His lordship was kind enough to invite me to recuperate here away from the bustle of the city."

"And you will be here for Christmas as well?" I asked, forcing my tone to brightness.

"As will my fiancée," he replied coolly, locking those witch-black eyes onto mine.

I did not blink. "Excellent. I shall look forward to getting to know her intimately." The words were blandly spoken, but Brisbane knew me well enough to hear the threat implicit within them.

His gaze wavered slightly, and I inclined my head. "I do hope you will excuse me. I must greet the other guests. Mrs. King, a pleasure," I said, withdrawing from the group. Father caught my

eye, his own eyes bright with mischief. I turned my head, not surprised to find Portia at my elbow.

"Well done, dearest," she whispered.

"Whiskey," I hissed. "Now."

In another of the little altar alcoves a sideboard had been arranged with spirits of every variety. We made our way to the whiskey decanter and stood with our backs to the room. Portia poured out a generous measure for both of us and we each took a healthy, choking sip. I swallowed hard and fixed her with an Inquisitor's stare.

"I shall only ask you once. Did you know?"

She paled, then took another sip of her whiskey, colour flooding her cheeks instantly. "Of course not. I knew Father meant to invite him down for Christmas. I thought it might be a nice surprise for you. But I had no idea he was being elevated, nor that he had that…that *creature* with him. How could he?"

Portia shot Brisbane a dark look over her shoulder. "He kissed you. He gave you that pendant. I thought that *meant* something."

"Then you are as daft as I. Drink up. We cannot hover over the spirits all evening. We must mingle with the other guests."

She stared at me as though I had lost my senses. "But are you not—"

"Of course, dearest. I am entirely shattered. Now finish your whiskey. I see Aunt Dorcas mouldering in an armchair by the fire and I must say hello to her before she decays completely."

Portia's eyes narrowed. "You are not shattered. You are *smiling*. What are you about?"

"Nothing," I told her firmly. "But I have my pride. And as you pointed out," I said with a nod toward Alessandro, "I have alternatives."

Alessandro smiled back at me, shyly, his colour rising a little.

Portia poked me. "What are you thinking?"

I put our glasses on the table and looped my arm through hers, pulling her toward Aunt Dorcas.

"I was simply thinking what a delight it will be to introduce Alessandro to Brisbane."

Aunt Dorcas had established herself in the armchair nearest the fire, and it looked as though it would take all of the Queen's army to roust her out of it. No one would call her plump, for plumpness implies something jolly or pleasant, and Aunt Dorcas was neither of those. She was *solid,* with a sense of permanence about her, as though she had always existed and meant to go on doing so forever. Disturbingly for a woman of her size and age, she had a penchant for girlish ruffles and bows. She was draped in endless layers of pink silk and wrapped in an assortment of lace shawls, with lace mitts on her hands and an enormous lace cap atop her thinning hair. She wore only pearls, yards of them, dripping from her décolletage and drawing the eye to her wrinkled skin. She had gone yellow with age, like vellum, and every bit of her was the colour of stained ivory—teeth, hair, skin, and the long nails that tapped out a tuneless melody on the arm of her chair. But her eyesight was sharp, and her hearing even better. She was talking to, or rather *at,* Hortense de Bellefleur,

Father's particular friend. Hortense was stitching placidly at a bit of luscious violet silk. She was dressed with a Frenchwoman's natural elegance in a simple gown of biscuit silk, an excellent choice for a lady of her years. She looked up as we approached, smiling a welcome. Aunt Dorcas simply raised her cane to poke my stomach.

"Stop there. I don't need you breathing all over me. Where have you been, Julia Grey? Gallivanting about Europe with all those filthy Continentals?"

Her voice carried, and I darted a quick glance at Hortense, but she seemed entirely unperturbed. Then again, very little ever perturbed Hortense.

"Xenophobic as ever, I see, Aunt Dorcas," I said brightly.

"Eh? Well, never mind. You've put on a bit of weight you have, and lost that scrawny look. You were a most unpromising child, but you have turned out better than I would have thought."

The praise was grudging, but extremely complimentary coming from Aunt Dorcas. She turned to Hortense.

"Julia was always plain, not like Portia there. Portia has always been the one to turn men's heads, haven't you, poppet?"

"And some ladies'," I murmured. Portia smothered a cough, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Yes, Aunt Dorcas, but you must agree Julia is quite the beauty now," my sister put in loyally.

"She will do," Aunt Dorcas said, a trifle unwillingly, I thought.

I bent swiftly to kiss Hortense's cheek. "Welcome home, chérie," she whispered. "It is good to see you."

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