

DANCING WITH INK

by

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ABSTRACT

KRISTINA MARIE DUEMMLER. *Dancing with Ink*.
(Under the direction of PROFESSOR AARON GWYN)

The following creative thesis contains the first 100 pages of the historical fiction novel on the life of Lady Mary Wroth, the first woman in the Early Modern Era to publish a prose poetry novel. The thesis begins and ends in the year 1651. It is here that the text delves into the misgivings in Wroth's life: losing her estate, her financial struggles, and her reputational conflicts. As the story unveils the truth about what happened in Wroth's later life, it will show an up close and personal story of Wroth as a child in the year 1602, where the work explores the idea of girlhood in Early Modern England. In between narrative moments with present day Wroth and childhood Wroth is a third narrative structure: young adult Wroth. This section focuses on the years 1604-1606, where she began married life with Robert Wroth. It is my hope in this section to show what an Early Modern marriage looked like from a woman's perspective. The work does not follow a chronological order but instead follows a jump cut structure where times and events are explored and then the narration jumps to another time and another event with no logical connection. The reader learns about three different versions of Wroth at the same time, and each time period informs the story and draws the reader forward in the narrative. Thematic concerns such as feminist theory, womanhood, relationships between people and between people and the outside world, and memory and trauma are explored in the work. The creative thesis will provide a close examination of Lady Mary Wroth's life, allowing readers to be inside the mind of Wroth during paramount moments in her life, the likes of which has never been done before.

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DEDICATION

To Lukas, everything and my heart.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Publishing in the Early Modern Era looked quite different than it does today. For one, women during this time period were oftentimes excluded from the practice, and if they found a way around this exclusion and were able to publish their works, they were congratulated with harsh judgements and harassment from scholars of their day. One such woman, Lady Mary Wroth, did not let her desire to write and interest in poetry be squandered by the patriarchy of Early Modern England. She was the first woman in the Early Modern Era to publish a set of sonnets (*Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*) and a corona (“A Crowne of Sonnets Dedicated to Love”) as part of her prose poetry novel: *Urania*. But it was not enough for Wroth to just enter into this male-dominated field; she also insisted on turning the sonnet, a typical poem in which women were objectified, into a means of showing women’s authority over their feelings and actions.

Lady Mary Wroth lived an ambitious life full of contestation over the present-day beliefs regarding women. It is the intricacies and struggles of Wroth’s life that inform her text and draw me toward her. Margaret Hannay, in 2010, published the first full biography on Wroth. While Hannay’s biography gives detailed accounts of her whereabouts, it neglects, as biographies do, to comment on personal dealings in Wroth’s life, instead choosing to keep a researcher’s tone in the text. As a creative mind, I wonder what happened in Wroth’s childhood that gave her the determination and drive to push against boundaries and publish when no other woman had before? What happened in her marriage to Robert that left her riddled and alone? How did she cope, in her later years, when her book was attacked and rejected? I find myself asking these questions and imagining what a life for Wroth would have held: bravery, desire, and, of course, lots of

writing. These answers can only truly be explored in a more creative form. Therefore, the following creative thesis delves into three different time periods in Lady Mary Wroth's life: her childhood, early adulthood, and late adulthood, in order to better understand what her life might have entailed.

Through these three sections, which weave in and out of each other throughout the length of the novel, certain thematic concerns dictate the scenes explored and the plot's continuation. The first thematic concern which this thesis delves into is feminist theory. In exploring a woman who broke through barriers set by men regarding what women could and could not do, feminist and gender theory are analyzed. The idea of a patriarchal order is questioned, and the ideas of equal rights, justice, and fairness is brought to light. In watching Mary, as a child, a young woman, and an older woman, fight against the men in her life, and even the women in her life, who tell her what she can and cannot do, the novel focuses on how Wroth was able to push back against these forces to achieve a milestone for women everywhere: publication. Even in her later life, after she was published, she struggled with homelessness and poverty. The world around her saw no value in a widow, but Wroth contested those values.

In dealing with a woman in the Early Modern Era, this work invariably attends to womanhood during this time period. The practices of Early Modern women are explored in this novel, as well as the views of daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood, and widowhood. In order to inform these four times in Wroth's life, the theme of family and friendship is also relevant to the work, especially the relationship between father and daughter and lady of the house and maiden. Personal relationships are of the utmost importance in this novel and are what drive the story forward. In turn, the novel explores

love and what that looked like for women during this time period, especially regarding arranged marriages. In addition to exploring human relationships, this novel also explores the relationship between Early Modern women and the outdoors. In a time when women were the sole knowledge source for the household, the outdoors and gardening was an important practice for women. Throughout the entire course of the novel, the relationship between the outdoors and women is investigated, as well as the relationship between women and the household.

In addition, the ideas of memory and traumatic experiences are brought to light in the later sections of Wroth's life where a traumatic experience sparks the remembrance of previous traumas that occurred in Wroth's life. Memory around past traumatic events is a concept that this project is interested in studying. What happens to the brain during traumatic events? How are those events remembered? And what are the outward as well as mental effects of those events? It is through the late adulthood section of the project that these questions are attempted to be answered.

In order to explore these themes as well as the life of Lady Mary Wroth, this thesis pays particular attention to the following aspects of craft: structure, narration, voice, characterization, and setting.

The first and most obvious aspect of craft that this thesis explores is structure. As stated above, the thesis delves into three different times in Wroth's life, and these times weave in and out of each other. The work does not follow a chronological order but instead follows a jump cut structure where times and events are explored and then the narration jumps to another time and another event with no logical connection between events or times. In order to aid understanding, each section begins with a time and a

setting to ground the reader in the time period and setting that the next segment takes place in. This structure is important to the narrative because it lets me explore three different times in Wroth's life in surprising ways. The reader learns about these three different versions of Wroth at the same time, and each time period informs the story and draws the reader forward in the narrative. Closely tied to structure is narration. When dealing with a subject who went through a lot of traumatic events in her life, this work tries to explore how trauma and memory are connected. When remembering traumatic events, the memory is not always chronological, and most times involves jumps in time. I try to explore this idea with the narration in this work which mirrors the jumpy and nonsensical way memory can take over.

Since the thesis deals with three different times in Wroth's life, it deals with three different versions of Wroth. As one grows older, one changes, and that change affects everything from mental capacities to voice. This work attempts to show the different versions of Wroth through her voice. Each section has a distinct voice for the narrator which matches the way that Wroth might have thought or acted during that time in her life. For instance, in the childhood sections, the narrator is more descriptive and lighthearted in tone. When dealing with Wroth as a young adult, the sections are narrated at a quicker pace paying more attention to the relationships which Wroth engages with. During the sections that deal with Mary as an older woman, the narrative voice is fast paced, more skeptical, and easily distracted. This work attempts to capture the variation that occurs in Wroth's life due to the different events that Wroth encounters. Closely tied to voice is characterization. Through the different narrative voices, I play with

characterization, especially when it comes to characterizing Wroth. I let the voice and narration lead when it comes to developing Wroth's character.

Lastly, and seen in most historical fiction works, this thesis pays particular attention to setting. While I was not able to choose the setting for my work, since I based it off of where Wroth was recorded as being at the time of the narration, I do use the setting to inform the story and move it forward. Setting is especially important in the childhood sections since Wroth is so tied to the outside gardens during these sections. I use the setting, either the outside or the indoors, to inform Wroth's current state of mind. Setting is also important in the later sections as they dictate who Wroth is able to encounter. Relationships are highlighted during those sections, so the setting aids in the development of certain relationships over others.

As part of the writing practice, I have engaged in a lot of reading in order to gather inspiration. One of the most influential works which has had a great impact on the content of the thesis is Hillary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* series. This three-part series explores the years 1500-1535 and strictly deals with the reign of King Henry and his relations with former Queen Anne. Seeing as how my thesis takes place only 64 years after Mantel's work, a lot of the historical knowledge that informs the exposition of the book was gathered through this work. As well, I learned a lot about royalty and how they interact and live which I used to inform the sections in Wroth's early adulthood where she interacts closely with Queen Anne and her inner circle of friends. While *Wolf Hall* has had an extensive influence on the content of the work, it has also had influence on the ways in which the work is written. Mantel is an expert at diving into the main character's mind while using a third person limited point of view. It is this intimacy between her

main character's thoughts and her writing that I draw influence from. I attempt, in my work, to incorporate internal monologue alongside the physical events happening at the time.

In addition to Wolf Hall, I draw influence from Philipp Meyer's *The Son* and Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruin*. These two novels, both historical fiction, deal with multiple narrative structures. Meyer's novel follows three different characters during three different time periods. I used his novel as a starting point to see how to successfully weave together different narrative plots and times. Atkinson's work also plays with narration in having five different characters narrate different portions of her work. I drew influence from the way that Atkinson would hint at future events in her narrative due to the play with chronology. All three of the mentioned authors have influenced my view of historical fiction in general but have also influenced my authorial voice. I tend to write similar to the books I am reading, so a lot of the structure of my writing or play with aspects of craft are generated from watching these authors play with the same aspects.

Seeing as how I am writing an historical fiction novel on a time period in which I did not live nor took an historical class on, there has been a cornucopia of research needed in order to reanimate Early Modern England and to stay as accurate as possible to what Wroth would have experienced during her life. I have conducted research on the different settings in which the work takes place, even finding maps and descriptions of the different houses and/or locations that Wroth ventures to. In addition, there has been research conducted on the proper outfits for women of high class as well as for women of lower classes. I have also looked into London during the 1600s, and I am working from a

map of the city during that time in order to position Wroth and the other characters in the work.

Second to research on the time period, I have conducted extensive research on the life of Lady Mary Wroth. I have read Josephine Roberts's edition of Wroth's work where she gives an overview of the information known about Wroth, including anytime there was letter correspondence about her, from her, or to her. It also includes Wroth's family history and the history of the places she has lived and traveled to. I have also read Margaret Hannay's extensive biography on Wroth. I relied heavily on these works for the history of Wroth and for the events that take place within the work. I have also relied heavily on Robert's transcription of Wroth's work. The thesis includes many moments of Wroth writing, and in those moments, I include snippets of Wroth's published work which I gathered from Robert's book. I have also done research on the other characters in the book who touch Wroth's life. These people include Robert Wroth, Queen Anne and King James, Ben Jonson, her publishers, Robert Sidney, Barbara Gamage, all of Wroth's siblings, and her son. Every major event detailed in the work is inspired by actual recordings of things Wroth did and people Wroth met.

The research for this work began in a class I took in the spring of 2020. The class was titled Early Modern Women Writers. It is here that I learned about Lady Mary Wroth and about writing practices for women during this time period. I have taken a lot of the knowledge from this class in terms of women and garden spaces, women and recipe books, and women's practices around the house and have put that knowledge into practice in Wroth's life.

SECTION ONE

London, England

1651

Chepelyde street bustled with carts; their wheels groaning as they maneuvered along the holes and mounds in the dirt road. Constrained horses thrashed against the ropes, flinging their manes in the air, causing drivers, seated high, to snap at the reins and jerk the bits against the steeds' teeth. The clanking this caused was drowned out by the loud voices of the streetwalkers: boys walking around with buckets offering small trinkets and pieces of silver in exchange for coins; women, dressed in frayed skirts, stumbling about whispering secrets regarding the new parliament which they swore came from a confident source but, when asked, refused to admit who this source might be; men in dark suits whirling in and out of the women and boys, their heads down, their strides long, heading somewhere they deemed important but upon arriving would probably discover to be trivial and they will find themselves questioning their rush as they massage the bunions on their feet caused by their leather boots tied tightly against their ankles; whisperers in trench coats and high collars circling the masses speaking of Charles II and his recent crowning in Scotland and hinting that he and his will rise again and tie them all to the burning stick; widows, in black veils, and orphans, in tattered coats, picking at the litter in the streets wondering aloud when their soldier would come home.

Twenty miles Northeast sat Loughton Hall. A manor as far from the mess of the streets just witnessed that it almost felt in a different time, a time before modernization when the wilderness was the main landscape and the deer and foxes were the main life, but not so far to flee the effects of death.

It had experienced great keepers, one being former Queen Mary Tudor, and was known to be full of servants: men and women fluttering in the halls, swaying between rooms, and frisking between tasks. But now it sat in the hands of one Lady Mary Wroth, who, old and battered, found herself sparsely occupied and little companied, only affording the bare minimum of hands to keep the estate running, though not the entire estate, only the west wing, for Mary ventured no more among the other particulars of the house, preferring to stay where her mind found peace.

There was a time in her past when the commotion of Chepelyde street would have caused her heart to clobber against her ribs and her blood to pump faster, but that time was long gone. Instead, she found the tumult to be exhausting, wearing on her already enervated ears and attention span, thus forcing her into a life behind closed windows and locked doors where the noise could not find her.

In a room, behind draped windows and latched doors, Mary walked, flinching each time her knees cracked, cursing her stuck joints and pulverized cartilage; she looked over her shoulder regularly, watching the door. A habit.

She wandered alongside her shelf, her finger rippling against the different sizes and textures of her books. She stopped every once in a while to wipe at the dust on a cover or flatten out the corner of a bent page she noticed. She could feel her heartbeat in her finger as it slid along a page of the *Faerie Queene*, her childhood favorite. Each day her heart felt weaker, beat slower, thudded harder in her chest. She had heard from someone, she no longer remembered, at a time, she no longer recalled, that a life was marked by a certain number of heartbeats, and once one reaches that number, their heart stops. She used to like this idea, as her heart always felt strong and loud inside her, but now she knew the truth. Her life wasn't allotted a certain number of heartbeats; it was

constrained by air. Over her years, she had taken countless breaths, breathing in the environment around her and expelling herself into her surroundings. Each breath pulled at the world, and the world in turn only allowed a certain number of pulls. Lately, she could feel the pulls dragging, the air thickening. The world was coming for what it was due. It was only a certain number of breaths away.

When her hand stopped on a title, smaller than the others, she turned her whole body to the shelves and counted until her finger reached the end and fell to the shelf's wood. Four. There were still five out there. She hoped they were on shelves similar to her own, hoped that they were bound, her characters protected. She used to hope for praise, but that wish died hard and fast; now she only hoped that they weren't burned.

She twisted, moving away from her work. It was weird having a piece of her mind separate from herself. Its own entity. Did it think and feel? She wanted to laugh. Her mind was no longer prepared for questions like that.

She faced her desk, and her eyes squinted. Hadn't she left an unfinished letter there yesterday? She remembered writing the words *not returned yet*; the quill then falling out of her hand as she'd stood and walked from the words. She stepped toward the desk, planning to search the drawers, but her hand brushed a chair, and she stopped. That chair should be closer to the door. She looked around the room. In fact, a few of the furniture seemed to be crooked or out of place. She must not have noticed, too occupied by her books. The staff hadn't been in here to clean in years, having strict orders to stay out of her private spaces. The only person allowed within these walls was herself. And she would never have moved the pieces, if not for her desire to keep things tidy, her brittle bones and sinewy muscles wouldn't have been able to heave the chairs anyway.

As she turned back to her desk, her eyes landed on a pair of glistening black bulbs in the corner. Out of the shadow came a voice.

“Lady *Wroth*.”

A large figure, dressed in a traveling coat, stepped from the shadow. Her eyes lingered on a pin attached to his breast pocket, a knight roaring in the center of a red circle, before the coat ripped open and a flash of white shot toward her. Her mind screamed for her to duck, to run, to move in some way, but her muscles, weak with age, didn’t move, leaving her debilitated as the white grew larger and larger.

SECTION TWO

Kent, England
Penshurst Place
1602

The sun crested over Penshurst, turning the tan bricks white and the windows into mirrors which reflected back the expanse of green from the gardens. The castle grew out of the ground, rising three stories and ending in a line of square crenels and merlons. Today, no one stood in the crenels as they once had during the Second Desmond Rebellion some twenty years ago, firing arrows at unknown enemies. No. Today, only a bird was visible, tweeting from the branch of an oak tree suspended over the west hall.

While the life outside stilled in the August sun, the air danced with the sound of learning children seated behind a clavichord or upright holding a viola. Ever since the Lord of the estate had married, the windows of Penshurst had been thrust open and the trickling of music flowed out of them and over the gardens. It was not only the music that lingered in the halls, but the smell of paint that seemed to never lose its poignancy.

Some say that it was in Penshurst, under the care of Mistress Barbara Gamage, that great literary and artistic accomplishments were made, but it was not to Mistress Gamage's cause; it was in the blood of the Sidney's, for the Sidney's were known to have a gift. A gift not seen but heard, for the very words spoken from a Sidney were electrified and felt within the veins of the listener. And the hands of a Sidney were rumored to be the very hands of God.

That was never more true than for one young Lady Mary Sidney, in whose veins blood pumped hotter than any other. She sat outside of Penshurst among the magnolia trees; her dress, fanned out around her, lifted and twirled with each passing wind. She

leaned against the small naiad statue, using the shade her uplifted hands created as a recluse from the summer sun. Her quill scratched against the parchment in her lap.

The Sunn which to the Earth

Gives heate, light and pleasure,

Pausing to dab the quill in more ink, Mary pushed her white, laced sleeves further up her arm.

“Why must I wear such unsuitable clothing?”

Nelly, who stood by the rose bushes plucking at the dead leaves, turned. “Because it makes m’lady look like a lady shall look.”

Mary huffed in Nelly’s general direction. What did she know about what a woman should look like? She watched her handmaid walk along the shrubs, appraising the clean, straight apron she wore. Nelly had been Mary’s handmaid ever since she was born, and in the sixteen years of knowing her, she had never once seen her apron anything but stark white and pressed firmly against her skirt. Unlike Mary, who, even now, had splotches of black ink patterned across her hem and sleeves.

She dipped her quill once more in the ink pot and stared out among the magnolias; the pink-white petals sprouted upright from their branches, yearning towards the sun. A bee flew along the trees, stopping to pick at a flower. She leaned over her parchment.

The spring now come att last

To trees, fields, to flowers,

And meadows makes to taste

Whilst I sit in dismay

For the sun can not reach me herre

“Lady Mary! Nelly!” Between the rose bushes, a voice called. The two women looked. A woman walked down the path; her white apron flung in the air, slapping at her arms: Coraline, her mother’s housekeeper. “Lady, your mother wants company with you. She said t’was urgent.”

Mary stowed her ink and grabbed her journal. She waited for Nelly to come closer before she stood. Nelly bent forward and brushed the leaves from Mary’s skirt. She waited until she was finished, a curt nod from Nelly signaling to Mary that she was allowed to go. She walked forward; the two maids behind.

“Head lifted,” Coraline called. Mary juttied her chin out. How was she supposed to walk along the path when her eyes were cast up? All she could see were the clouds floating in the air. That didn’t seem right. Her feet stumbled along the uneven cracks.

“Stand proper.”

Mary sighed and tried to keep her footing straight. She imagined herself in her head, pictured a straight edge pressed against her neck and scalp.

They entered the heraldic garden. The multi-colored posts held the heads of various beasts. Lions standing tall, elks with wings, a red angel with a bow and arrow, all stared at Mary as she passed. They assessed the placement of her shoulder blades. She wondered why her mother’s head wasn’t thrust on a post so better to watch her form. Instead, she sent her housemaid.

“Shoulders back,” Coraline called. Mary jerked her back straight. Her corset dug into the space between her shoulder blades.

“If it was urgent,” Mary asked, turning her head toward the maids. “Should we not take the most direct route?” Her eyes scanned the field on her left. On the other side, the door to the kitchen.

“Look Ahead,” Coraline called.

Mary turned. “My question still stands,” she shouted back. “Nelly? You have been quiet.”

“M’lady wants to take the field?” Nelly asked. Her voice curved in the way a hand curves around a cheek as it slaps.

“And get your dress dirty?” Coraline scoffed as if ridding the taste of the words from her mouth.

“Never mind,” Mary grumbled. “I guess no matter is as important as this damned dress.” She squirmed her arms, trying to reposition the corset. They turned left at the end of the path and headed toward the garden tower. As she walked, her hand grazed along the flowers. She couldn’t see them, her eyes turned toward the sky, but she could smell lavender and peonies.

“That is what I heard, I swear,” Coraline’s voice whispered behind Mary. She slowed her walk, listening.

“But she is young still.” Nelly’s voice was incredulous. “He has never shown interest in her pairing before.”

“She is of age, Nelly.” A pause. Mary kept her form straight, letting her fingers trail along the flowers. “I know you see her as the little girl you raised. But look at her bosom. A tell sign.”

“Tis the corset.”

“A corset diminishes, not extenuates”

Mary’s fingers twitched toward her chest. Had she sprouted? She always felt so flat in comparison to the women around her. But, being it that the women around her were mainly handmaids in aprons and simple gowns, her corset did seem to shrink her. It

was in her night gown that they were free to expand. Was it not a month ago that her mother had come into her room, appraising her in her bath? She had wondered what her look had meant.

The trio turned at the garden tower and passed under. The ladies' voices echoed against the stone.

"As the oldest, it is time she brought the family fortune. She is doing them no good as a lady who sits around writing all day." Mary almost turned.

"Oh, the writing is nothing," Nelly said. "Tis something to keep her occupied in the day." Mary slowed further.

So quiet she almost didn't hear: "Writing should be left to the men and scholars."

Silence.

Good, keep quiet, Mary thought. *What did she know?* Her aunt, the very aunt who had been published, encouraged Mary to keep writing. If anyone knew the importance of writing, it was her, not some maid who thinks that women were meant to stand at the kitchen table and chop away her days. But a feeling was taking over Mary; a feeling that had become more prevalent since her last visit to her Aunt's where she was read her work and was able to experience firsthand the magic of her words. She could still feel the silence that enveloped the room after her reading. But not the silence that feels heavy and present; it was a pained silence. A silence that pierced the tender flaps of skin between Mary's fingers, stilling her hand so that it felt as if it would never write again. Ever since then, her own words had felt small.

"But she is so young."

Mary only heard parts of the response. Her clicking heels covered the rest.

"They..he..this week."

Mary's stomach dropped. This week? So soon? This couldn't be true. Her father had promised after his last attempt that he would wait until she was ready.

They came to the open kitchen door, and the women's voices were drowned out by the kitchen maids. Five women decorated in white-stained aprons busied around the kitchen, their hands always full: bowls of flour, cups of milk, pinches of salt. Mary stood by the door, watching as one threw flour over a dough ball preparing to roll it out.

She waited for the maids to get closer before stepping through the door. She hated any time she had to walk through the kitchen. Five pairs of eyes snapped up as she walked in and, all at once, squinted as they caught sight of her. A huff was heard before the heads bowed forward; a mummer ran through the crowd: "My lady." But the eyes never left her. She felt them claw their way up her sleeves, assessing the ink-stained lace. She felt as they slimed their way to her bonnet. Mary's fingers followed, tucking in the hair that skewed out. She felt as they squeezed her waist tighter. And then they left as another set met theirs.

"Ladies," Coraline said. All of the eyes fell silent. Coraline looked around the room; her own slits stopped on each face. When they landed on Mary, she had to look away. How could one stare a lion in the eyes and stay on their feet? "We must be going." The kitchen maids turned, each going back to their task from before. Mary watched as the women averted Coraline's stare. Nelly sighed and let Mary ahead.

"Eyes forward," Coraline called. Mary turned.

They walked into the dining hall; more women were in here, some laying out a large tablecloth onto the wooden table, others were carrying piles of plates from one table to the next.

“Good Murrow,” Mary said as she walked past two women carrying a tray of cutlery. She felt the slime coat her body as their eyes raked over her. But then they met Coraline’s and turned away.

The trio continued down the grand hall. Mary stared at her ancestors’ pictures that hung on the wall. Great grandfather Dudley. Great grandmother Dudley. The pair neglected to have a photo painted together, insisting on having their own frame. But even in two separate frames, they seemed to stare at each other, their lips curling back. Mary swore with each year that passed her great grandmother Dudley’s lip curled more. Maybe in a few years they would all be able to see the bottom row of her teeth.

They passed by Grandfather Sidney; his bright red beard unfurled from his chin like smoke from fire. She thought of her own red hair tucked under her cap. The pins pushed against her temples, giving her a headache. When she had asked Mr. Bird if she could remove the cap, he had responded that women were better with headaches for they kept them distracted.

Her father and her mother were next. Her mother looked the same even though they claimed the painting was done after they were married sixteen years ago. Her eyes looked like little buttons that pushed into her chalk-white face. But Mary knew better. They were not buttons but more the eyes of a sleeping snake who, once awoken, could kill with one blink. Her father was different. He loomed in the painting, taking up most of the frame. His eyes were larger, more so balls than buttons. She looked at the hair on his lip. She couldn’t remember if he still had that mustache. She could barely remember the sound of his voice.

After her parents, the hallway gave way to the pale walls. Space for her and her siblings’ paintings. She had asked if she could have one made and put on the wall for her

birthday, but her mother had scoffed. “One gets a painting when one is married and has a husband to stand next to. Otherwise, it would just be a painting of you.” She laughed afterward and Mary joined in, wondering what was funny.

They passed the nursery then William, Liza, and Cathy’s rooms. The sound of picked strings undulated from the room and Mary smiled. Cathy was getting better with each passing day. Maybe soon she would put on a show. The trio stopped at the fifth door. Mary waited while Coraline knocked.

“My ladyship, I have Lady Mary for you.”

“Come in.”

Mary suddenly felt nervous. Coraline opened the door for her, and she entered slowly.

The walls were lilac. Thick wooden panels structured them into hundreds of squares. Large paintings of the previous women who lived in the room hung on the walls, their mouths turned down and their chins high. A four-poster bed sat in the middle of the room; satin sheets hung at each post of the bed frame, creating a canopy. Housemaids in formal blue waiting dresses pirouetted around the room. Some removed the sheets from the bed while others brought new ones over. Three stood by the window, picking at the leaves on a geranium. Her mother sat on a rectangular, upholstered chair. She stared at a painting of fruit which stood on an easel by the window. One lady maid sat by her mother, silently watching her, waiting for the moment her mother needed something. Her eyes were searching, expectant. It was as if her whole life was leading up to the moment her mother needed help. Her stare pained Mary. Did she even know what desire felt like?

“Oh, Mary,” Barbara, her mother, said. “Come, sit.” She patted the ground next to the chair. Mary stepped forward, and then slid to the ground, her skirt floated to the floor

a few seconds after her. Coraline closed the door behind them and went to stand behind her mother. Nelly stood by the door. She picked at her apron, straightening it against her skirt.

“How does it fare?” Barbara asked, fanning her hand out toward the painting.

Mary stared at the oranges and apples arranged in a bowl.

“I much prefer strawberries.”

“Oh child.” Barbara patted her head. “Not the subjects you study, but the way the subjects are presented.” Mary’s eyes squinted as she stared at the painting. She tried to see what her mother meant, but all she saw was a bowl of fruit. She sighed.

“It is well my dear,” Barbara said. “You will see in time.”

“Mother?” Mary asked, her eyes tearing away from the painting. “Is it father? Has he written? Is that why you called?” Mary’s questions flowed without pause.

“No,” she said. “He wrote the week before. He is not expected to write again till week after next.” Mary picked up the end of her skirt, twirling the lace between her forefinger and thumb.

“What is it that has happened to your hands?” Barbara asked, grasping Mary’s wrist in one hand and holding it in the air. Mary stared at her ink dotted fingers.

“I was in the garden, writing,” Mary said. Her book felt heavy on her knees.

“Get me a wet cloth,” Barbara said. The woman sitting next to her stood at once and ran to the other room. She came back a mere second later with a navy cloth. Her hand was cupped underneath it.

Barbara took it and wiped at the ink.

“Well, let us hear it,” Barbara said as she scrubbed at her fingers.

“Pardon me?” Mary asked. She had no idea what her mother wanted to hear. She didn’t even know if she was talking to her or one of the other twelve women in the room.

“Your writing.” She said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Let us hear what you have written.” Seemingly tired of rubbing Mary’s left hand, she grabbed her right one.

Mary picked up her book and pressed it against her chest. “‘Tis private.”

“Writing is never to be private, otherwise there would be no point in writing.” Barbara rubbed furiously at a spot on Mary’s thumb.

Mary looked around at the other women in the room. Her eyes stopped on Coraline. The pained silence came back.

“Do not mind them,” Barbara said. “They hear nothing. Their lips are tied to the secrets in this room.”

Mary wanted to tell her mother how the women’s lips were not tied, how they seemed to always talk of the happenings in this room, how she even knew about her mother’s secrets. Instead, she looked at the woman sitting next to her mother, staring at her as if she were the sun and moon combined. She opened her book and skimmed through pages of writing until she came to the one.

“Be gentle,” she said to the woman.

The Sunne hath no long journey now to goe

While I a progresse have in my desires,

Disasters dead-low-water-like do show

The sand, that overlook’d my hop’d-for hyres.

*Thus I remaine like one that's laid in Briers,
Where running brings new paine and certaine woe,
Like one, once burn'd bids me avoid the fires,
But love (true fire) will not let me be slow.*

*Obedience, feare, and love doe all conspire
A worth-lesse conquest gain'd to ruine me,
Who did but feelee the height of blest desire
When danger, doubt, and losse, I straight did see.
Restlesse I live, consulting what to doe,
And more I study, more I still undoe.*

Silence. But not the silence that prevailed after her aunt's reading. This silence still carried pain, but the pain seemed to rack the ears of the listener, turning their mouths down and their eyes into the slits of a birds whose only care is what danger comes next.

"Lovely, darling," Barbara said as Mary closed the book gingerly. "What imagination I have bestowed upon you." Her eyes skirted around the room, as if checking to see who all heard Mary's words. Mary didn't know if her mother wanted the answer to be everyone or no one.

Mary laid the book back in her lap. She stared at the worn, leather cover. Her thumbs busied themselves by twirling around each other. The pain still had not left; if anything, it grew to a force greater than Mary.

"What is it?" Barbara asked. "I can tell there is something on your mind."

"It is nothing."

Her mother's head tilted, and she sighed. She waited.

"It will only upset me," Mary said.

"Your troubles trouble me, so would it not be best to show us both mercy."

"It is about print."

"Ah." Her mother nodded. "I thought your mind would go there. How could it not with your aunt and your late uncle?"

Mary looked at the wooden floor. Her eyes scanned the crevices in them wishing she could shrink and hide herself there. Even though Mary had never met her uncle, she knew him. How could she not know about the great Philip Sidney, poet of the world. His words were read aloud each family gathering and stories of his greatness followed her wherever she went. She wouldn't have minded, she probably would have enjoyed hearing about her uncle, but it was the looks she got afterward and the words people said about her that caused her disdain for him. For she was born on the year anniversary of her uncle's death, and everyone believed that her uncle's soul had come back through Mary and he now used her to continue his work. Each year that passed, people looked at her more expectantly, waiting for the return of the great Philip Sidney to the literary scene. It only grew worse when her aunt finally published. Rumors spread through the city like a fever.

"Did you hear, the great Sidney's are at it again."

"I hear the eldest daughter has the mind of her uncle. We should be expecting greatness soon."

She used to enjoy thinking about this, expecting to hear him inside her or feel him working through her, but as time passed, she realized it was all rubbish. For she never felt

him inside her, and it only seemed that her writing became more infantile the older she grew.

“Do not let your imagination run after their successes, my child,” Barbara said. “If it is your time, it will come to pass.” She rubbed her hand along Mary’s neck.

Goosebumps raised where her fingers touched. Maybe her mother was right, for even if she were able to publish, her work would not be the inspired words of Philip Sidney but only the words of a young girl used to stomp on the family name, slashing at it. The ink leaking over their fame like blood.

“Now to the reason I have summoned you.”

Mary looked up. She had forgotten about the call.

“Your schoolbooks have arrived at the church across the way,” Barbara said.

“When can I have them?”

“Not until day after tomorrow, I am afraid.” Mary opened her mouth to speak.

Her mother held up a finger. “With the dinner tonight, the staff is too busy to tend to your books. You will have to study your old ones in the meantime.”

“But mama, to read such books, whereby I have already memorized, would be of no point.”

“I am sure Mr. Bird will find ways to refresh your old material.” Barbara turned back to the painting on the easel. “You are free to go and run along.”

“What if I were to go to the church and procure the books myself?” Mary asked. Her hand flew to her mouth. All commotion stopped in the room. The sheets calmed in the bed maids’ hands. The house maids’ fingers stilled over the leaves. The woman next to her mother gripped her skirt. Mary swore she heard a breath catch in a throat, but she couldn’t tell if it was her own or someone else’s.

Barbara turned slowly on her chase; her eyes narrowed.

“You? To go along the way, alone?”

“I am old enough to journey alone,” Mary said. “It’s only across the way. The priest knows me well, and I the journey well.” Mary’s words started to slur together the faster she spoke.

Her mother’s eyes softened; her hand went to her chin. Mary saw an opening.

“I would not be gone but an hour or two at most. I pray thee mother, let me go. I cannot stand to read what I have already studied.”

“I suppose you *are* sixteen. Old enough to journey that short way,” Barbara said. Mary bit back a smile and kept her face clear of emotion. “But you will tell your governess and will take your lady maid and an escort. You are to go straight there, speak only to the priest, and come right back.”

Mary nodded. Her mother turned back to the painting. “Now go along, quick, before tonight’s affair.” Mary turned on her heel and stepped quietly out of the room.

Mary walked along the gravel path, looking at the spring bulbs rising from the ground and the climbing, rambling vines which covered the bricked partition.

“Pardon me, m’lady,” Nelly called from behind. “But you are not to run along ter far ahead.”

Mary slowed her walk. She looked back at the castle towering behind her. She could just make out the red-bricked pointed top of the south tower on the far side of the castle. Closer to her, she saw her handmaid wipe her apron across her forehead as she walked along the path. And just behind her, the escort. He wore a black overcoat, his

hands in the pockets. It looked as if he didn't have hands, just arms that stopped at his waist. Mary shivered.

She looked at the Italian gardens to her left and walked between the hedged squares toward the oval, lily pond. She sat next to the pond, cracking open her book. She dipped her quill and stared at the lilies floating in the water. Her father had built this garden a few years before Mary was born. When she was old enough, her father would walk her among the rose bushes toward the lily pond and tell her exciting stories of knights and princesses. She thought about what he was doing now in the Netherlands and what stories he would bring back to her.

She picked up her quill to write, but no words came to her. A drop of ink fell on the corner of the parchment. Mary watched as it hit the page and spread out. Icy, black fingers reached toward the edges of the page.

"Are yer ready, Lady Mary?" Nelly broke her reverie. Mary stowed her quill and stood. She looked at the escort a few paces behind Nelly. His handless arms. His eyes never leaving the women. She couldn't tell if his presence was to protect them or to keep track of them, like animals being herded by a dog.

"Do not mind him," Nelly said. Mary turned toward the path, and Nelly followed.

"Nelly?" Mary asked. She rolled her eyes at the ridiculous way they had to talk.

"Yes m'lady?" She heard Nelly say from behind.

"Do you favor being a woman?"

"M'lady should not worry yerself with me thoughts," Nelly said.

Mary almost turned. This was Nelly's answer to any question. Her mind was a locked chest that Mary had to dig, and scratch, and scathe at until the moment it broke, and Mary smashed it open. Her fingers bloody from the work.

“I wish to know your thoughts. Otherwise, I would not have asked.”

“If it will please yer,” Nelly said. She breathed in before continuing. “I have no mind to be anything other than what I am.”

Mary slowed her walk, so she was closer to Nelly. She whispered the next question. “You do not ever wish to be a man?” She shot a look back at the escort. He hadn’t changed his posture. Hands still in pockets. Eyes still hard.

“Why heavens no,” Nelly said. Mary saw her pat the apron on her skirt, making sure it was straight. “If God had wanted me a man, he would have made me one. Since that is not so, there must be a reason why I am a woman.” The chest rattled, and Mary saw a slight opening. Her fingers reached forward.

“What do you suppose my purpose in being a woman is?” Mary asked, picking at the edge of her sleeve.

“Forgive me, m’lady, but I have no idea,” Nelly said. “Only God knows.” The chest settled, and what light Mary saw dimmed.

“I do not suppose he will tell me?” Mary asked. It wasn’t really a question. She knew the answer. The clouds in the sky thickened.

“He might,” Nelly said. “If yer ask him.” Mary continued to watch the clouds. She felt the urge to ask the escort if he ever thanked God for making him a man.

They turned down the path that led to the front of the private Sidney Chapel. The slanted red roof stretched downward to meet the tanned bricks. The arched doorways and windows were graceful even in stillness. The tower on the west side of the building reached two stories higher than the main sanctuary. At each corner of the tower, beige-bricked cones reached to kiss the clouds. Mary ran ahead, too enthralled by the beauty of

the building to hear Nelly's calls. She thrust open the doors and walked inside then stopped.

On the south side of the room, three windows let streams of light into the sanctuary. Mary watched as the dust twirled and danced in the light. Foliage, carved into the spandrels along the South windows, curved upward to meet the Sidney coat of arms. Inverted torches flanked either side of the emblem. A narrow arch reached from the south aisle in the church to the small chapel that the Sidney's claimed as their own.

It wasn't the intricate design of the Sidney chapel that stopped Mary. No, it was the boy who kneeled in front of the altar that stopped her and stole the breath from her chest.

Mary kept quiet. With the ruler at her back, she walked forward. As she stepped, the boy turned. Mary's feet stilled as the boy looked her way. He wore simple clothes, but she could make out the silk undertones of his coat. He had bronze hair, which hung down to his ears and curled at the ends. His eyes were what stopped her. They looked ravaged, like the emptiness left behind after someone takes their last breath.

"I am sorry miss; do you need something?" the boy asked. He had a throaty voice that at once sounded aged but young. His eyes never left hers.

Mary looked around her. What she wanted was to know why he was here in the Sidney chapel, why he wasn't in the main sanctuary where others were meant to stay, why he was able to speak when she had to keep quiet, and why his eyes looked like the pain she felt in her fingers.

He waited. Well, if she was the only one here, then she had to speak up for her family. What was more important, her virtue or their family's honor? Mary didn't wait for an answer.

“What is your business here?” she asked. Her voice shook slightly. She coughed once and continued, this time stronger. “This is the Sidney chapel.”

“I am sorry to have intruded. I had but no idea,” the boy said. “I am waiting to have company with the Priest.”

“Well, you must not stay in here,” Mary said. She lifted her chest and walked toward the parapet, keeping her eyes locked on his. She felt the ruler against her back, but she didn’t care. She let her shoulders sag the way his did. “There is a main chapel over there which would suffice while you wait.” Her eyes stung. She ignored them.

“And what are you doing here, may I ask?”

“That is none of your business.” Mary reached the parapet. The boy’s head was a full foot higher than hers. She stepped onto the first step, so their faces were even. She could feel a pressure building in her stomach. It pushed against her spine, raising her head.

“Are you a Sidney?” He stepped with her.

“Yes, I am. And proud of it.” She climbed one step higher. The pressure rose, moving along her spine like a snake slithering through grape vines.

“I can tell.” The boy skipped the step Mary was on, stretching to get onto the main stage. “I wouldn’t be so proud, if I was you. There are certain rumors circling about your family that would put even the holiest of saints to shame.”

Mary stepped onto the stage. “What rumors?” The snake coiled around her tongue. She could feel it pull against the muscles, urging her to speak, to yell, to bite.

The doors to the chapel opened and Nelly and the escort entered.

“What is this?” Nelly asked, looking between Mary and the boy.

“Nothing,” the pair said together. The snake disappeared. Leaving behind it the words of her tutor: *seen but not heard*.

The escort’s eyes narrowed. They flickered between Mary’s and the boy’s face until they came to rest on Mary’s. Her own eyes lowered.

“Where is the priest?”

“I am here, who is asking?” a deep voice echoed which Mary recognized.

Mary curtsied and kept her head down as the priest walked toward them.

“Ah, Mary,” the priest said, placing his hands on Mary’s shoulders. “I can guess at the reason you are here. I wish you would have sent a footman to call. I am afraid your books will have to wait. I have an urgent matter to attend to.”

Mary’s stomach dropped. Luckily her eyes were already cast down.

“Speaking of such, you must be Mr. Palmer,” the Priest said, releasing Mary and turning toward the boy.

“Yes, sir,” he said. Mary watched the way his tongue curved.

“Come boy,” the priest said, waving toward the back of the church. “We will convene in my office.” He turned toward Mary. “I am sorry my dear, please do come back tomorrow, and I will have your books ready.”

Mary bowed, but kept her eyes down. She didn’t trust them.

The priest headed for the back of the church. Mary watched as the boy followed behind him. Before he turned the corner, she could have sworn she saw him laughing.

The sun shadowed Penshurst, vigilant. The flowers in the garden reached higher, stretching toward the sun, ready to reveal their secrets. Every plant and flower more cognizant, vibrant colors brighter in the afternoon sun. Mary gripped her bed railing with

both hands. She watched as the *lavendula vera* swayed in the wind; their purple tops knocked against each other, fighting for the sun's attention. Nelly grunted as Mary's bodice tightened.

"I do not wish to wear a dress," Mary said. She took a deep breath as Nelly readjusted the ribbons. "I would like to wear pants. Like William."

"M'lady's brother is a boy," Nelly said. She gripped the ribbons with tight fists. "Ye ready?"

"As I will ever be."

Nelly's grunts filled the room as Mary's ribs were pushed closer together. "Besides, gals yer age would be happiest with yer dresses," Nelly said between breaths. She straightened out the ribbons.

"If those girls want my dresses, then they can have them," Mary said, wiggling her shoulder blades. Maybe she could create some space. "I have no use for them."

"'Tis her ladyship's wish that yer wear this dress tonight," Nelly said. Her fingers ran along Mary's neck sprouting goosebumps as they passed. "Please do not upset her."

"Why must I wear this one?" Her eyes strayed down to the large embroidered skirt.

"'Tis yer mother's favorite," Nelly said. She patted the tops of Mary's shoulder. Mary knew it was coming again. She took another gulp of air. Nelly tightened the straps.

"I know that well," Mary said, letting her breath out. "She insists I wear it only to the most formal of events. Whoever is joining us for lunch?"

"Pardon me, m'lady, but I know not," Nelly said. "Breathe in." Mary sighed and took another deep breath. Her torso lengthened further, and Nelly once again pulled on the straps. The corset squeezed Mary's chest flat.

“What is going on in here?” a voice asked from the door. “It sounds like a bear after hibernation.” Coraline walked into the room. Pieces of her hair hung loose in her face, and her apron was askew on her skirt.

“She is stuffing me into this coffin,” Mary said. Her hands gripped the bed rail tighter. *Help me*, she mouthed.

“Tis yer ladyship’s wish,” Nelly said.

“And she will be ever grateful,” Coraline said. “You look lovely, Lady.”

Mary groaned. “Am I the only sensible one?”

“Will you help with these?” Nelly asked, her head inclined toward the straps.

Coraline walked over and grabbed one. Mary planted her feet. She would need her balance. She wouldn’t make the same mistake as last time. She remembered the squeezing, losing her footing, and then blackness. She only found out later that she had fainted from lack of oxygen. She had insisted on throwing that dress out afterward. It was the only one her mother allowed to be tossed. The others fit perfectly, according to her.

“Breath in, once more,” Nelly said. Mary felt the women tighten their grip on the ribbons; Mary tightened hers on the bed railing.

She tried to take another breath, knowing this would be her last lungful of air for the next few hours. The women pulled on the straps one last time, closing off most of Mary’s airways. Nelly tied the top of the corset off and grabbed the bodice of the dress. Mary tried to let out her breath, but only a little air was able to escape. Her head swam. She kept her feet planted. Although, she thought, if she fainted, then maybe her mother would allow this one to be thrown out. She welcomed the dots that saturated her vision as Nelly hauled the rounded farthingale from the bottom of the garment bag.

“I wish not to wear that,” Mary groaned. She blinked the spots away. She needed to stay awake if she was going to have any say in what happened to her. “It makes me feel like a royal flycatcher in springtime.” Nelly zipped the bag and placed it back in the armoire.

“It makes ye look like a princess.”

“A princess from the low country, maybe.”

“Stop that,” Coraline said. “I will hear none of that. One more peep, and it will be lines all day tomorrow.”

Mary groaned but kept her mouth shut. Nelly grabbed the farthingale and tucked it into the neckline of Mary’s dress. She felt the lace push against her head, lowering her gaze.

“And you have no idea who is coming?” Mary asked. She pushed her head against the frill. It didn’t budge.

“No, m’lady, but I assume someone of importance,” Nelly said. “Yer mother insisted on using the fine dishware.” Nelly looked between her and the vanity.

Mary sighed. If she hated getting sucked into her dresses, it was nothing compared to how she hated getting her hair done. It felt as if Nelly just ripped out strands instead of tucking them into her bonnet. An easier way to make sure nothing slipped out. If she were bald, there would be no hair to show.

“Will you be needing help?” Coraline asked. Her foot tapped against the floor. Mary looked at her. Her eyes darted around the room, refusing to stay on anything solid for any length of time. The longer Mary looked, the more disarray she noticed. It wasn’t only Coraline’s hair and apron that were untidy, but her sleeves were rolled haphazardly up her arm and her fingernails were like ravaged wood.

“No-” was all Nelly could get out before Coraline sprung from the room.

“That was interesting,” Mary said.

“If I may say so, she has it bad.” Nelly began gathering Mary’s hair into her hands. “No one wishes to be her. Especially now.”

Mary felt Nelly’s chest shift underneath her fingertips. “Why?”

Nelly grabbed the brush and pulled it through her hair. “Never mind. You should not be bothered by these matters.” The brush ripped through a knot, and Mary gripped her vanity chair.

“Is that why the kitchen staff refused to meet her eye?”

“M’lady noticed that?” Nelly asked. She placed the brush on the vanity and began braiding.

“I notice a lot,” Mary said. She thought about how the kitchen maids looked at Nelly, how Nelly played with her skirt in her mother’s room, how Coraline didn’t have the same draw as the other maids, how her mother had twelve maids and she only had the one. An image of the escort from earlier popped into her mind. His handless arms came out of his pockets. Mary blinked the image away and realized Nelly had been talking.

“—nothing but her duty, but it still feels ill sometimes. Anyway, you would not know how to react if you were in that position. The stress.” Mary was about to ask her to repeat what she said, but Nelly began piling the braids on top of Mary’s head and she knew the worst was coming. She shut Nelly’s chest, leaving it for another day. She would need to concentrate to get through the pins.

She clutched the sides of her chair and closed her eyes. She tried to focus on her breathing, feeling the air move against the back of her throat, but the image of the escort came back. A pin pinched against her ear. She winced and the escort came closer. She

opened her eyes. Obviously, that wasn't going to help. Instead, she looked outside. She concentrated on the blue and yellow border of flowers that ran up to the garden tower, the same colors used in the Sidney coat of arms from the chapel. She tried to keep her thoughts pure, but the boy's face filled her vision, blocking out the colored irises. His words ran through her mind. *There are certain rumors circling about your family that would put even the holiest of saints to shame.* What had he meant? What did he know of her family? And was he the one spreading these rumors? She felt her cheeks get hot. And why was he alone when she needed both Nelly and an escort to go to the chapel? Was he an orphan? And that laugh. Was he laughing at her, at her inability to get her books? Or at the way she had to bow to the priest while he was able to stay standing? She wished he would go away, to have never been there. If not for him, she could be reading one of her books at this very moment, using the new words as a recluse from Nelly's heavy hand. But a small part of her, a part that she would never admit existed, felt something different when she thought about him. A feeling Mary never had before. She thought about that feeling as Nelly dug pin after pin into Mary's head.

"There now," Nelly said.

Mary's eyes opened. She couldn't feel her scalp anymore. It went numb halfway through. She was grateful, though, if she couldn't feel, then the headache would stay away. She hoped this affair was fast. She knew she wouldn't be lucky for long.

She walked toward the window, the dress keeping her feet close together. She was afraid to look but even more afraid not to. She twisted in front of the glass, trying to catch her reflection. She choked, on what little air she had, when she caught sight of herself.

“I will never understand why women are forced into these awful outfits,” Mary said, twisting in front of the window. The dress had turned Mary’s rounded, childish frame into a shape from her brother’s math studies. Her torso was long and thin, outlined in red. The skirt started at Mary’s hips; it curved upward and then dropped dramatically toward the floor, creating a heart shape around her thighs. But the oversized skirt and tightened top wasn’t what made Mary gasp. It was the fan of lace that reached from one corner of her shoulder to the next, extending high above her head. “I look ridiculous.”

Mary turned toward Nelly where she stood by the door appraising the dress with a slight smile twitching at her lips. Mary could feel the excitement bubbling from her. And in those bubbles, she knew she was alone.

“Let us continue then,” she said with a sigh. She started toward the door, inching across the room. “It will take almost all night for me to descend the stairs.”

Nelly took Mary’s arm as she reached the door and helped her through the halls. She could hear the clatter of dishes in the dining room below. The air filled with the sweetest smells: beef, mutton, cherry custards, apple tarts, fritters, and pears. Mary inhaled as much of the scent as her corset would allow. She knew she wouldn’t be able to eat as much as she wanted.

Nelly, taking the lead, helped Mary descend the grand staircase. It was a painstaking task as Mary could only go one stair at a time, and Nelly had to reposition herself in front of Mary after each step to ensure that, if Mary were to fall, it would only be into her awaiting arms.

Mary’s mother stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching as Mary and Nelly came down the steps. She did not try to hide her smile when she saw Mary.

“Oh my, Mary,” Barbara said. “What a beauty. A modern-day Daphne.”

“Thank you, mother,” Mary said. She tried to smile but could feel that it only reached halfway to her eyes. She wasn’t sure if it was a compliment her mother had meant. If Mary remembered correctly, and she was sure she did for she had read Ovid’s poem at least ten times, Daphne had been turned into a tree due to her beauty.

“Watch it, slow child,” William, Mary’s oldest brother, said as he skipped down the stairs past Mary and Nelly. Mary stared at the way his legs could stretch out and freely move.

“Hush now,” Barbara said looking toward William where he skidded to a stop next to her. “I will have none of that bickering at tonight’s affair.”

“Certainly not,” William said, bowing slightly. “I will be on the best of behaviors, mother.” He stayed in his bow, turning his head slightly to wink at Mary.

“I saw that,” Phillip, Mary’s younger brother, said as he tottered down the staircase. He stopped to give Mary a kiss on the hand before descending the rest of the way. His legs were encased in a skirt, not breeched yet. But at least he had a future of pants ahead of him.

“I agree with mama,” Phillip said as he skipped next to Barbara, grabbing her hand. “We must be nice to each other.” He leered at William.

“Where *are* the others?” William asked, obviously bored with where the conversation was heading.

“Your brother and sisters are already in the dining room,” Barbara said. “They had no patience in waiting for our guests but insisted on picking the best seats.”

“Have they picked the one near the fireplace?” William asked, his eyes wide. “They know that is always to be mine.”

“I know not,” Barbara said. “I have been in here awaiting our guests.”

William ran into the dining room shouting, “Robby, Cathy, Lizzie, if you know what is best, you would not be in the seat by the fireside.” Mary stifled a giggle. She looked at the next step in front of her. Three short knocks sounded from the door.

“Oh, they have arrived,” Barbara said, clasping her hands together. “Quick, get the door.” She waved at a hall boy who stood in the corner watching the family with intense eyes.

The aid rushed to the door and opened it, ushering the guests inside. Mary could hear the murmur of welcomes coming from her mother and a few unfamiliar voices respond. She kept her eyes on the stairs in front of her, grasping the railing tightly with her left hand.

“Good, m’lady,” Nelly whispered. “Just a few more steps ter go.”

Mary’s eyes lifted to look at Nelly as she spoke. From behind Nelly’s head, Mary caught a flash of bronze, the sweep of silk fabric, and cold, brown eyes. Her foot slipped on the marble staircase. Her hand slid on the railing. She fell into Nelly, who grunted from the impact but miraculously stayed on her feet. All voices stopped. Mary looked up from Nelly’s arms to see seven pairs of eyes shining at her.

“Are yer alright, m’lady?” Nelly whispered into Mary’s ear.

“Yes, I am fine,” she said, straightening herself. She grasped the railing once more. She tore her eyes from the others and pinned them to the marble. “Thank you, Nelly.” She pushed her chest out and continued her descent. Her mind raced with the new image of his face, eyes wide with both concern and anger.

“My dear,” she heard her mother shout. Mary wished she wouldn’t. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, mother,” Mary said, her voice a whisper.

The rest of her descent went by in silence: the present party cautiously watching Mary conquer the last steps, Mary's gaze pinned to the white marble beneath her. She didn't look up from the stone until her feet were safely on the ground floor.

"Well, let us make our way to the dining room," Barbara said to the guests. Mary thought she caught a bit of embarrassment in her mother's voice. She kept her gaze lowered and her chest lifted as they entered into the grand dining room.

The room was as large as their stables. Curved wooden beams made up the ceiling. Their reddish tint lighter in the afternoon sun. An arched window positioned just below the top beams let in a stream of light which illuminated the wooden table in the center of the room: the wood, the same color as the beams. The fire on the right side of the room blazed. Just in front sat William. To the left were Robby, Cathy, and Lizzie. Mary's eyes squinted as she noted the simple gowns Catherine and Lizzie wore, their heads free to move.

She pulled her chair out and grabbed Nelly's extended hand as she lowered into the seat. Both Nelly and Mary pushed down on her skirt as she scooted closer to the table. She got about three inches closer when the skirt stopped her progress. Nelly and Mary tucked and pushed and stuffed until she was close enough to touch the table with her fingertips.

"I guess you will not be allowed to stay and help me eat?" she asked. Nelly looked beside them at Mary's mother and then turned back; her head shook slightly. Mary sighed as Nelly walked back toward the kitchen. She looked at the table, two feet away, and hoped the kitchen wasn't serving soup.

"Are you alright?" William whispered from beside her.

"No, how am I to eat like this?" She waved at the table in front of her.

William looked at her; his head turned to the side.

“Just scoot closer,” he said, as if Mary hadn’t thought of that. “But that is not what I ask about. Your fall earlier, on the stairs.”

“That?” Mary said. Her cheeks went hot. “I wish everyone would just forget what happened and move on.” She picked up her napkin and waved it over her lap. The air it kicked up felt good on her cheeks. She considered waving it a few more times. “It is not like I fell off the roof. I slipped down a stair. That is all.”

“Alright,” William said. “I can tell *you* have moved on.” Mary turned from him. Instead, she watched and listened.

Her mother sat at the wooden table, her face stoic. She glanced around at the present company: a woman with a long face, which was made to look longer by the pointed nose that sat slightly crooked on her face, brown hair, curled at the ends, and eyes the same color as the boys. A second woman, her face also long but rounder in the cheeks. Her nose not as pointed or crooked but short and stout. And a towering man, who even seated was the height of a regular man standing. His limbs were exaggerated and spewed forth from his body onto the table. He had light eyes and hair and looked more like the statue of Zeus that stood in the gardens than a man at a table. It is at this man that her mother’s eyes stopped.

“Thomas, Margaret.” Her mother nodded at the first woman and the man. “Sylvie.” Nodded at the second. “I am so glad you could join us.” Her head lowered and her eyes touched on the table in front of her before coming back to the man. “It is nice to be around friends when one cannot be with family.” Her head lifted a little. “Please enjoy the meal the staff has put together. I am always pleased by their workings.” And with

that, footmen walked through the door carrying plates filled with leaks, radishes, cabbage, the smell of vinegar and sugar strong in the air.

The company nodded. Thomas spoke. "Thank you, Barbara." He looked at Mary's mother and then his eyes touched each child's face. When they stopped on Mary, she shuddered. She couldn't tell if it was the intensity of his eyes or his lingering stare that trapped her in her chair. "And thank you little ones for the welcome." He laughed once.

"I was so eager to meet your Peter," Barbara said. Her eyes went to the boy. Mary looked as well. He leaned back in his chair.

"It is lovely to meet you, Mistress Sidney." He lowered his head in a small bow. "You are even more lovely than I have been told."

Mary's mother smiled and looked at her plate. "He takes after you, Thomas."

"Who told you she was lovely?" Margaret asked at the same time. She pushed around her lettuce. Her fork scraped against the plate.

"He is my son," Thomas said, ignoring Margaret's comment. "There is no doubt about that. Knows how to charm a woman."

"It is not a hard task," Peter said. He laughed and took a sip from his cup. Mary's teeth ground against each other.

"Why is he in attendance?" Mary whispered to William.

"Who?"

"Peter," she said. She rolled her eyes, obviously she was talking about him. Wasn't everyone aware of his presence the way she was?

"I have not the slightest of ideas," William said, staring at Peter. "Do you know him?"

“He was at the Sidney chapel this morning.” Mary’s eyes squinted. “He kept me from gathering my books.” She shoved a radish into her mouth.

“Tis strange that he should have been in the Sidney chapel,” William said.
“Maybe he is of Sidney descent?”

Mary stared more intently at the boy. Where her family was long, he was short. Where their hair was bright and fair, his was dark and thick.

“I do not see any resemblance between us and that boy,” Mary said. Her ears went back to the conversation, but her eyes stayed on Peter. She watched him stab at another piece of cabbage.

Thomas laughed. “I would say I was surprised by your invitation.” He picked up the goblet and swirled the liquid around. “I have not heard from you in years. Since before your marriage to Robert. I would say that was a troubled time.” He laughed again. This time Mary’s mother joined in. But the sound was off, could have been mistaken for a cough.

“Yes, quite a time in my past.” Barbara picked up her fork. She brought it to the plate and then set it down again. “It was due to the queen.” Her chin raised. “She has always been kind to this family. Without her, Robert and I would not be married.”

“I actually heard that she was the one that originally did not sign off on the marriage,” Margaret said. She picked up her goblet and took a sip. She looked at Barbara over the rim of the glass.

“Well, that is not true, so much as, she did not know Robert yet. She was close to my family and- “

“Yes, I hear she has strong ties with you,” Margaret interrupted. She set her goblet down. Her eyes never left Barbara’s.

“It is true, my ancestors were always close with the royals.” Barbara stared back. “They say we are one step down from royalty ourselves.” Her eyes went back to Thomas.

“It must be nice to have such strong family histories,” Peter said. “I have a hard time keeping up with ours.” He looked at Sylvie.

Sylvie looked up from her salad. Her eyes wide. She looked at Peter and then at Margaret as if she had just been thrown into a raging fire. She shook her head slightly and looked back down at the greens.

Margaret scooted in her chair so that she was facing away from Sylvie. “Sorry about my sister, she is,” Margaret paused. “*Quiet.*” She laughed and pushed at the greens on her plate. Mary still hadn’t seen her eat anything. Her mother laughed along. She pushed cabbage around her plate. Mary was certain she hadn’t eaten anything either.

“Quiet is the polite way of saying it,” Peter said. Margaret laughed louder.

“Tis alright,” Barbara said, laughing along. “We all could take note of her behavior. It is always better to be quiet than outspoken.” Mary looked at her mother. When was she ever quiet?

Thomas coughed. “Right you are.” He raised his glass. “Here is to quiet reverence.” The women raised their glasses. Barbara looked at Mary, nudged her. Mary grabbed her cup.

“To quiet reverence,” Peter said. He looked at Mary, the same smile from the chapel spread across his face. She put the cup to her lips but didn’t drink.

“Your home is lovely, Barbara,” Thomas said, looking around the room as if he could see the entire house in these walls.

“We have been blessed,” she said. “There is no doubt about our favor.”

“Yes, you have been blessed,” Thomas said. His eyes looked hungry. “Very blessed.”

“It is all due to my husband.” Barbara rubbed a finger along her wedding band.

“He is in the Netherlands, no?” Thomas asked. He fanned his napkin over his lap.

“Yes, the Queen has recently made him governor of Flushing.” Her mother grabbed her own napkin.

“Only governor?” Margaret asked. “I would have thought she would have made him a lord by now.”

“Yes, we thought so as well,” Barbara said. She seemed to be holding something back, her words only a whisper. “But the queen has reasons beyond our understanding. And even so, she has been more than gracious to our family.”

“Perhaps there is a reason he has been.” Margaret paused. “Stunted.”

Thomas coughed. “My wife forgets herself.” He grabbed her napkin, unfolded it, and lowered it over her lap. His face turned to her. Mary could swear she heard whispering, but she couldn’t be certain. His face turned back to the table; a forced smile replaced his smirk. “She means nothing but to consider how rightly deserving your husband and family are.” Barbara stared at Margaret. Her eyes seemed to distrust the words, but she smiled.

“Yes, it is nothing to stutter about.” She grabbed her goblet and took a sip. When she put it back on the table, her mask was back. Perfect bliss.

“With the queen so keen to your family,” Thomas said. “You must have strong connections for your daughters.” His eyes went to Mary.

“Yes, we have many suitors that call to this day asking for hands,” Barbara said. Her eyes swept across the girls’ faces. They stopped on Mary’s. “But as a mother, I want

to wait. To have my girls near me as long as I can.” Mary looked away from her mother’s penetrating gaze.

“Well, with a family like yours, with accomplishments grander than most, I am sure, when the time comes, you will have no problem finding the very best for your little ones.” His eyes looked to Peter. Mary looked away. *Yeah, right.*

“Thomas, I have an inquisition for you,” Barbara said. She placed her fork on the table and leaned forward. Her bosom pressed against the table. Margaret’s eyes strayed lower.

Thomas leaned back in his chair. “Hit me.”

“I read Johnson’s new play last night, *Every Man Out of His Humor*, are you familiar?” She stabbed at a leak but left it on her fork.

Thomas nodded. “Yes, Marg showed it to me the other day.” Margaret looked up from her plate.

“I was wondering, if it is true that men find the color gold to be the color of fools?” She looked at Sylvie’s dress. The gold frill on the outline seemed to shimmer in the candlelight.

“It is said that gold represents the fool, but I would argue that any color can represent the fool.” He chewed on a radish. Mary watched it bob between his cheeks. “When a fool is a fool, it matters not what color he wears.” He laughed afterwards and the women joined in. Mary looked at Peter, saw the smirk on his face.

“Now you say *he* when you talk of a fool,” Margaret said. She placed a hand on his arm. Mary watched her mother’s eyes as they went to that hand. “But can the fool be a woman?” She looked at Sylvie who sat, chewing on a bit of salad, unaware of the conversation. Mary watched as she swallowed and popped an onion into her mouth. She

felt the urge to get up and sit near her. To tell her to pay attention and speak up. But she knew that it would only make matters worse. She was taught that women should speak when they have something to say, and looking at the faraway gaze of Sylvie's eyes, Mary knew she had nothing to say. She was suddenly mad. Why was this woman able to stand in for women, to represent them to men?

"That depends," Thomas said. He placed a hand on Margaret's. Her mother took a sip from her cup, closing her eyes. "Is the woman married?"

Her mother put the glass down. "Let us say, for the conversation's sake, that the woman is not married." She leaned forward again. "Or married but the husband is away." Her dress dipped into the salad. Mary wanted to tell her, to wipe it, but she knew what would happen if she spoke.

Peter looked up. "If I may." He looked around the table. "We would need to clarify that point, because not married is quite different from married but separate."

Thomas nodded.

Margaret placed her other hand on the table. "Then not married."

"Not married?" Thomas asked. He looked at Barbara. She nodded. "Then she is a fool by not marrying. For she should know that without a marriage she is nothing but her father's daughter."

"Then married," Barbara said.

"Then she is not a fool, for even if married and unhappy, at least she is married and better off for it."

"Who said married and not happy?" Barbara asked.

"Is there a difference?" Peter asked. Thomas laughed; the women joined in. Mary took a sip from her cup.

“Well done, son,” Thomas said, still laughing.

“For your sake,” Barbara said. “You better hope there is.” Her laugh cut off.

“I only mean,” Thomas said. “That if she is married, even if she is unhappy, or happy, she is better off.”

“So, a woman’s ability to be a fool or not to be a fool relies on her marital status?” Barbara asked.

“To marriage,” Peter said, raising his glass. Thomas raised his, and the women joined in. Sylvie picked hers up a little late, a confused smile on her face. Mary kept hers on the table. The more this Peter boy talked, the less she liked him, and that was a feat because she already thought lowly of him at the start of dinner. Come to think of it, the more she looked at him, the more she realized that he looked rather plain. A typical round face filled with the typical features: a small nose, round eyes, a few freckles. She was sure that if he stood in a crowd, she wouldn’t be able to pick him out from the others.

Footmen came in, replaced the salads with mutton and mash.

“I know not how Johnson creates the pieces he does,” Thomas said, setting his glass on the table.

“What do you mean?” Margaret asked. She looked concerned, as if his statement hurt her.

“It is just that he is such a brilliant writer. I can barely write you a letter most days.” He looked at Margaret and she looked down, pink coloring her cheeks.

“You write lovely letters to me,” Barbara said. Margaret looked up, her face now more red than pink. Thomas’ face was also red.

“Those are different from what Johnson does,” Thomas said. Margaret removed her hand from his arm. His fell to his side. “His are stories. I write to you about my days.”

“Those are stories,” Barbara said.

“Stories involving the people you love,” Margaret said. She looked at Barbara.

“Exactly, my point,” Thomas said. “I write about the truth in my life. He writes about things not to come. It is one of the many things I admire about your family, Barbara.”

Barbara blushed.

Margaret flushed. “One of many? What are the others?”

“I often find myself in awe of the words my family has created,” Barbara said. She cut a piece of mutton but didn’t bring it to her mouth.

“I just read your sister-in-law’s work. Inspiring.” Thomas took a bit from his fork. Mary watched meat juice leak onto his chin. Margaret reached over and wiped a napkin against it. “Thank you,” he whispered. Is that what she had to look forward to? Wiping her husband’s chin when his meat leaks onto his skin?

She looked around the table at her siblings. Cathy and Lizzie sat, silently eating. William, beside her, put his peas in neat rows on his plate. Phillip, sitting next to Peter, stared at him, his eyes full of pride as Peter swirled his goblet. He took a sip, swishing the liquid around in his mouth before swallowing. Mary thought she might puke.

“She is not the only writer in the family,” Barbara said.

“Oh, who writes?” Margaret asked. She looked skeptically at Barbara, like she was a thief about to run away with the prized jewels.

Mary opened her mouth. Her mother squeezed her thigh.

“My husband, Robert, is quite the writer,” Barbara said. “And our little Phillip has taken after him.” She motioned to Phillip.

“I hear that the late Phillip is rumored to be returning?” Thomas asked. His eyes went to Mary.

Her mother laughed, a little too loud. “Rumors have a way of telling some truths while also revealing lies.”

“So, it is not true?”

“Now do not misunderstand me,” Barbara said. She leaned toward Thomas. “I neither said it was truth nor falsehood.” She leaned back in her chair and put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes glittered like the jewels on her fingers. Thomas’ eyes gleamed. He looked hungry again. Mary wished he would just turn into the wolf he was and eat her right then and there. Then maybe she would never have to look into the eyes of another hungry reader again.

“But Mary has other talents,” Barbara said. Could she sense Mary’s stress?

“Is that right Mary?” Thomas asked, taking a sip from his goblet. Mary lowered her face.

“Yes, she is a dancer,” Barbara said. She looked at Peter. Mary looked at her mother. What a weird thing to bring up, Mary thought. She had no idea where she was planning to go with this. “And she is getting along well, but she is unable to find a suitable dance partner.” Mary didn’t understand what her mother was doing. It was true that Mary was having a hard time finding a dance partner. Robby only stepped on her toes and Phillip was still too short. William wouldn’t even enter the ball room during her dance lessons afraid that even being too close to dancing would leave him less of a man.

“Well, did you know that Peter is a dancer?” Thomas asked. He waved his fork towards Peter as if Mary’s mother needed a reminder of who he was. “And he is well known around our town as one of the most admirablest dancers.” Peter’s face turned red and he leaned further into cutting his mutton. Margaret just sat looking between them as if she was confused on what was going on. Mary was sure she had the same confused look on her own face.

“I knew not,” Mary’s mother said. She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Something she only did when she lied. Mary picked at her sleeve. “I wonder if he would be interested in partnering with our little Mary?”

“That is an interesting inquisition.” Thomas said, his eyes lingered on Mary. Mary was suddenly sure she knew what the dress was for. “I think we could arrange something.”

“How lovely,” Mary’s mother said. “Why don’t you stay in our guest quarters while you are in town?” Mary forced her eyes away from the boy. She didn’t care to see how red his face was now; she was certain hers was as red, if not more so.

“How gracious,” Thomas said. Margaret opened her mouth but then closed it again.

“And in the morning,” Barbara said, placing a hand on Mary’s thigh. “We dance.”

The light filtered in through the curtains at a low angle, casting shadows across the room and highlighting the dust floating inches above the dark-paneled floor. Mary lied still for a minute, breathing, waiting for sleep to take her again and move her closer to an appropriate hour to be awake. The past night's events flashed before her eyes, leaving her stomach in flutters and her ears red hot.

She tried to get a grip on how south the evening went. What started out as an afternoon meal with visitors turned into an invitation for a long leave of stay and a dance partner proposal. With a sigh, she sat up and removed her covers. It seemed her mind was no longer interested in sleep.

She slipped her feet into her slippers and grabbed her robe. She lit the candle on her desk and sat down. The familiar creaking sound of the wood rescued her from the uneasy quiet of the morning. It took her a moment to realize why it was so oddly silent.

“For Saint Peter’s sake,” she grumbled. “The birds have not even stirred from their nests.” She opened her top drawer and grabbed her leather-bound journal. She flipped to a new page and dipped her quill into the ink pot.

*My hart is lost, what can I now expect,
An ev’ning faire; after a drowsy day?
(Alas) fond phant’sie this is nott the way
To cure a morning hart, or salve neglect.*

Mary wrote with such vigor and speed that the ink ran dry before she had finished, leaving the last few words mere shadows on the page. She glanced at the words, turning the paper left and right. She liked the way the words were hidden on the page, as if it were a secret letter written by a love-lost soul whose words were only meant for their suitor and could only be fully realized by the desire of their heart. She dipped her quill and started again.

*Led by the power of grief, to waylings brought
By faulce consiete of change fall’ne on my part,
I seek for some smale ease by lines, which bought
Increase the paine; grief is nott cur’d by art:*

A light knock on the door stopped Mary's pen.

"Lady, may I enter?" Nelly's voice sounded from the other side.

Mary wrapped her robe tighter around her shoulders and sat back in her chair.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, further breaking the silence in the still room.

"I thought I saw candlelight beneath the door," Nelly said. "What is m'lady doing awake at this early hour?"

"Sleep had little hold on my thoughts." She looked at her journal.

"Has m'lady been writing?"

"Yes," Mary said, closing the book and placing it on her lap. A moment of silence passed between them. Mary assumed Nelly wanted to see the words, but she wasn't ready to share just how much Peter's presence nerved her. She was barely able to explain to herself why the boy mattered so much.

Nelly hesitated by the door. "Very well." A pause. "Shall we begin?"

"It would seem to be time." Mary sighed. She stood and walked over to her bed and sat down on the mattress. Her thumbs twirled around themselves, finding new ways to interlace and unwind.

"Nelly?"

"Yes, m'lady." She walked toward the armoire and opened the doors.

"Have you danced with a man before?"

"Yes," Nelly said. "My paps was a man light on his feet." Nelly grabbed Mary's tights and skirt.

Mary rolled her eyes. "Not your father, I ask about, but rather a stranger."

Nelly hesitated by the door of the armoire. Her left hand clutched the wood, and her eyes looked toward the wall. Mary could tell Nelly wasn't seeing the wall, but rather a past moment in time. Maybe a moment filled with music and dancing. Maybe a moment touched by someone else. Mary waited for Nelly to respond. The Nelly chest of secrets rattled, and Mary's mouth watered at the prospect of what she would taste. Her foot swung above the floor; her heel clicked against the bed frame creating a steady beat in the silence.

Click. Click. Click.

"Well?"

Nelly blinked and shook her head. "Once," she said. "But t'was a long time ago and." She paused. "Quite hard to remember in detail."

The chest stilled its rattling. Mary sighed and pursed her lips. She knew Nelly was lying. Her far away gaze spoke a different truth, one in which the memory was vivid and real in her mind. But for whatever reason, Nelly didn't want to tell. Mary stocked this moment away, waiting for another time to ask again. She would hear of this past dance one way or another.

Nelly walked over to Mary and took off her nightgown. She held out the tights for Mary to step into. Mary clenched the bed railing and lifted her right foot. It shook slightly in the air.

"Is something troubling m'lady?" Nelly asked.

"No." Her voice came out an octave too high. Nelly's eyebrows raised.

"Peter," Mary said. Her hand slapped against the bed post as if his face were there. Mary wished it was. She watched her fingers claw around the wood.

“Ah,” Nelly said; her lips turned up at the ends. “I thought he would be a bothersome thought.” Nelly pulled the tights firmly up Mary’s legs and onto her waist.

“Well, it is just that, he isn’t very polite. I mean did you see how he ate last night, like some kind of animal.”

“Mhm”

“And he does not seem coordinated when he walks, so what would make him a good dancer?”

“Mhm.”

“And I do not even know him well enough to guess his favorite color, rather dance with him.”

“And he is rather handsome.”

“And he...pardon me?” Mary asked. She took a step back to look Nelly full in the face.

“Oh, do not be getting shy with me now,” Nelly said, stepping closer to Mary. “I saw how yer cheeks flushed with every word he said.”

“They were red from heightened frustration, nothing else.”

Nelly kept quiet and tied a ribbon around Mary’s waist.

“They were,” Mary said. “And I don’t think it is any place for you, my *lady maid*, to be in on such issues.” Mary grabbed the ribbon and ripped it out of Nelly’s hand. “I can do this myself; you are free to go.”

Nelly looked her in the face. For a moment she seemed startled, as if she would speak. Then she dropped her gaze, bowed, and left the room, firmly closing the chest in her absence. Mary plopped onto the bed and threw the ribbon on the floor. She stared after the door, wondering if this was how a queen bee felt after she pierced a rival queen

with her stinger, her venom rushing through the unborn bee, wreaking havoc and ensuring her solitary place as ruler.

Mary stayed in her room for the rest of the morning. She paced between her bed and the window, watching the sun lurk behind the clouds, prowling the sky. She almost broke her reverie when she smelled the scent of eggs and pastries wafting up from the kitchen, but the image of Peter's face and Nelly's smirk kept her firmly in her room. It wasn't until the sound of music started that Mary knew it was a lost cause.

"L'dy Mary, 'tis time to begin lessons," she heard Nelly say from the door.

"Coming." She tucked a loose strand of hair into her bun and rubbed some lavender leaves against her wrists before heading to the door. Nelly was waiting on the other side.

"M'lady missed breakfast," she said.

"I was not hungry."

Nelly's lips pursed, but she didn't say anything. They walked in silence toward the ballroom.

"Is that lavender I smell?" Nelly asked. Mary kept her gaze forward, ignoring Nelly's comment. She placed her hands in front of her, wrists pressed firmly against her skirt.

She heard Nelly's sigh but was distracted by the piano keys being played. The music ushering Mary forward sounded more like a death march than the calming sounds she usually danced to.

"Are we to learn a new dance?" Mary asked, listening to the unfamiliar tone. The deep sounds were faster and more rhythmic than usual.

“It seems that Mr. Palmer has brought his own dance instructor to lead lessons,” Nelly said. “I heard them discussing it over breakfast. Apparently, he is the best instructor in whales.”

Mary grumbled. Was there anything Peter’s presence wouldn’t ruin?

Mary and Nelly turned the corner into the ballroom. Everyone was already in their proper places: Mary’s mother and Peter’s father sat on grand chairs in the corner of the dance floor, their heads turned toward each other, their faces alight with whatever conversation they were enthralled in. Margaret sat next to Thomas; her face scrunched as she watched them. Coraline stood behind Barbara, her eyes watching her, waiting. The new instructor stood next to the piano giving notes and directions to the musician. He was tall and thin; his limbs elongated. He was bent over the piano bench talking with the musician. His hand waved above the keys, motioning to a few on the left side of the piano. Peter stood in the middle of the dance floor, tipped forward, his hands reaching toward the floor. His fingertips barely scraped the wood paneling.

Mary smiled and walked toward him. She stopped about five feet away and then bowed. Both her palms rested against the floor. She looked through her lashes toward Peter. He was no longer stretching, but rather facing away from Mary, his arms crossed so his fingers drummed on his rib cage. Mary smiled.

“Ah, my young couple,” the instructor said as he walked toward the two. Mary looked up at the last word. “What a great day it is to dance, no?”

“Yes, Mr. Walter,” Peter said. “And to have such a wonderful teacher. I am beside myself this morning.” Did he flatter everyone he talked to? Well, with one exception, Mary thought.

“Thank you, Peter,” Mr. Walter said, bowing slightly. His eyes barely touched Mary’s face and then went back to Peter’s.

“Shall we begin?”

Mary stood from her stretch. She opened her mouth to protest; she still had a few more stretches to do.

“Yes,” Peter responded before Mary could interject. She shot him a sideways glance.

“Wonderful,” Mr. Walter said. Mary closed her mouth.

“Lady Mary, dear.” Mr. Walter turned toward Mary. He bent forward, resting his hands on his knees. “Your mother informed me that your past instructor has taught you the Galliard, Courante, and Bassadance. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Mary said.

“Wonderful,” Mr. Walter said. “So, you *are* aware of the movements involved in the Galliard?”

Mary nodded. Didn’t she just say yes?

“So, you know that this dance has five steps in one measure. Like so.” Mr. Walter glided forward, stepping slowly, watching Mary’s face the whole time. “Right, left, right left, cadence.” He jumped in the air, making sure to land with his right foot first. He turned around and walked back to Mary.

“Yes,” Mary said. “I was taught how to do a cinq pas.” She was growing tired of having to repeat herself.

“Wonderful, child,” Mr. Walter said. He stood up and patted the top of Mary’s head. Her head bobbed with each tap. She felt like a dog being rewarded for a trick.

“Peter, would you please get into formation and inform Mary of where she will stand.” Mr. Walter walked back to the piano, and Peter came forward.

“There is no need for you to exert yourself,” Mary said. She felt the snake swirl around her tongue again. “I already know the formation.” She walked toward Peter and placed her left hand on his shoulder. It was harder than she expected. She was used to dancing with Phillip, who still had most of his childhood roundness. Her mother said he would lose it when he was ready, but Mary wasn’t so sure.

Peter’s arms reached toward her waist. She watched as his fingers curved around her hip bone. His hand burned through the thin fabric clinging to her skin. Peter stepped closer. She could smell eggs and butter. She wondered if he ate as aggressively as he had last night. Luckily, she wasn’t there to see that. She wasn’t so sure she would have been able to hold back, if she had to watch him open-mouth chew anything else.

His left hand raised, and Mary placed her hand inside his. He clasped around her fingers. Her hand slid along the rough ridges of his skin.

She lifted her elbows and raised her head. It felt good to stand in position with someone taller than herself. She sent her head back, looking toward the far wall. Her eyes locked with her mother’s. They were clear and intense. Her breath caught in her chest.

“Very good form,” Mr. Walter said. “Great teaching, Peter.”

Mary grumbled under her breath.

“What was that?” Peter asked.

“Never you mind.”

“Start the music,” Mr. Walter said. The deep sounds Mary heard earlier flitted around the room, ricocheting off the walls and slamming into her ears. She felt the beat pulse in her bones. Peter’s hand tightened around her waist. His nails dug into her hip.

She could feel his pulse through his fingertips. It was beating fast, almost at the pace of the music. She wondered what her pulse felt like.

Peter and Mary stepped into the *cinq pas*.

“Do you hear the rhythm?” Mr. Walter asked. “One, two, three,” he counted.

Peter’s breath blew into Mary’s ear. Moisture formed on her checks. She went to wipe it away, but Peter wouldn’t release her hand.

“Now time for the cadence,” Mr. Walter said. “Mary, this is where you would leap into the air. Follow Peter.”

Mary rolled her eyes. Peter’s hand tugged on her back, pulling her into the jump. The pair sprung into the air, heading toward the center of the room.

“Elbows out, Mary,” Mr. Walter said. Mary threw her elbows further into the air. She felt like a chicken.

“One, two, three--” Mr. Walter started counting again.

Peter took a step left, jerking Mary with him.

“Oi.”

“Well, keep up,” he said into her ear.

“Pardon me?” Mary asked. “I *am* keeping up and with speed.” To prove her point she started the next step a second before Peter, sliding into the *lavolta* easily. Her chest pressed against his. She felt the snake awake inside her. She was thankful Mr. Brid wasn’t here. He would have had a heart attack over how many words she had already spoken aloud.

“What are you doing?” he asked. Spit flew into Mary’s ear.

“Showing *you* how to dance.” She twisted her head and rubbed her ear on her shoulder.

“I am to lead.” He stepped forward, pulling Mary along. He was the snake charmer, calling her to strike.

“If you wish to lead, then keep with the pace.” Before the next beat hit, Mary stepped, tugging on Peter’s arm. And then his hands were gone, and the music stopped.

Mary halted and looked at Peter confused. He stood with his arms crossed, staring at Mr. Walter.

“She is leading the dance, sir,” Peter said. “I am afraid that she does not understand how couples are to dance.” His eyes burned into Mary’s. She looked away to the far corner. Bad idea. Barbara sat, back ramrod straight, fingers clawing the edge of her chair, leg bucking; her eyes, wide with rage, focused on Mary with such intensity that Mary felt pressure on her forehead as if her mother were glaring a hole into her head.

She looked down, her cheeks reddening. She wondered if Nelly had this much trouble with her secret partner. She wished she had forced her to open her chest. Mary could almost see it in the corner of the room, taunting her with the unknown. She looked for Nelly, keeping her eyes far from her mother’s, but she was nowhere to be seen. Mary felt small, like a child wandering the halls after a nightmare.

Mr. Walter walked over and bent in front of Mary again. She lifted her head, making herself taller so he would stop leaning in front of her like she was a small child.

“Mary, you are dancing wonderfully,” he said. Mary grumbled. If she had to hear him say the word *wonderful* one more time, she was going to lose it. “But Peter needs to be in the lead.” He rubbed her arm reassuringly. She ignored the urge to jerk away.

“While I am sure you think you know the dance, it is proper for a man to lead a lady around the room, not the other way around.” He laughed, taken with his little joke. Mary nodded once, not trusting her voice. “Wonderful, doll,” he said, patting Mary’s

head once more. She stepped to the left. His hand fell through the air and to his side. He stared at Mary for a minute and then stood and walked back toward the piano. "Back in formation again." He sounded like he spoke through his teeth.

The pair stepped closer, taking form.

"Do you know your place now?" Peter asked.

Mary took a step closer. She felt the snake, but he was no longer around her tongue. He had serpented through her throat making his way to her head. She felt his heat pulse in her temple. Her right foot clamped down on Peter's left.

"Is this my place?" she asked.

"Oi," he yelled, reaching for his foot.

She laughed and stepped toward him again, grabbing his hand. Mary could hear his teeth grinding behind his closed lips. He grasped Mary's hand and squeezed. She heard two of her knuckles pop.

She slapped her hand down on his right shoulder and smiled when his body buckled under her hand. He gripped onto her hip and looked toward the back wall. Mary threw her elbows out and sent her head back.

The music started once more. Mary waited for Peter's first step. They strode across the floor together, gripping each other's hands as firmly as they could. She allowed herself to be pulled along like a rag doll, succumbing to every tug Peter forced.

Mary counted the beat in her head, keeping time to the music. She pictured herself in her mind, making sure each movement was perfect and in sync with the music. They twirled faster around the room.

Mary could hear Peter's quick breathing. She matched her breath with his so their chests would dovetail. When his expanded, hers released. A give and take like a fish undulating in water.

"Now into the final steps, my couple," Mr. Walter said.

They slid into the final lavolta; their bodies compressed as they spun. There wasn't a part of Mary that wasn't Peter. They twirled away from the center of the room, and then the music stopped, and Mr. Walter was clapping. Peter stopped twirling and removed from Mary: his body peeling off of hers like a thigh, slick with sweat, stripping from leather. At once, she felt colder.

"Wonderful," Mr. Walter said, still clapping.

"Beautiful!" Mary's mother shouted from the other side of the room. Mary looked toward her. All three adults were on their feet, clapping.

Peter's eyes were wide. He seemed to be in shock.

Mr. Walter walked over. He put a hand on Peter's shoulder. Peter's eyes shrunk as he was shaken out of his trance.

"Wonderful leading, my man." He turned toward Mary. "A beautiful sight to see."

Barbara came forward. "That was darling," she said, putting a hand on Mary's shoulder. "I wish you could see how well you dance together."

"Thank you," Peter said.

Mr. Walter turned toward Peter. "Young sir, let us lunch and discuss steps for tomorrow's study?"

Mary's face lit up. "I would love to discuss the idea of combining the galliard with the courante. That is what my past instructor and I were beginning."

Peter looked toward Mr. Walter. Their eyes lingered on each other's for a minute before Mr. Walter turned back toward Mary.

"A wonderful idea, Mary," Barbara said. She hoped her mother didn't pick up Mr. Walter's favor for the word *wonderful*.

Mr. Walter let out his breath, seeming relieved for the interruption.

"But you have your studies to attend to," Barbara said. "Maybe another day you can talk about your fantastical ideas."

"They are not fantastical, mother," Mary said under her breath. "Ms. Saunch and I were compiling--"

"Enough," Barbara said, squeezing Mary's shoulder. The snake vanished, leaving a shell in its emptiness. "Either way, you have studying to be done. Run along. I will discuss with Mr. Walter." She waved her hand at Mary, ushering her toward the door. "Nelly, will you take Mary to Mr. Bird in the study room? And tell Mistress Lucretia she is done with her lesson." Mary looked around the room. Sure enough, Nelly was back and heading her way.

"Yes, m'ladyship," Nelly said. She walked toward Mary and grabbed her arm. "Come along."

Mary let Nelly drag her out of the room, her mind hollow now. As she left, her eyes locked with Peter's. His face was distressed: his eyes troubled, his lips pursed. Before she turned the corner, she could have sworn she saw him mouth the word *sorry*. Somewhere far off, she heard the click of fangs.

Mary stood under the naiad statue, staring toward the hedges. Each edge was squared off, not a wisp or leaf out of place. She walked toward the shrubs and grabbed at a petal. She pulled on it until it stuck up above the others.

She looked at the wayward leaf, satisfied. She pulled a few more out of place so that the bush now had random wisps sticking up in all directions. Mary quite liked the new look and decided that it would just be better if all of the blades had more freedom. She began kicking at the hedge and pulling at the leaves. She was about halfway through abusing the bush when she heard a voice and a familiar rhythm.

“Widow'd, and childless, lamentable state! A doleful sight, among the dead she sate; Harden'd with woes, a statue of despair, To ev'ry breath of wind unmov'd her hair; Her cheek still red'ning, but its color dead, Faded her eyes, and set within her head.”

She stopped, her foot halfway in the bush.

“No more her pliant tongue its motion keeps, but stands congeal'd within her frozen lips.”

She unstuck her boot, looked the bush once over, smiled to herself, and headed toward the voice.

“Stagnate, and dull, within her purple veins, its current stop'd, the lifeless blood remains.”

She passed by the orange dotted fish; their swimming stopped, entranced by the voice.

“Her arms, and neck their graceful gestures lose.”

The closer she got the more urgent her steps became. She walked quickly on the pathway; her boots created a beat to match the rhythm of the voice.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Action, and life from ev'ry part are gone,”

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“And ev'n her entrails turn to solid stone”

She turned toward the tower. The voice was louder. She was close.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Yet still she weeps, and whirl'd by stormy winds,”

And then she turned the corner into the south lawn and stopped.

Peter sat next to the pixie tree; his eyes skyward; his hand in the grass. His pinkie finger twirled around a single green blade absentmindedly as he spoke.

“Born thro' the air, her native country finds.”

Mary walked closer to him, keeping her footsteps silent in the grass.

“There fix'd, she stands upon a bleaky hill.”

When she was about five feet away, she lowered herself down. She spoke the final line with him.

“There yet her marble cheeks eternal tears distil.”

Peter turned around and stared. His mouth hung open.

“That is one of my favorites by him,” Mary said.

“I did not know you were here,” Peter said. “I could have spoken more softly. I thought I was alone.”

“No need for apologies,” Mary said. “It was nice to hear his work spoken in the voice of a man.” She scooted closer. Here, in this space with him, she felt the ruler fall away. “I always hear it in my own head. It loses some of the mystery when it is your own voice reading your favorite lines.”

“Interesting thought,” Peter said. He turned, so that his body was facing hers. It brought him a foot closer. “I have never wondered about my own voice while reading.”

“I would not imagine you would have to,” Mary said. She picked a piece of grass and twirled it between two fingers. She continued, knowing no one was counting her words here. “For every published poet is a man, and so there is no need for you to wonder about any other voice but your own while reading.”

Peter looked down at his hands, as if the next words he should say were written there. Mary pulled the piece of grass she was twirling in two and blew them into the air. She watched them fall. It wasn’t until they were on the ground that Peter spoke again.

“I wanted to say sorry.”

“For what, exactly?” She could count a few things he should be sorry for.

“For Mr. Walter not allowing you to discuss dance formations.” He picked at the cuticle on his pinky as he spoke.

Mary was frozen in shock. She had no idea what to say. She picked another blade of grass and ripped it in two.

“I liked your idea of combining the galliard with the courante,” he said, still picking at his cuticle. “I mentioned it to Mr. Walter. He said he would work on it.”

Mary’s heart thudded faster in her chest. The pieces she was holding fell to the ground.

“I just thought you should know,” he said.

Mary stared at the boy. Her mind was a scramble. She was trying to fit the snobbish, animalesk boy from earlier with this poetic, kind man in front of her now. The two didn’t fit. It was like trying to grab the wind.

He looked up, probably stunned by the length of silence between them.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Mary opened her mouth to speak, but her tongue felt dry. She swallowed and tried again.

“Yes,” she managed to whisper. She coughed and tried for a third time. “Thank you. You did not have to do that.”

“I know,” he said. “But it was a good idea.”

Mary’s cheeks became hot. She felt a strong urge to say something, anything, to thank him in some small way. “You can use the Sidney chapel, if you would like.”

“Thank you for your permission,” he said, a smile forming. “But I was already using it.” He laughed afterwards. It was an easy laugh. Mary joined in. Her laugh cut off when she remembered something.

“What did you mean earlier, about my family?”

Peter stopped laughing. He looked down at his hands. Mary could see his forehead getting redder. She almost told him not to worry about it, not wanting to upset him. She wondered when her feelings of ill will toward him changed. She suddenly hated seeing his forehead crease in concern. But she held her ground. If he was spreading rumors about her family, she needed to stop it.

“It was nothing,” he said.

Mary wasn’t going to let him off that easily. “Something that would put even the holiest of saints to shame does not seem like nothing.” He kept his eyes down. “Look,” Mary said. She tried to keep her voice sweet. “I need to know what is being said about my family. You can understand that.” Peter nodded; Mary waited.

After what seemed like hours, Peter finally spoke. He kept his eyes down, speaking to the grass. “It is nothing, really. I just heard that the Sidney women were not

to be messed with. They were beautiful, and strong willed, and acted more like men than women. And if one let themselves be swept up by them, they would never be able to free themselves from their grasp.”

Mary’s mouth hung open. She had no idea what to say. Luckily Peter kept his eyes down, so he couldn’t see how stunned she was. People thought she was strong willed, and beautiful, and like a man? She wanted to hear him say it again, just to make sure she had heard it right. But she didn’t know how to ask him to do that without sounding narcissistic.

“When I saw you come into the chapel, it was immediately apparent that you were a Sidney,” he said. He finally looked up at her. His eyes touched her face for a second and then looked down. If it was even possible, his face got redder. “And then the way you talked to me, like I was nothing and you were everything. I was not prepared for that.” He stopped and picked a blade of grass. “I am so used to people bowing down to me, not the other way around. It was—” He paused. The crease came back to his forehead. “Refreshing.” Mary’s mouth still hadn’t closed. She didn’t know if it ever would.

“And then the way you did not back down during that dance,” Peter said. He laughed quietly to himself. “I knew the rumors were right, and I was doomed.” Mary didn’t understand this last part. Doomed? But it didn’t matter. Her head was in turmoil, spinning around and around the words he said. She remembered the moments that Peter spoke of differently. A snake coiling along a broken shard of glass. But the way he said it, as if it wasn’t a snake that caused Mary to lash out but Mary herself. Born into the heat she felt all around her. She always felt that the world burned; she just never realized that she was the flame that sparked it. Peter looked up at her, expectantly. He had just laid out

his feelings for her, and she couldn't think of anything to say. Or rather, she had a million remarks she could say. She just didn't know which one would make the most sense. She went with the simple one.

"I enjoyed dancing with you earlier," she said. She hoped he noticed how much emotion was put into that sentiment. She picked another blade of grass and twisted it between her fingers. The rough edge rubbed against her pinky. She tried to focus on that sensation instead of on how hot her face felt.

"I as well," he said. Mary's fingers stopped twirling. She had to actively think about moving her fingers before they started again. "It is unusual for me to find a dancer that is at my own level." Mary's stomach fluttered. "I do not mean to sound arrogant, I just." His voice cut off. Mary waited for her cheeks to cool before she looked up. Peter's forehead was creased again, and he spoke his next words with his eyes closed. "It was nice, that is all."

Mary waited for him to open his eyes again, but he didn't. She looked down at her own fingers, which twisted and untwisted around themselves.

"Well," her voice cracked. She coughed and continued. "If it wasn't for my two broken knuckles, I would have said that we were well matched." Peter laughed, and his eyes finally opened.

"But as it stands," Mary said. She stretched her hand out and wiggled her fingers. "I think you could use some work on your form."

"I am very sorry, my lady," Peter said. He scooted closer to Mary. She froze. He bowed his head forward and grabbed Mary's hand. Her breathing stopped.

He kissed her two front knuckles and then gently lowered her hand. Mary's face was on fire. She knew her whole head would be red, but she didn't care. It was the first time a boy had kissed her. She wanted to stay in this moment, to have it never end.

"L'dy Mary," Nelly's voice came from behind. So much for that wish, Mary thought.

The pair spun around. Nelly came jogging around the corner. Her face was flushed; her chest heaved.

"Lady Mary," she said between breaths. "Yer called inter the castle. Tis urgent."

Mary stood at once. All the blood drained from her face. She could remember a similar evening, though the weather was much colder and damper then, when Nelly had come running for her.

She looked down at Peter, stuck between her desire to stay with him and the uneasy feeling in her chest.

"You must go," he said. "Do not worry. I am a man of great patience."

"Thank you." She smiled briefly at him and then spun toward the house. She was running before Nelly could give any more detail.

She ran by the rose bushes, remembering how wrinkled and dead they were the other time she ran like this. That night, she ran, tears trailing down her face for she knew that no matter how fast she ran, she would not be fast enough to save her. She wondered who she was running for tonight. Her thoughts immediately went to Robby. His plump face and dimpled chin filled her thoughts, and her heart tore. She ran faster.

She pushed through the kitchen door and ran to the staircase. She was halfway up the steps before she heard Nelly crash through the door below. She didn't see the room around her as she ran, but instead saw the fragile frame of her sister lying in the bed. Her

tiny hands balled into fists, her lips pale. The vision changed, the face no longer of her past sister but of baby Bridget. She shook away the thought and took the last steps two at a time.

She ran through the dining room and headed for the main staircase. She expected to hear the cries of her mother echoing through the castle, but all was quiet. Could she already be so late that the mourning has ceased? She kicked up the pace.

Her heart hammered in her chest. She felt her pulse radiate through her veins, pushing her feet faster. She skidded into the grand entrance and stopped.

Her mother stood at the bottom of the stairs, her hand to her chest. Mary's knees shook. But something was off. Instead of the face from Mary's memories, a face full of sorrow and darkness, her mother wore a mask of rapture. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyebrows raised, her lips pulled back. Mary followed her mother's gaze and saw her father walking through the front door. And then Mary's knees gave out.

She fell to the floor, her body collapsing in on itself. She was vaguely aware of a scream that sounded like it came from her mother, but she could have been mistaking the present with the past again, hearing her mother's cry when Alice took her last breath.

Hands patted her forehead, wiped the sweat from her eyes, smoothed back her hair. Muffled voices spoke nonsense words above her head, some closer than others, some more urgent, some only whispers.

She blinked at the dots that filled her vision. It wasn't long before the voices started to make sense.

"She is overheated."

"Oh dear, look at her face."

"She ran so fast; I could not stop 'er."

“She has refused to eat all day.”

“She will be alright. She only needs a moment to calm down.”

The last voice was rough, loud, authoritative. It was the voice of her father. She blinked furiously, wanting to see his face, to believe that he was really there.

“Darling,” her father, Robert, whispered in her ear. “I know I come as a surprise, but you are upsetting your mother. And we both know that that is a tricky bridge to cross.” He laughed. His breath blew into her ear and tickled her cheek.

Her vision started coming back. The blurs in front of her face started thinning and turning into real shapes. She first saw her mother, bent over her and upside down. She looked as if she were crying, but she could have also been laughing. It was quite hard for Mary to discern from this angle.

To her left was the face of her father. He smiled down at her and rubbed a few strands of hair out of her face.

“There is my little Mall.”

“Father,” Mary said. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. She breathed in his familiar scent of horsehair and dirt. Tears brimmed her lids. “I thought you were not expected until Christmas time.”

“I decided my family needed me here now,” he said. It sounded as if he would say more.

Mary pulled back. She waited, but nothing came.

“It is such a nice day,” Barbara said. “You two should go for a stroll like you used to.” Mary’s mind went to Peter.

Mary looked at her mother. “Do you want to join us, mama? It has been a long time since you have seen father as well.”

Her mother and father looked at each other. She could have sworn she saw her mother shake her head slightly, but her vision wasn't completely back yet so she couldn't be certain.

"I have to prepare for tonight's meal," Barbara said. She clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth. Mary's eyes squinted. Her mother never cooked.

"Well, shall we get off the floor then, Mall?" Robert asked.

Mary looked around her. She had forgotten they were still on the floor. Her father laughed at the surprised look on her face, and Mary couldn't help but join in. She had missed the sound of her father's rickety laugh.

He raised from the floor and helped Mary up. He held her elbow until she was stable.

"It is fine, father," Mary said. "I am alright." Mary took a step to show her father how steady she was. He nodded his head, but his eyes stayed on her. She knew he would worry the whole walk.

"Shall we go to the South lawn?" she asked. Her head filled with the sight of Peter lounging on the South lawn waiting for her.

"Such a short walk?"

"I thought you would be tired after your travels." *And I have someone for you to meet.*

"Why yes, I am quite tired." He feigned a yawn, and they both laughed. Her father poked out his elbow, and Mary laced her arm through his. They walked slowly; her father's eyes always on her.

She sighed but kept the slow pace. She thought about how to broach the "Peter" subject. Or what she would even say. Now that she thought about it, she didn't really

know what she would tell her father. That Peter kissed her hand? Away from him, it suddenly felt like a very little thing, nothing too serious. Friends might kiss each other's hands. She had seen many men kiss her mother's hand before, and it never meant anything. Her little freak out was interrupted by her father.

"Have you cut your hair?" he asked. Mary's hands went to her hair, where it hung in loose curls at her shoulders. She picked at the strands as if she needed reminding.

"Not since the last time you were here."

"It looks shorter."

"Hm," was all Mary could say. Her mind whirled around the thought of Peter. She was only vaguely aware of her father walking beside her. Until her arm felt wet.

"Are you sweating, father?" she asked. She took her arm out of his and wiped the layer of sweat off of it. She looked at her father's coat. It was definitely a shade darker around his arm pits.

He shook out his arm and ruffled his coat to hide the spot. "It is hot out."

Mary looked toward the sun, where it sat behind a thick layer of clouds.

"It is fall," she said. "The sun is preparing for winter."

"This is a heavy coat," he said. Mary went to feel the fabric, but her father jerked away. "Maybe we should not hold each other to keep you dry. We would not want to ruin your dress."

Mary wanted to push the subject, but they had rounded the corner and were crossing the coy pound. They would be to the South lawn soon, and Mary had yet to bring up Peter. She decided to be diplomatic about it.

“How was the Netherlands?” she asked. “Did you make any new friends?” If he told her about his new friends, then she could tell him about hers, or her new non-friend, or whatever he was. She shook her head to clear it.

“No,” Robert said.

Mary pursed her lips. “You made no new friends? That seems hard to believe.”

“Ok,” he said. “I made one new friend.”

“Only one?”

“Only one that is important.”

This was good. She pushed further.

“And who is this special friend?” *Tell me about yours, and I’ll tell you about mine.*

“Why, let us sit and talk about him,” Robert said. He walked over to the edge of the coy pond.

“Why must we sit?” She could just see the edge of the South lawn. She was so close; she could almost see him.

“I am getting tired,” he said. He feigned another yawn.

“I know that you are not tired,” she said. She put her hands on her hips. “Let us keep walking. It is only a bit further to the south lawn.” She craned her neck, trying to see over the hedges.

“Mary, sit please.” Mary stopped looking. There were only a few times her father used her full name. When she was in danger or when he had something important to say—something she wouldn’t want to hear. And since they were safely within the compounds of their property, Mary’s stomach dropped.

She stopped and looked at her father. She suddenly noticed just how sweaty he was. His whole coat was a darker shade. A drip of sweat ran down his face. He wiped it away quickly but not before she noticed it. And he wasn't only sweaty, he was finicky. His foot tapped against the sidewalk, and his fingers busied themselves with the buttons on his coat. She must have been so distracted by the thought of telling her father about Peter that she hadn't paid any attention to him.

She walked over to the edge of the coy pond. Her legs were stiff, and her knees cracked. Her father tapped the spot next to him. She sat down, keeping her eyes on his face.

"What is it?" She was scared to ask but also scared not to.

"Well." He took a deep breath.

"Just say it."

"It is about my friend."

"And?" Her palms were slick. She was sure that if she had to wait any longer, she would be as sweaty as him.

"He is a very high nobleman." He mopped his forehead. Mary's leg bounced up and down.

"Ok?"

"He has a son."

"No," she said. Her stomach didn't just drop, it left her body. She no longer felt anything, as if her whole body had shut down.

"He is around your age."

“You would not.” Her hands balled into fists; she couldn’t feel the pricks from her fingertips where they usually dug into her palm. “You promised more time.” Her head shook back and forth.

“Well, little Mall.” That one word did it. *Mall*. His favorite nickname for her. All of the feeling reentered her body, but it came back with a vengeance. Her face was on fire, her vision red, her stomach tense, her veins pumping. She could feel her pulse in her throat.

“Do not call me that!” She stood up. She didn’t just feel the ruler at her back fall away, she felt her daughterhood regress, ebbing with the wind.

“You cannot plan what fate has in store.”

“Fate?” She was shouting now. Her thoughts went to Peter, but her anger overthrew her worry. So be it if he hears. “It is not fate when you force it.”

“This is a father’s duty.”

“What about my opinion?” Tears formed in her eyes. She brushed them away.

“I want to hear what you think,” Robert said. “But he is the best option you will have.” She could tell by the set of his lips, the cock of his head, the way his eyebrows furrowed that he had made up his mind. There was nothing Mary could say.

She felt in this moment the words Peter said. She *was* the flame, ready to demolish all in her way. “I refuse.”

“You cannot refuse. You already refused the first time, remember?” Yes, she remembered, but that rule was stupid. Why did she only get one overrule? This was her life, not some childhood game with a rule book. “Just meet him.”

“He is here?” She could practically feel her blood pressure rise to a new high.

“Yes, he is waiting to meet you.”

Her world tilted for a minute, as if she would pass out again. She heard her father shout her name, but she didn't care. She focused all of her energy on staying upright, and then, for the second time that day, she was running. She ran past the coy pond, past the watchtower, past the daisies and into the kitchen. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she ran.

She grabbed the first person she saw.

"Where is my mother?"

The woman had a bowl of flour in her hands, and she watched the bowl as Mary shook her arms.

"Where is my mother?" she shouted again.

The woman stumbled with the bowl but finally answered. "Upstairs in the dining room."

Mary let go of the woman and ran for the staircase. She took them two at a time and skidded into the dining room. She saw her mother sitting at the table talking with someone. She didn't stop to see who it was. She didn't care who saw. Ladyness be damned. She had left that part of herself on the brick alongside her tomorrow.

"Mother," she shouted. She ran to her mother and dropped on the floor. Her knees scraped against the wood. Her sobs shook her. She put her head in her mother's skirt and hiccupped through them.

"Mary?" Barbara asked. "What is wrong darling? Is it Philip? Bridget?" Her mother went to stand up. Mary lifted her head.

"No, they are fine," she said. "It is father."

Barbara gasped. "What has happened? Is he hurt?"

"No, no," Mary said. She wiped her cheeks and looked at her mother.

“Well, what is it that has you so upset?”

“He has brought someone home for me.”

Barbara’s face filled with comprehension and then embarrassment. Her eyes went to the other side of the room and then back again.

“Oh,” she said. “He has told you.”

“You knew?” They both had planned this. She was glad she was already on the floor. She probably would have fallen over if she were standing.

“Now, Mary,” Barbara said under her breath. “Be good.” Her eyes scanned to the other side of the table again. Mary’s eyes followed this time.

At the other end of the room sat a man. He was large with wide shoulders. Next to him sat a boy a little older than Mary. He was more slender but had the same wide face. In front of the boy sat two gimmel rings.

SECTION THREE

On the road to London

1604

The rain choked England, dousing her countryside and city streets, baptizing her men, and saturating the minds of those forced outside amongst the mud and filth that were England's roads. One of those minds being Lady Mary Wroth, who sat inside the carriage as it gurgled through the mudslide heading toward town. It was a long trip from her home at Chigwell to the Londoner's house who had what she wanted, but it wasn't long enough. Each turn of the wheel pulled her further from that home, but it also propelled her toward the moment when the wheels would turn around and command her back. There was no freedom. Only moments away from the torrent, which exposed how suffocating it was just in time for her to be submerged again.

The coach stopped, and she waited for her escort to open the door and her aid, Elizabeth, to fix her skirt and hold a paraplue over her head as she stepped from the chaise. The manor, if one could call it that, was two stories and slanted so that, if in the right light, the second story seemed to touch the ground. The windows were barred shut, and the curtains, behind such panes, were stained and tattered. Mary looked toward her coachman.

"This is 19 Westfield Lane?" She looked back at the heap of bricks. Surely her prize was not amongst this rubble. How could something so precious be born in a place so. She paused. What was the word? So far from precious.

The driver nodded. "I can take ye back to Chigwell, if ye do not want to proceed any further."

“No,” Mary said. “This will do.” Even if it was far from her usual, it was *that* fact that drew her here. Chigwell was more elegant than this place, but the walls, no matter how plastered and painted, couldn’t hide what was inside. It didn’t matter how pretty the lodgings; it was the minds behind the bricks that caused the ruin.

She stepped forward, and the door opened as if it were waiting for the moment she chose to ignore the filth before offering herself to her. A man, hunched at the shoulders and sagging at the waist, stepped from the doorway.

“Ah, Lady Wroth. What a pleasure.” He stooped when the rain hit his forehead, sulking toward the sky as if he had no idea England’s clouds could dispel such a substance. “I received your arrival notice from your aid.” He inclined his head down the road where, assumingly, Thomas, the house steward Mary had sent ahead had come and left. “Such a pleasure to have you. Let me help.” He reached back into his doorway and came out with a large blanket, which he then ran down his walkway with and held over Mary’s head. “Do not want your cap to get wet.”

Mary laughed. The manner in which he thrust himself forward and near her was refreshing. The men Robert had brought over to stare and marvel at his new bride treated her like an antique doll who shouldn’t be touched for fear of breaking. But this man didn’t seem to care about her fragile frame like he knew there were many more of her, so breaking one wouldn’t be the worst. He laughed along, and she wondered if he knew why.

Once inside and free from the sting of the rain, he lowered his blanket. It fell to the floor in a wet heap, and Mary stared at it, waiting for a maid to come and clear the

area and treat the wood, but no maid came. Instead, the wet heap stayed. Mary stared at it as she spoke.

“Thank you. Mister Mason, I am assuming.”

The man nodded. Mary didn’t know what she was expecting when she was given his name, but this carefree and impulsive man was not it. How did her mother know him? She couldn’t imagine *the* Barbara Gamage in a house like this. “It is so kind to offer me refuge in your home.” She laughed thinking about his face as he looked toward the sky. “It is lovely.” She looked around her and hoped he didn’t read too much into her tone.

“You do not have to lie,” Mason said. “I know I come from humble livings. I wish you would have sent your aid earlier. I could have come to you. To think that you traveled in this.” His hand waved to the door. “Just to come to *this*.” His hand now moved around the cramped foyer. “I am thoroughly upset with myself.” So that’s how her mother knew him, she thought. He must have come to Penshurst to meet her.

“I was already out running some errands,” Mary lied. “It was no trouble at all.”

Mason quirked his eyebrows. He seemed about to say something, but then his shoulders shrugged, and his smile came back. A boy, not much younger than her, ran up to Mason’s elbow. He heaved the air around him as if it had a weight his lungs could not hold.

“Sir.” Heave. “Lady Wroth has arrived.” His eyes went to Mary and slid down the length of her body. She smiled, and when his eyes finally reconnected with hers, she winked. His eyes bulged.

Mason put a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you Rafe. I already know.”

“Sorry, sir,” the boy said. He kept his head lowered; his eyes springing between the papers in his hand and Mary.

“How about you finish with your accounts while I take care of Lady Wroth?”

“Yessir.” The boy ran off in the same direction he came.

“He seems.” *How to say it?* “Nice.” *That should do*, Mary thought.

“It is hard to find good apprentices these days.” Mason looked after the boy and snorted. Mary wondered what he was thinking of, but then he turned and smiled. “I heard about your nuptials. I wish you the best.” His eyes lowered to where her hands should be. Mary put them behind her back. Her left ring finger, she held still. If she couldn’t feel it, she could breathe. “I thought that was to be him, but I guess I am mistaken.” Mason’s eyes strayed back to Stephen, her escort.

“Thank you,” Mary said. “Robert is out of town.” She didn’t know why she lied, only that the truth wasn’t an option. She looked at Stephen. Hopefully he wouldn’t say anything. She fidgeted and the pocket of her coat, which rested against her hip bone, moved as she stepped. She didn’t know if it was the unusual weight of the pocket or the conversation that sent her mind back, but in the space of time it took for her weight to shift from her left foot to her right, her mind returned to that day.

She had sat behind her vanity, looking down at the familiar mahogany wood, as her fingers had run along the drawer handle. How often had she opened this drawer? Several times a day, if not several times in a single hour. She had opened it, heard the familiar drag as the drawer slid along the grooves, and looked inside, expecting to see her daybook and quill, but it was empty except for the thin layer of dust that was already

taking root. Her mother had helped her clean out her personal belongings a few days before, moving them to her new home in Chigwell.

She had closed the drawer, and her hands had raised to rub her eyes, to smooth the stress wrinkle she knew was on her forehead, to hold her head up, but they had stopped halfway in the air when she remembered her mother's stern voice.

"Now, do not touch your face, or you will ruin your makeup," she had said as she looked Mary once over. "Lest we should have a bride who looks like a harlot."

Now, as her weight shifted, she pushed the pocket of her coat off of her hip. If she couldn't feel it, she didn't have to think about it.

"Well, should we see it then," he said. Mary smiled, thankful he didn't push the subject.

"May my staff wait here?" She asked, looking back at Stephen. The less he knew the better.

"Yes, that will be fine." Elizabeth and Stephen stepped back to stand by the door. Mason turned, and Mary followed. He led her through a meager dining room with a short-legged table and four chairs, through a low doorway into a sitting room, through an archway into a kitchen, if one could call it that, where a small woman in an apron whirled between a bubbling pot over the fire and two tiny boys who sat at an even smaller table picking at crackers. When the pair entered, the woman stopped and looked up. She smiled at Mason and flurried to his side where she kissed his cheek. As she swayed away from him, a breeze blew by wafting with the scent of rosewater.

Her nostrils had filled with the same sweet scent of rosewater that her mother had insisted on dousing her in, arguing that since she was to be married it was time she

smelled like a proper woman. She hadn't known what that meant about her before this day. Had she smelled like an improper woman? She realized she didn't care enough to ask. That part of life was over.

A knock on the door had startled her. Was it already time, she had wondered. Her stomach had dropped, and then filled with the sensation of a hundred bees flapping their wings, and then heaved as if she might vomit the small amount of eggs she was able to force down her dry throat.

"Come in," she had said. Her voice shook. The door had creaked open. Mary had pushed her chair back, getting ready to stand. She knew she was going to need help. She would never know why her mother chose one of the tightest dresses in the parlor.

Her father had walked in, wearing his military uniform, his hat under his arm. He had seen Mary struggling to stand and raised his hands.

"Hold on," he had said, walking toward Mary. "They are not ready for you yet. I wanted to have communion with you before."

Mary had slumped in her chair. Her stomach had settled, and she took a deep breath, or as deep as her dress would allow.

Her father had sat on the edge of her bed and had looked around the room.

"This room feels so different already," he had said. His hand swept along the edge of the bedspread. "I thought I had time before it felt like you were gone, but I already feel that you have left." He had smoothed a section of the bedspread and placed his hat on it. Mary had looked around the room as well, trying to see what he saw.

"You look magnificent, by the way," he had said. Mary's gaze had turned back to her father. His cheeks had turned pink. She had smiled. She and her father shared the

same habit of blushing. "I know not if you have seen yourself yet, but you should take the time. It is worth it."

"I will keep that in mind," she had said. "Thank you." She had looked down at her hands. It was never easy for her to talk about feelings with her father, but now was especially hard.

"I know that today is," he had paused. His eyes had closed as he thought. "Special." She had winced at the word. "But I hope one day you will look back and be glad." His eyes had opened as he spoke the last word. Mary had looked at the floor, not trusting her eyes.

She had heard the bed creak as her father moved, heard his feet press against the floor, heard his knees crack as he had stood, heard his light footsteps as he had walked closer to her. She had seen the tips of his feet where he had stopped.

Now, in the small kitchen, Mary shook her head. She had to stop running that day through her mind. It had been a month, and still whenever Mary closed her eyes, all she saw were flashes of white, blossomed flowers, smiling faces, and Robert's eyes.

"Ah, Misty," Mason sighed. He rested his hand on the small of her back. His fingers barely touched her, as if she were the wing of a dying bird. Her back seemed to curve perfectly to fit his fingers. In that touch was a love Mary had never felt. Her heart ached. "This is Lady Wroth." The pair turned to Mary.

"Oh my, Henry told me you would be coming." Her hands fluttered in the air. "Can I get you anything? Tea? Water? A-" Her eyes looked around the room and stopped at the boys. "A cracker?"

The older boy, who heard this, snatched another cracker in his tiny fist.

“Now, Gilly,” Mason said, walking to the boy. “We have to share. For God has gifted us these things we have, and he wishes we share our gifts with others.” He kissed the top of his head and pried the cracker from the boy’s fist. The boy looked as if he might cry, but then he bit his lip, and his eyes scrunched. He watched as Mason carried the cracker over to Mary.

Mason leaned toward her ear. “I know you may not want this,” he whispered, opening his hand to her where the cracker sat. “But for teaching purposes, can you just pretend to take it?” Mary laughed and grabbed the cracker.

She looked at the boy, his cheeks full and pink. “Thank you-” She looked at Mason.

Gilward, he mouthed.

“Gilward,” Mary continued. “What a kind gentleman you are to offer me your cracker. I am so pleased.” She put the cracker to her mouth, making sure to cover it with her hand. “Mmm,” she sighed as she pretended to chew. “This is the best cracker I have ever had.” The boy smiled, and the littlest one laughed. The woman, Misty, tilted toward Mary.

“Thank you.” She fluctuated between the fire and the boys, stocking the flames and brushing the one’s hair out of his eyes. She stopped behind the oldest and kissed his head, then brushed her hand along the face of the other.

“I might not have much,” Mason said, looking at the trio. “But this is enough.” Mary suddenly felt small, like a bug who didn’t belong in this world. She wished she was the child the woman touched, so that she could try again, have a redo. She promised she wouldn’t mess that one up. Who she promised to, she didn’t know. But she did know that

it didn't matter. No matter how much she wished and promised, her fate was determined, written in ink on the inside of her wrist.

Mason's words rang in her head. Something about them appealed to her. A nagging feeling pulled at her thoughts, and then it hit her. The voice, Mason's voice, so fervent and poignant, reminded her of her father's plea.

She had stared at his feet as he stood over her. She had waited for him to speak, hoping he wouldn't but knowing he would.

"It is important for you to realize," he had finally said. His hand went under her chin and raised her face. "Please look at me, Mall." His thumb rubbed against her cheek as tears brimmed her eyelids. "It is important for you to know that a woman's marriage is just a step forward. It is just a way to move from one place to another. That is all, and I have picked the best place for you to move forward." His eyes had sparked as tears formed. "I hope one day you will see what a blessing this is." He had dropped his hand from her face. He had opened his jacket and grabbed an envelope from his inside pocket. He had laid it on her vanity, and hesitated for a minute, as if he would speak again. Mary had grinded her teeth.

He had leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. His lips had lingered for a moment, and she had felt a drop fall on her hair. Her own tears had curled onto her cheeks. He had turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Mary had wiped the tears away, not caring if her makeup smeared. Her mother would just have to be pleased with an ordinary daughter for a bride. She had grabbed the envelope her father had left and opened it. Inside was the most money Mary had ever seen at one time.

“Well, let us not make you wait any longer,” Mason said, breaking from his trance and bringing Mary back from that day. “It is in this room here.” He, yet again, led Mary through another door and into an even smaller room. She looked around at the many shelves that clung to the wall. Some were crooked, obviously having barred more weight than allowed. This must have, at one time, been the kitchen pantry, but now it was filled with wrapped package after wrapped package. Mason looked between the parcels. His head bobbed from shelf to shelf before he grabbed a bundle, a “mhm” coming from his throat.

He brought it to Mary and began untying the string that bound it. “Your mother said that your skin had an infinity to pearls.” He put the twine on a shelf next to him and fiddled with the wrapping. “When I had insisted on showing you amethysts instead, she had all but bit my head off, if one could do that over letter.” He laughed. Mary watched as his fingers worked around the brown paper. His left hand cradled the piece. “But looking now,” his eyes touched her face. “I see why your mother insisted.” The last wrapping fell away. The beads absorbed the light in the small room, swirling it around itself and repelling it back into the space. “These are oriental natural pearls from the South Sea.”

Staring at the pearls, Mary spoke, her voice only a whisper. “They are beautiful.” The small beads glistened in the trembling candlelight. The flames licked at the pearls, causing the shine to pulsate as if the jewels were alive. She was never the biggest fan of pearls, but something about these called to her. She reached into her coat pocket for the envelope.

Mary sat in the carriage as it waded through the puddles. She listened to the sound of the horse's hooves dragging her along; her head on the back of her seat, eyes closed. Her fingers played with the pearls around her neck. The weight of them on her collar bone eased some of her anxiety, but not all. Each beat of a hoof meant another step closer. Each pass of the wheel felt like a rolling pin pressed against her, thinning her. Maybe by the time they arrived she would be reduced to a wisp that would blow away in the wind.

What was she going to tell Robert? The question ran through her mind, but her thoughts didn't want to cooperate. Instead, they strayed to the men in the front who pulled on the reigns and lurched as the wheels hit bumps, to the smell of rain and mildew that punched through the curtained windows, to the sound of Elizabeth's even breathing, to the feeling of the glossed beads on her dry fingers.

The carriage stopped, jerking Mary forward. Her eyes flew open. Were they already there? She looked out at Chigwell Manor, her home before they moved to Durance, if one could call it a home. The rain barbed the pointed tops of the roof, smearing down the shuttered windows and landing on the lawn, which was really just a mud pit encased in iron. The red bricks looked brown and muddy in this light. She made a note to ask the gardener to clean the slabs next time he came.

Her door opened, and Stephen's hand extended toward her. She took it and stepped out of the wagon. Her heels sunk in the dirt. Leaning on Stephen, she wiggled them free and walked toward the door, Elizabeth's hands covering her hair.

Once under the cover of the porch, she wrung out her sleeves and wiped her forehead. She waved to the coachman as he ushered the horses toward the barn. Her eyes narrowed as she watched Stephen wind around to the back of the house, most likely to

the servant's entrance. She hoped he wouldn't say anything, but a small part of her hoped he did. If he told Robert, then she wouldn't have to.

She looked around for another distraction, finding none, she sighed and opened the door. Her hands went to her pearls; she spun one around with her finger as she walked inside.

The house was quiet. She took her coat off and hung it on the peg, taking care not to knock it over. Elizabeth began wiping the water spots from the wood floor. Mary took off her heels and tucked them under her arm, tiptoeing to the staircase. Maybe Robert was asleep: best case scenario.

Her foot pressed against the first step, and it creaked. She closed her eyes hoping it wasn't loud enough, but the call came anyway.

"Mary!" Robert's voice shouted through the house. "Is that you?" Definitely not asleep.

She waved at Elizabeth. "Go. Before he comes," she whispered. Elizabeth scampered around the corner and out of sight. At least one life could be spared.

"Yes, dear," Mary said, louder. She ran back to the coat hanger and stowed the shoes under one of the long fleeces, taking care to wave the jacket over them. She wiped her forehead dry and looked down at herself, water spots covered her dress. She grabbed at her head wrapping: wet. Well, there was no hiding now. She tucked the pearls into her dress. At least he didn't need to know about those.

"Where were you?" Robert asked as he rounded the corner. "Did you leave the house?"

“Yes, dear,” She took a deep breath and ran her fingers over her lips. Hopefully he wouldn’t notice the trembling. “Remember we discussed me going to the shops today. I brought Stephen along with me. He can tell you.”

“Stephen? I will ask him later.” He looked at the front door, his eyes lingering. “And what were you doing at the shops?”

“Buying things for the kitchen.” She looked toward the galley door and took a step forward.

Robert’s hand grabbed her arm before she could escape. He pulled her back to him.

“Where are the bags?”

Mary looked down at her empty hands, cursing them. She should have grabbed one before she left.

“Stephen took them in for me. You know how heavy they can get.” She laughed and hoped the sound was right.

His hand loosened but didn’t let go. His eyebrows raised.

“So, Stephen is in the kitchen then?” He dropped his hand. “I guess I will go and ask him about your day right now.” He turned toward the door.

“Wait,” Mary jumped forward and grabbed his arm. She spun him around. “Do I not get a welcome home kiss?” He looked back toward the kitchen and then back at Mary. And then his eye lowered to her neck, and he jerked out of her grip.

“Where did you get those?”

Her hands went to the pearls, and her gaze followed. They must have popped out when Mary jumped forward. She spoke to them. “I bought them at the store.” Her finger rubbed against the glossed beads.

“With whose money?”

“My own.” She looked up.

“What money?” He scoffed afterwards as if the idea of her with money was amusing. “What woman has money?”

“I do.” She stood taller. As tall as a woman with pearls would stand, she thought.

“When did you get money and from *whom*?” His eyes slid down to the buttons on her dress.

“What are you insinuating?” Her hands went to her neckline. She fingered the top clasp. “Do you think so lowly of me?” Her voice pitched on the last word.

“I know not what to think.” His voice jumped in volume. “You come home having been gone hours. No one knew where you were, or when you were coming back, or *who* you were with. You show up mysteriously. Your cap falling off, your dress completely wet—”

“It is raining outside, for heaven’s sake.” Her voice matched his volume. She waved toward the window. His eyes gazed out for the smallest of seconds and then shot back at her.

“That means nothing.” She gaped at him. “Who is he?”

“My father,” she shouted. Robert’s mouth hung open and then closed. A gaping fish.

“Your father?”

“He gave me money on our wedding day.”

“He gave you money, but still refuses to give me my full dowry?”

“He is working on it. How many times does he have to tell you that?” Mary was tired of hearing this. It was the same every time: Robert insisting he be paid for the *work*

he had done in marrying her; her father insisting he be patient and enjoy his daughter. Either side made her feel less whole.

“As many times as it takes for him to get me what I am due.” He waved his hand through the air as if he could wave her away. “More importantly, why would *he* give *you* money?” He said the last part slowly, making sure to enunciate each letter.

“As a bribe for marrying you.”

Robert stepped forward. Mary held her ground. She knew Robert. He was all talk and no play. He would never actually hurt her.

“As my *wife*.” His voice was even, calm, as if he were trying to explain something to a child. “What is yours is mine. So how much were these beads.” His fingers slid under the pearls and flicked them in the air. They dropped down on Mary’s collarbone.

“250.” Robert kept his face smooth. Mary matched the expression.

“And how much did your father *bribe* you with?”

“The same amount.”

“You used it all?” His face broke its composure. His eyes widened, and his voice raised.

“If I am to play a *happy* wife, I must look the part.” Her thoughts went back to Mason. His fingers against the supple part of his wife’s back. She wondered if he ever accused her of being unfaithful.

Robert took a steadying breath. “As my *happy* wife, I expect the table set in an hour with dinner and dessert to follow. I am having some important men over tonight. And I am sure they will want to be entertained by my *lovely* wife, so wear something flattering. And ready the wine. I expect to drink my fill tonight.” He spun on his heel and

headed for the parlor. Before he turned the corner, he shouted over his shoulder. “And tell your father to pay up. Unless he wants his daughter divorced.”

He left the room and Mary heard the door slam. She stood still for a minute, not certain if she wanted to go after him or if she wanted to run out the front door. She settled on heading to the kitchen. Afterall, she did have dinner to prepare.

She swung the kitchen door open, her eyes filling with tears.

“Her Ladyship,” the kitchen maids murmured. Those closest to her bowed.

She lowered her head; her gaze focused on the floor. A tear fell from her cheek and landed on the wood planks. She hoped no one saw it slip from her face. She stepped on the spot, wiping it with her foot as she passed.

She walked to the counter where the recipe book lay sprawled open. She stared at the page. With her head tilted toward the counter, her tears filled her eyelids, blurring her vision. She blinked through them. What did that say? *To nickel walms*. No, that couldn’t be right. Robert’s look as he eyed her buttons flashed in her head. More tears spilled onto her cheek.

“My ladyship, we have already made the pickle with vinegar, black pepper, ginger, cloves, mace, and nutmeg,” a woman said as she stepped closer to Mary. She put her hand on the page, pointing to certain words. Mary recognized the voice and hand of one of her best cooks: Sterlin. “We are preparing to beat in the mustard seed, if it pleases my lady.” Mary tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, using her wrist to wipe at the tears on her cheeks.

“I can do that,” Mary said. Sterlin started some form of opposition. “I like to help,” Mary said, cutting her off. “You know that. I will not leave all of this work for

you to do.” Robert’s demand shouted in her head: *As my happy wife, I expect the table set in an hour with dinner and dessert to follow.*

She walked toward the pantry, not letting Sterlin voice another objection.

Robert’s voice accosted her the whole way there. *And I am sure they will want to be entertained by my lovely wife, so wear something flattering.* She coughed through a sob, using her elbow as a cover. Once in the pantry, she scanned the bottles for mustard seed.

Where did you get money and from whom. Why was her mind doing this to her? Why couldn’t she just forget and move on? New tears replaced the old ones. She stepped closer to the bottles, forcing her eyes open wider.

Rosemary, rose water, leaf carron. Her finger, shaking, ran along the bottles as she read. Footsteps came toward the pantry. She turned her body so her back was to the door.

“Can I help her ladyship find something?” Amy, a kitchen maid, asked as she walked closer.

“Yes, the mustard seed, please.” Mary’s voice shook. She laughed through her next words, hopefully hiding the shaking. “I seem to have forgotten where it is placed.”

“Is something wrong with my lady?” Amy asked. Mary cursed as more tears piled onto her lids.

“Yes, everything is fine other than the loss of the mustard seed.” She laughed again. Maybe if she laughed enough, Amy would believe her lie.

“It is here, my ladyship,” Amy said, handing Mary the bottle.

“Thank you.” She kept her eyes on the bottle as she walked out of the pantry. She ignored the concerned look Amy gave her. She obviously wasn’t hiding her emotions well. She went back to the book and studied it once again.

“How much?” she asked to herself. She blinked, and a tear dropped onto the page. She wiped at the tear and smeared some of the words. Mason’s words replaced those of Robert’s. *I might not have much. But this is enough.*

She dabbed at the wet page, trying to dry it. “What did that say?” She leaned closer to the book.

An image of Stephen’s figure by the door, his eyes black, covered the recipe book. Another tear fell onto the page. She dabbed at it. More words smeared. The three men’s forms flashed in front of her face. Robert’s eyes staring at her buttons. Mary wiped at the page. Mason’s fingers on his wife’s back. She scrubbed harder. Stephen’s stare. She wiped fiercely at the paper now. Robert. Scrub. Fingers. Scrub. Stephen. Her fingernail punctured the wet sheet and ripped a hole in the middle of it.

She stared at the wrecked page; a stream of tears ran down her cheeks. Her shoulders shook with her sobs. There was no more hiding. She curled toward the counter; her hands grabbed onto the edge, and she fell inward. Her body shook. She saw feet step close to her but felt no hands. She assumed they had no idea what to do. This wasn’t exactly taught in maiden training. Usually, the lady of the house kept her emotions in check.

“Sorry,” she blubbered. She meant to apologize to her staff, but it felt personal.

Sterlin spoke: “What would her ladyship like for us to do?” There was a pause which Mary filled with hiccupping. “We can get you a wet cloth or draw a bath?” She could tell Sterlin was grasping at straws. Mary had to get control of herself.

She imagined the water on her cheeks sucking back up into her eyes. She pictured that water running down her throat, felt the slick sucking as it gushed down, felt it thick

against her lungs, felt it land in her stomach where it absorbed into energy. She used that energy to stand.

She felt pressure under her arms as someone helped her. The pressure was light, and the hand shook. She was the fragile doll again. But she was already broken. Couldn't they see her pieces on the floor: ruined and lifeless?

She blinked and saw the whole kitchen staff standing in front of her, their eyes filled with pity and questions. That almost sent her over the edge again. She hung on by inches.

Sterlin was the only one brave enough to step forward. "If I may, my lady, it might be best for her ladyship to go to her chamber." She looked down at her feet before meeting Mary's eyes again. "We have everything under control."

"But the pickled mustard. And the wine. I have to set the table."

"My ladyship," Sterlin said, cutting Mary off. "You have to rest and prepare your face. You will have company here in little over an hour. Go, find Nelly." Mary's hand went to her pearls. She rubbed the glossed beads.

"You are right." She kissed the top of Sterlin's head, which sent Sterlin into a flutter. Mary would have laughed if she could remember how. She headed toward the door. Before leaving, she turned and thanked the other women. A crowd of kind words shot at her, coaxing her closer to the edge.

She half ran through the house, heading toward her privy chamber. She took the long way around the winding hallways, staying as far from the parlor as possible. By the time she made it to her room, she was panting, and her cheeks were dry.

She closed the door behind her and fell onto the bed; her legs hung off the edge; her feet swung in the air. She stared at the mural above her.

A friend of her father's had agreed to paint the flying angles and fluffy clouds shortly after her wedding one evening.

She had sat at her father's feet; her head had rested on his knee. She had stared at the fireplace, watching the flames bite toward her and lick back to the logs.

"It cannot be that bad," her father had said. His fingers traced small circles along her back.

"'Tis father." She had expected tears to form in her eyes with the confession, but they were dry. She must have cried all her body would allow. "I sit in my privy chamber day and night waiting for him to call on me." *And half fearing when he will call.*

"It would seem that the issue lies in your privy chamber." He traced more circles. Mary turned toward him, so she could read his face.

"I understand not, father."

"If you were well occupied in your privy chamber, there would be no issue with you spending your days there." He leaned toward the desk they sat near and picked up a quill and some parchment. "Luckily, I have just the man to help you with your little problem."

Mary kept her mouth shut, realizing that her father lived in a world where women had little issues that could be easily solved by a man. He would never understand that it was these men that were causing the problems. Two weeks later, and Mary had a new mural on her ceiling.

"Now you have something to study while you are here," her father had said as they looked at the mural. "And company to keep you entertained." He had kissed her cheek and left.

Now, she looked at the little angels painted on her ceiling, every one a man. She stood from the bed and headed toward her painting supplies.

Her left hand held her right wrist steady as the brush finished the last curve. Her feet shook from straining against the mattress. She wiped the back of her hand along her forehead, drying the sweat. She reached toward the paint can.

A knock on the door startled her, and the brush fell to the bed. Blue paint splattered across the mattress. Mary frowned. She looked toward the corner of the room where her sheets and bedspread lay in a pile. At least she had taken those off.

“Come in,” she said as she grabbed the brush and tried to pat the blue off the white cotton

“Surrey to disturb you m’lady, but... What has happened here?” Nelly asked. Her mouth hung open as her gaze flitted between Mary and the ceiling.

“Do you like it?” Mary asked. She stood on the bed again, looking at her creation.

Nelly stepped forward; her hands raised to grab Mary.

“Her ladyship should not stand like so, yer will fall and break yerself.” Her hands fluttered around Mary’s body, not knowing where to grab. Mary walked to the edge of the bed and jumped off.

“Oi.” Nelly’s hands fluttered violently.

“You refused to answer my question from before,” Mary said. “Do you like it?” She pointed toward the angels.

Nelly’s eyes went back to the ceiling and then jerked back to Mary. Her eyebrows folded forward.

“Tis that bad?” Mary asked. She was quite impressed with her handy work, but maybe she wasn’t the painter she thought she was.

“No, m’lady. It is,” she paused. “breathtaking.” Nelly kept her eyes on the floor. Obviously, it wasn’t stealing her breath in a good way.

“Breathtaking how, exactly?”

“Well, m’lady. It’s just that, well, yer see.”

“Say it already, I have not all day.”

“They’re creepy, m’lady.” Nelly’s eyes went back to the ceiling. “Pardon me outbreak, but flying angels with breasts? Are they deformed? I do not understand.”

“They are *women*,” Mary said. She jumped back on the bed.

“Careful.” More fluttering hands.

“Oh, stop, I am fine.” She walked toward the angels. “See, I have lengthened their hair here, and given them breasts, and I even made them little skirts. It is magnificent, no?”

A long pause.

Mary jumped off the bed again. “You will see in time. You just need to think it over. Mother always said: it takes hours before one can understand a work of art, sometimes even a week. I will check back in with you on the morrow.”

“Of course, m’lady,” Nelly said. Her eyes jumped back to the ceiling and then to Mary’s face. They widened in shock. “Oh, m’ladyship, what has happened to yer?” Nelly asked. Her hands fluttered again.

“Whatever do you mean? I am fine.”

“Yer hair is a mess. Yer dress is spotted with blue, and yer forehead is streaked.” Mary’s hand went to her forehead. She could feel the crust of dried paint. She ran to the

window and stared at her reflection. Sure enough, a large streak of blue ran from one side of her forehead to the other. *How did that happen?* And then she saw her arm, also covered in paint.

She looked at herself more carefully and sighed. Her whole body had random splotches of blue.

“Nelly, can you run my bath?” Mary asked. She started undoing her buttons. “It would seem I have painted more of myself than the ceiling.”

“Madam, we haven’t the time for a proper bath. The gentlemen are here.”

Mary’s hands stopped on the third button. Her stomach dropped. As if on cue, the dinner bell rang from the kitchen. Mary had seconds before she was expected at the table.

She ran to the sink. She splashed her face and rubbed at the crust on her forehead. It didn’t give. She grabbed a washcloth and scrubbed harder. When her forehead ached, she moved to her arms.

“Her ladyship mustn’t rub so hard,” Nelly said. “Yer will give yerself a rash.” She grabbed Mary’s hand and lowered it. Grabbing the cloth, she wetted it again and started dabbing at Mary’s face. She waited; her eyes closed. Her foot tapped on the floor.

“Patience, madam,” Nelly said. “A heavy foot is never patient.” Mary’s foot stopped. Nelly’s pressure on the rag grew. She started tapping again.

After a few seconds, Nelly’s hand fell away. Mary raised her eyebrows. She could still feel the stiffness of the paint.

“Tis no use?” She asked. Nelly nodded. “Well, we have no other options. I must go as this.” She waved her hands over her bodice; Nelly’s mouth fell open. Mary knew she was probably imagining what Robert would say. At least Nelly would be spared from Robert’s rage. That would all collapse on Mary, as always.

“We can at least clothe yer,” Nelly said. She walked to Mary’s armoire and started flicking through her dresses.

“Tis no use, Nelly,” Mary said. “We have not the time.” Mary shivered as she thought about Robert’s reaction if she were late and a mess. She could at least try to only upset him a little more than he already was. Maybe he would forgive this. She wanted to laugh but couldn’t find the energy.

Nelly turned and looked Mary over. Her eyes squinted more and more, the longer they stared.

Mary sighed and headed for the door. She grabbed her wrap before leaving. This should cover up some of her arms and dress. She put the wrap on as she walked through the halls, keeping her eyes from the windows. One glance at her reflection and she might lose all courage and run back to her room. She could hear the sounds of muffled voices as she made her way to the dining hall. It wasn’t until she was at the door that the voices made sense.

“And where is this lovely wife of yours?” a gruff voice asked. Ice cubes clanked against glass. “I thought the whole purpose in the evening was to show her off.”

“She will be here shortly.” Robert’s voice. “I am sure she is just finishing her hair. You know how long it takes them to get ready.” A moment of silence and then laughter. Mary smiled at how far off Robert was. The smile faded when she remembered what the difference would mean for her. She pushed the door open and entered the room.

Three men stood around the oval wooden table that sat in the middle of a grand room filled with various paintings on the walls. Mary had reveled at the paintings when she was first introduced to Chigwell Manor.

“Caravaggio, Rubens, Elsheimer?” she had asked in awe as she had walked around the room. She had stopped in front of an Elsheimer painting, one she knew well from her mother’s stories but had never seen in person: the burning at troy. She had studied the faces of the souls as they retreated from the burning palace. One stuck out among the others. A woman. Her body was the largest, wrapped in a dress which she held together by her hand. Her face was turned back toward the others, her mouth open, her hand raised in the air. Her face showed no sign of fear or anguish, as so many of the others had, instead she looked fatigued. As if she were disinterested in the escape, only tired of having to direct the men to safety.

She looked at this woman now, thinking that she might know exactly how the woman felt.

“Ah, here she is now,” Robert said. He turned to Mary. She watched as first his face lit up with recognition and relief that she was finally there, the relief only lasting a second before his face fell and his eyebrows lifted. “Mary?” Was all he was able to mutter. She smiled and looked toward the other two men, both wearing similar masks of confusion as Robert.

“Greetings gentlemen, it is so nice of you to join us for dinner.” She walked toward the table, standing behind the chair next to Robert’s. “I am Mary, as you probably already know.” Her hand motioned toward her husband before falling to her side. “I am sorry for my appearance. I have just finished painting and had no time to dress.” The men had composed their faces by the time Mary was done talking. Both smiled and nodded their heads toward her.

“S’ nice to meet you madame,” the shorter of the two said. He was already balding; the top of his head looked like a greased egg. “My name is Brock Gibson.” Mary nodded once.

“I am Harris Beardsley,” the other one said. He was taller and leaner, but not skinny. His body rounded in the middle and then thinned at his legs. He was not balding, but instead had a full head of blonde hair which waved down to his ears and curled at the ends.

Mary looked to Robert, waiting for him to speak. He swallowed, not completely out of his bewilderment. “Gentlemen, let us eat,” he said, keeping his eyes on the table. As he said the words, Nelly, Amy, and Sterlin, walked through the connecting door to the kitchen, carrying plates. Mary looked at them. Nelly’s eyes bounced back and forth between Mary and Robert. Mary shook her head once, hoping no one else noticed. Nelly must have insisted on serving over the footmen. She probably brought Amy and Sterlin for back up in case things got out of hand. Amy and Sterlin’s eyes scanned Mary’s body, but they didn’t look as shocked as she would have expected. Nelly must have warned them.

They placed the plates and then went back through the door. Nelly caught Mary’s eye before slipping through. She winked once and then left. Mary looked to Robert. He was engulfed in his plate, too busy looking over the mutton to notice anything else. She knew what Nelly’s wink meant. *If you need help, just ask.* Nelly would suffer with Mary, even try to take the blame, before she let Mary suffer alone. She was at once extremely grateful for Nelly’s place in her life.

“So, Mary,” Brock said through a bite of mutton. “What were you painting?”

Mary felt the blush pull at her cheeks. “A mural.” She grabbed her glass and drank, hoping the cup hid the red. Robert coughed beside her.

“A mural?” Brock asked. “I had a man paint a mural in my foyer last year. I wanted to bring the outside in. You know, add some mystery to the place. I had some animals in mind, maybe a forest, but the man ended up giving me some washed up version of the sky that didn’t even include a single leaf, let alone a deer. I ended up firing him and painting over it.” He laughed and took another bite of mutton. “I hope yours is better than that.”

“I think it would be,” Harris said. “See where you went wrong, Brock, is not with the mural itself, it is with the painter. You had picked a man to complete the job, but you should know never to leave a man to a job inside. We get confused by the indoors. We were meant to be outside among nature. Among animals, like us. A woman, as Mary no doubt is.” He winked at her. “Would be comfortable inside. Would enjoy a job indoors. She would not be distracted by her desires of freedom and hunting to mess up the job.” He finished his expose by shoving a brussels sprout in his mouth. He chewed, looking quite pleased by his insight.

“I would argue, Harris,” Robert said, before Brock could butt in. “I agree that men are meant to be outdoors, and that is why picking a man for the job of painting an *outdoor* landscape would have been the best idea, for we know the outdoors the best.”

“Here, here,” Brock said, raising his glass.

“Apart from paining, Mary,” Harris said, wiping a drop of wine from his chin.

“Are there any other endeavors you participate in?”

“I write,” she said. She pocked at her own brussels sprout.

“A writer,” Brock said. “Any good, Robert?”

Mary almost looked up.

A moment of silence, and then. “Her writings are nice company for rainy evenings.” She kept her head down.

“Well, with a family like yours,” Harris said. “I am not surprised. I read your Uncle’s work.” Mary opened her mouth, but Brock jumped in.

“Any interest in printing?” She couldn’t tell what he hoped the answer was. He seemed interested, but his fingers seized around his fork, and his mouth was a hard line. Though she couldn’t tell Brock’s reaction, Robert was all but fuming next to her. She didn’t have to look at him to know what his face looked like.

“Someone once told me,” she said, looking toward Robert. “That my writing is best kept private, shared amongst friends whose hearts are warm to me and thoughts will never betray me.”

“That was me,” Robert said, making sure that his words were not mistaken for another’s. *No, Robert, Mary thought. No one could mistake your words for another’s. They are too vile to come from anyone else.*

“Well, with your father’s recent climb, you do not need to worry yourself with proclaiming the Sidney name. It is already high enough,” Brock said.

“Yes, they are high, but not high enough to give what they owe,” Robert muttered. Mary looked at him, her eyes widening. How dare he bring this up here. “Even so, she has left that family and would only be *proclaiming* the Wroth name. If that is what her words would do.” The men laughed. Mary wondered what the joke was.

Robert finished his glass and banged it against the table.

“Would you be so kind, Mary?” he asked, looking toward his glass. He glared at Mary, and she could tell he wasn’t completely over her attire. His face no longer showed

the same curiosity, instead, his face, from the point of view of someone who didn't know Robert, know everything about him and know his every action, would look politely interested. But Mary could tell, could tell from his set lips, from his arched eyebrows, from his pupilless eyes, that he was furious. He was biding his time, playing the part of a good husband just as much as Mary was playing the part of a good wife until the curtain fell and they could take off their masks. A shiver ran down Mary's spine as she thought about that moment. Maybe she would choke on her food, end up having to call a doctor, prolong the visitations until Robert grew too tired.

"Certainly not, dear," Mary said. She rose from her chair and grabbed the glass. "Would you like some more also, Brock." She smiled at him and saw his eyes widen. At least she didn't lose her charm under all of this paint. She grabbed the glasses and headed toward the kitchen. Once beyond the door, Nelly pounced.

"M'lady, what did he say? Is he mad? Furious? I can get yer another dress," she whisper-screamed.

"I am fine," Mary said. "Robert will just have to deal with this." She waved the glasses over her dress. "Until the men have left, and then-" she stumbled, not knowing what happened then. "We will have to see."

Nelly's eyes furrowed. "Well, why is her ladyship here? What are those?" She looked at the glasses. "Prithee, let me get those." Nelly's hands went to the cups.

"Thank you, but I am afraid I have to do this," Mary said, moving the glasses out from Nelly's reach. "Robert is punishing me, making me *play* the part of wife. I bet I will have to chew his food for him later." She smirked, but it only lasted a minute before falling.

Nelly fell silent. The women walked to the wine rack and filled the glasses. It wasn't until Mary was heading back that Nelly spoke again.

"I will bring in dessert soon. Keep an eye on yer. If I hear anything, I will find an excuse to come in."

Mary smiled, once again fiercely grateful for Nelly. She kissed her cheek and walked through the door. She walked to Brock and placed his glass on the table. Her arm brushed against his, and she saw him look up. Not returning the glance, she walked to Robert. As she bent forward to place his glass, she kissed his cheek. On her way up, she whispered into his ear.

"I know you are upset, but there is no need."

Robert grabbed her arm before she could fully extend. He pulled her down. "Not so fast, *sweetheart*." He brought her face to his, pressing his lips roughly against hers. The men laughed at the table and clanked their glasses. Mary squirmed, not liking how his lips moved against hers while company watched.

He let go, and she straightened at once. She tucked a piece of hair under her bonnet and patted her dress straight. She joined the men in laughing, hoping it sounded natural. To her, it sounded like a hawk crying.

"Now that you are back," Harris said, turning slightly in his seat so that he faced Mary. "We have a qualm we would like you to settle for us."

Mary sat in her seat, taking a sip from her glass. She swished the liquid around her teeth, washing away the taste of Robert's wine.

"And what is this qualm?" she asked. She laughed again, finding it easier to play along when Harris spoke.

“Well.” He took a sip from his own wine and cut a piece of mutton. “It would seem that these men are unaware of the situation that happened with the late queen Anne a few years back.”

Robert opened his mouth. “Not unaware. Just overly unsympathetic.” He laughed, and Brock joined in.

“Nonetheless,” Harris went on. “Back when Henry VIII held the throne, he was initially married to Lady Katherine, but she neglected to give him a proper heir.” His eyes rolled. “So, he went and found a woman who could: The late Queen Anne.” Mary nodded along as Harris went on. She knew this story well, her ancestors being friends of King Henry.

“The whole city went into upheaval. Half on Katherine’s side.” He held his right hand up, his palm parallel with the ceiling. “The other half vehemently praising Queen Anne.” His left hand raised, a mirror image of his right. “It would seem, as though these knuckleheads are on the Anne ship.” His left hand raised higher. “But I do not see how one man can be married to a woman, *really* married, but then get a free pass to wed and bed another.”

The men laughed at Harris’ tongue and cheek phrasing.

“So, we ask you, Lady Mary. What do you see as proper?” His hands leveled out again.

“Wait,” Robert said, putting his wine glass down. “I would like to offer support for my side before Mary votes.” He looked into her eyes as he spoke. “King Henry *knew* the place of a king’s wife.” He paused, still staring into Mary’s eyes. “To secure the throne. Since she neglected to give him a male child, she did not *follow the rules*.” Another pause. “Set in place for queens; therefore, she was never acting like a queen

should, negating her coronation.” Robert’s eyes tightened. “Now, since Katherine was not technically a queen, because she was not doing the *one duty* a queen should, King Henry could not be married to her. By law, kings must be married to a queen, so he went and found himself a proper queen.” He nodded after his rant, finally releasing Mary from his glare.

Harris’ lips turned down at the corners. “But Robert,” he said, leaning forward in his seat. “He was married to her. They slept in the marital chamber together. How could he just go from that to another lady?”

“You *should* ask that question, Harris,” Brock said. “For, if we can figure out how he was able to do that with two women, some say even more, then maybe we can succeed as well.” He laughed after this, mutton pieces flying from his mouth. Mary gagged into her napkin. All of the men laughed.

“See, we are making Robert’s dear wife uncomfortable,” Harris said, a smile playing at his lips. “Maybe we should continue this conversation in the parlor after dinner.”

Brock nodded at this, but Robert’s brow furrowed.

“We may continue this conversation later, but I am interested in what my Mary thinks.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “You have been so quiet during this debate.”

Mary swallowed and looked at her plate. The mutton, practically untouched, looked suddenly unappetizing. She glanced at Harris. She felt more comfortable talking to him.

“Well, I think I have to stand on the side of Katherine.” Harris stood up, throwing his arms in the air.

“Hah, gentlemen,” he shouted.

Robert shushed him. “And why is that?” he asked.

“Well,” Mary faltered. She didn’t know if they would understand. She chose her words carefully. “When we got married.” she looked at Robert. “You promised to be *faithful* to me.” Robert’s thumb rubbed circles on Mary’s shoulder blade. “I can imagine King Henry made a similar promise to Katherine, and, if it were me, I would be pretty output if you did anything to break that promise.” Robert’s thumb stopped. They stared at each other, neither breaking.

The room was quiet, except for Harris’ shouts of victory.

“Well, this is all moot anyway,” Robert said. His eyes still bore into Mary’s. “Anne never gave Henry a son, so he killed her.” Mary jerked away from him. His hand fell to his side.

“Well, at least you are bound to a woman of beauty,” Brock said. Robert looked at him. “Can you imagine being Earl. That broad he is bound to. If I were him, I think I would go hunting and never return.”

“You would wish to be so lucky,” Robert said. “With the nose that one has, she would probably hunt you down.” Robert laughed and the other men joined in. Mary pushed her mutton around with her fork.

Nelly, Amy, and Sterlin walked in then, carrying dessert dishes. As they collected dinner plates, they stared at Mary, their eyes softer. They must have heard. As Nelly placed her dessert on the table, she kissed Mary’s hair. One swift kiss.

As she stood to leave, her hand brushed Mary’s cloak, causing it to fall off her shoulder. She grabbed the fabric and pulled it back on.

“Robert, I did not know your crest featured yellow and blue. I always thought yours was red,” Brock said, looking at Mary’s cloak.

“It is,” Robert said. “Whence did you hear yellow and blue?”

“From Mary’s cloak.” He pointed at Mary’s left shoulder. She looked down, forgetting where her cloak was from. It was only when her eyes reached the small embroidered crest that she knew where she went wrong. She placed her hand over the symbol, but it was too late.

“Where is that from?” Robert’s voice boomed through the hall.

“You see, mine is red, with a knight’s head, that is why-” Brock began again. Robert held a hand up, pausing him. He lifted his eyebrows, waiting for Mary to respond.

“It was gifted to me when I was younger,” she said. She looked at the cloak as she spoke. “My father had it embroidered with the family crest.”

“And why are you wearing it now?” The other men were silent. Both staring at Mary as if she were a child who had acted out.

“Because I was cold.” Her excuse was flimsy at best.

“No, I don’t mean ‘why did you put it on’.” He took a slow breath. “I mean, ‘why are you wearing your old crest when you are no longer a part of that family?’”

“I am a part of that family,” Mary said. Her cheeks flushed.

“Not since you vowed to be *my* wife and enter *my* family.” His words spewed like venom. They stung just as much as if they were. “That day, you became a Wroth and your crest switched. To wear that.” He pointed at the Sidney crest as if it were vomit. His nose wrinkled as if it smelled like it too. “It is a direct insult against *my* crest, and therefore, against me.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “It means nothing, Robert. I just wore it down for dinner. I forgot that it had this crest on it.” His eyes didn’t soften. “Can we talk about this later,

after our company has left?” Her eyes touched on the other men. Their mouths were set; their hands balled into fists.

“No, we will discuss this now,” Robert said, his words raising in volume. Just then the door opened, and Nelly walked in. Her face was flushed.

“Her ladyship,” she said. Robert shot her daggers. Mary felt the urge to jump in front of her, to block her from Robert’s rage. “There is an urgent matter, in the,” she paused. Mary shook her head, trying to stop Nelly. She obviously wasn’t paying attention. “Kitchen. Your presence is requested immediatly.”

“Nelly,” Robert said. He spit out her name as if it tasted bad on his tongue. “We are in the middle of a very serious dinner; can the matter wait?” His voice was polite but tired.

Her eyes finally went to Mary. She widened her own and shook her head. She tried to scream at her to run, to turn and run as far away as she could, but she doubted her eyes said all of that. Nelly cocked her head, obviously confused. She would just have to speak.

“Thank you for alerting me, Nelly.” She hoped Nelly heard how fervent that thanks was. “But I am sure the kitchen staff can attend to whatever the matter is.” She smiled. Nelly huffed, and in that huff was a ferocity Mary had never seen before. Who knew a sleeping lion waited a breath away ready to pounce at the first sound of danger? The lion turned and walked out of the room.

“That was interesting—” Brock began.

“I demand you take that off,” Robert said. His hand went to the cloak. She twisted out of his reach.

“I will, when dinner is over.”

“Dinner is over now.” He reached again for the cloak. Mary stood.

“Then I will bid you farewell, gentlemen,” she said, nodding toward Brock and Harris. She slowly backed toward the door. Robert’s eyes were locked on Mary’s left shoulder. “Have a good night.” She turned and ran out of the room. The door closed behind her. She heard a chair slide against the wood floor.

“Stop,” Brock said. “She is not worth it.” More scraping on wood.

“You are right,” she heard Robert say.

As she stood there, listening to the men, it hit her. What Mason’s voice, so fervent, and fingers, so tender, reminded her of. The nagging feeling that she had heard a voice like his, that she had known the affection which touched his every word.

A whole lifetime of past love hit her in that moment. Previous moments and feelings overwhelmed her. At the center of it was Peter’s face.

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