



Tied With a Bow (Breed Book 25)

By Lora Leigh, Virginia Kantra, Eileen Wilks, Kimberly Frost

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#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Lora Leigh headlines an all-new paranormal romance anthology that turns up the holiday heat.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lora Leigh lives in Pennsylvania. **Virginia Kantra** lives in North Carolina. **Eileen Wilks** lives in Texas. **Kimberly Frost** lives in Texas.

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Virginia Kantra

“Brilliantly sensual and hauntingly poignant.”

—Alyssa Day, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Truly excellent paranormal romance.”

—*ParaNormal Romance*

Kimberly Frost

“[An] amazing author!”

—*Romance Junkies*

“An utter delight!”

—Annette Blair, national bestselling author

Eileen Wilks

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Upon a Midnight Clear

VIRGINIA KANTRA

To Carolyn Martin, who knows a thing or two about angels.

Chapter One

PARIS, FRANCE, DECEMBER 1792

The angel came down in the long gallery of the Conciergerie prison, the notorious antechamber to the guillotine.

Stone walls could not keep him out. Stench and darkness offered no deterrent. He was a child of the air, elemental, immortal, one of the First Creation. As long as he did not materialize completely, he could go anywhere.

Cold seeped through the blocked grates and up from the flagstones along with the miasma of human misery. The corridor was alive with sighs and sobs and vermin. In the bloody wake of revolution, the prisons of Paris were filled to bursting with the *ci-devant* aristocracy and their suspected sympathizers. Few had the money or influence to secure the comforts of a private incarceration, a bed, food, firewood, perhaps a chamber pot. Cells intended for one or two prisoners held four, six, a dozen men, women, and children, packed together on the filthy straw like so many bottles of wine.

In the stone blocks adjoining the exercise yard, some poor soul had scratched BIENVENUE EN ENFER. Welcome to Hell.

But this was not Hell. There were still those here who called on God in their distress. So the angel had come, drawn by a dying mother's prayer to provide . . .

Not escape, the angel acknowledged. He felt the brush of some unusual emotion, threatening his angelic detachment. Frustration, perhaps.

The children of air were forbidden from interfering directly in worldly affairs. With rare exceptions, humans must work out their own fate, their own salvation. But the angel could offer comfort to ease the woman's soul from this life to the next.

His frustration—if that's what it was—deepened. Tonight, solace did not seem enough.

He flexed his shoulders at the admission, feeling a prickle between his shoulder blades. He was an angel of God. Comfort was his stock in trade. It must suffice.

A woman's hoarse Latin slipped through the bars to hang like frost in the air. "*Sancta Maria, Mater Domini nostri, ora pro nobis pec-catoribus.*" *Holy Mary, Mother of our Lord, pray for us sinners.* "*Nunc et in hora . . .*" A cough. "*Et in hora . . .*"

More coughing, deep, wracking.

"Lie quiet, Maman." A girl's voice, sweet and clear and welcome as water in this dirty hole, speaking the King's French. "You must save your breath."

The angel followed the voice through the square iron grate into the cell. Two women—a woman and a girl, rather—huddled on the straw inside. The girl knelt on the brutally cold floor, supporting her mother's shoulders, trying to ease her breathing.

The child was very pretty, the angel observed dispassionately, with a delicate nose, a heart-shaped face blunted by a firm, rounded chin, and eyes as blue as an October sky. But it was the mother who had called him here. Citoyenne Solange Blanchard, former Comtesse de Brissac, convent bred and barely thirty.

"*Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae,*" the *comtesse* whispered. *Now and at the hour of our death.*

"Maman, you must rest," the girl scolded gently. "You need your strength."

The angel could have told the girl that no amount of rest would make any difference. The infection in the *comtesse*'s lungs had attacked her already weakened system.

But the girl's tenderness moved him anyway.

He spread his power over the dying woman like wings, extending over her the peace of the presence of God.

Solange opened her eyes in the darkness, focusing on his face. "An angel," she whispered. "Come to save us."

He was hardly surprised that she could see him. She was very near death. "I cannot," he told her gently.

Must not.

"Save her," the woman insisted. Her daughter, thirteen-year-old Aimée. "When I am gone, she will be alone."

The girl chafed her mother's hands. "Maman, you must not upset yourself." Doubtless the child believed the *comtesse* was talking to herself, out of her mind with fever and grief.

The whole country was mad. After centuries of privilege, the Old Regime was paying for its sins of pride and abuse of power. In three short years, the *comtesse* had been stripped of everything: lands, tithes, and titles. The life of her husband. Their son.

These humans went too far in redressing old wrongs. They had no concept of Heavenly justice, no understanding of divine mercy.

Comfort, the angel reminded himself.

"Your family will be reunited soon," he assured Solange.

She would be dead by morning. And her daughter would follow, executed within the week, sacrificed to nationalist fervor and bloodlust.

Underneath the familiar flowering of compassion, anger stirred, like a worm at the heart of a rose.

Solange wet her dry lips. "One day. Not yet. You must . . ." Another cough rattled the *comtesse*'s frail frame. She met the angel's gaze, the light of faith or determination in her eyes. "You *will* save her."

Such faith should be rewarded.

Shouldn't it?

"I will." The words falling from his lips caught him by surprise.

He was an angel, bound to discern the will of God, to protect, and to obey. He regarded the dark sweep of the child's lashes, the sheltering curve of her shoulders.

What if the charge to protect, the call to obey, pulled him in different directions?

He would be punished for his disobedience, of course. Not for the first time. Michael, leader of the Heavenly host, took a dim view of insubordination. But perhaps Gabriel would intercede for him. It was almost

Christmas, after all. The season of miracles. There was some precedent for his intervention in human affairs.

“You promise,” Solange insisted.

Recklessness seized him. “I swear.”

The girl glanced up, almost as if she heard him. Those clear blue eyes narrowed. “Who are you?”

The angel jolted. She saw him? Was she that pure? That innocent? Or was she like her mother, close enough to death to feel the brush of his wings?

“The answer to our prayers,” Solange said.

“Can he get us out of here?” Aimée asked, direct as a child, pragmatic as any of her countrywomen.

“Of a surety he can save you,” Solange said. “You must go with him.”

The girl raised her head. He had no idea what she could make out in the dark. She should not have been able to see him at all.

“You will have to help my mother. She cannot stand.”

The angel held Solange’s gaze for a long moment.

“I do not go with you, *mignonne*,” the *comtesse* said softly.

Aimée stuck out her rounded chin. “Then we will not go.”

“My dear . . .” The *comtesse* coughed. “You have no choice.”

“I won’t leave you.” The girl’s voice rose, provoking glances and whispers from her fellow prisoners.

But the cell’s other inhabitants were too respectful of her grief, too fearful of fever or sunk in their own despair to intervene.

“I cannot remove her against her will,” the angel said.

“You promised to save her,” Solange said.

Irritation flickered through him, crackled like ozone in the air. Frustration with her, with himself, with the sins of men and the limitations of angels. “She does not wish to be rescued.”

Intervention was one thing. He might be forgiven for granting a dying mother’s prayer. But violating a human being’s free will was another, far more serious offense.

He looked at the girl, her springy dark curls, her clear, wide eyes, the jut of that childlike chin. She was old enough to make her own decisions.

His chest tightened. And far too young to die. Her goodness shone in this mortal Hell like a star.

Solange continued as if he had not spoken. “I have family in England. A cousin.” Her voice, her strength, flared and faded like a sullen fire. “Héloïse married an Englishman. Basing. Sir Walter Basing. You will . . . take my Aimée to them?”

“No,” the girl said fiercely. Her cheeks were flushed, her shoulders rigid. “It is my life. My choice.”

Stubborn. He would need to silence her to get her past the prison guards.

He did not look forward to taking solid form, to descending into the flesh and the stink and the pain of human existence to lug her through the barricades. He dare not save them all.

But the girl would live. She would be safe in England. He would be damned before he'd let this child's light be extinguished.

His lip curled. He might be damned, anyway.

He breathed on the girl, catching her slight body as she slumped.

They didn't have much time.

The straw rustled and prickled. *Pailleux*, the guards called the poorest prisoners, after the *paille*, hay, they slept on.

Aimée squeezed her eyes shut, burrowing back to sleep, reluctant to exchange the comfort of her dreams for vermin-infested straw. Soft, dark, velvet dreams of being carried in hard, strong arms while the stars wheeled and pulsed overhead. Dreams of being safe, protected, warm.

Hay tickled her arms, poked through the shabby protection of her shawl. She sighed. It was no use. She lay still, waiting for the stench of the prison to assail her nostrils, but she smelled only sweet cut grass and the richness of cows. Earthy smells, homey smells, like the stables of Brissac.

She frowned and opened her eyes.

A man stood in the window of the hayloft. Her heart bumped. A very large man, his broad shoulders made broader by a cape, silhouetted against the starry sky. His profile was silver, outlined by the moon.

Except . . . Her gaze slid past him to the spangled sky. There was no moon.

Fear skittered inside her like a rat. “Where am I?”

He turned at once at the sound of her voice. She could not see his expression, only the bulk of him against the sky, but she remembered his face, beautifully severe in the darkness of the dungeon. “Do not be afraid. You are safe now.”

Which was no answer at all.

Her head felt stuffed with rags, her chest hollow. She raised herself cautiously on the straw.

“Maman?” Her voice cracked shamefully on the word.

Silence.

“Your mother entrusted you to my care,” he said at last.

Which meant . . .

Which could only mean . . .

Her mind splintered, and her heart, shattering like a thin sheet of ice over a puddle, the bright shards of her former life melting into nothingness. Her body was cold, cold. Her throat burned. She swallowed, pulling her shawl tighter around her.

“I will see you reach your family,” he said.

Her family was dead. Maman was . . .

A scream built and built inside her head, a wild, discordant squawk of rage and grief like a peacock’s cry. She felt it swell her lungs, climb in her throat, press against her teeth. But all that emerged was a whisper. “No. Take me back.”

He shook his head. “Too late for that. For both of us.”

Her lips were numb. “I do not understand.”

“The tide turns in a few hours. Our boat goes with it.”

“A boat,” she repeated. Her hands were shaking. She hid them in her shawl.

He nodded. “To England.”

Impossible. She was no student of geography, but Paris was many miles from the coast. She had not slept long enough to make such a journey.

Her dream rushed in on her, the swirling stars, the cool night flowing and parting around them like a river, the road a silver ribbon unspooling between the hills below. The texture of his shirt against her cheek. The strength of his arms.

She shoved the memory aside.

And *England* . . .

Loss blanketed her, heavy, wet, cold. Her head was a roaring snowstorm, her stomach a lump of ice.

“You tear me away from everything I know.” *Everything loved and familiar.* “You will rip me apart.”

“I saved you.” His voice was deep. Implacable.

“You are killing me,” she said passionately.

She wanted to die.

“I offer you life,” he said at last, softly. “In accordance with your mother’s last prayer. What you make of it is up to you.”

Almost, she was ashamed.

A door creaked in the silence. Her breath stopped. Sounds drifted from the stable below that were not made

by cows or mice. The scrape of a boot. A jingle of harness.

Cold sweat snaked down her spine. Had they been followed? Maman was gone, Papa and little Philippe, dead. In her guilt and grief, she longed to join them. But the will to live was not so easily extinguished.

She did not want, after all, to be discovered.

“Stay,” her rescuer commanded.

He flowed past her and climbed—jumped—*floated* down the ladder. His cape billowed from his shoulders as he dropped silently to the floor.

Aimée sat frozen in her nest of hay, her heart beating like a rabbit’s. Snatches of conversation rose through the trapdoor.

“ . . . into Portsmouth . . . ”

“ . . . look the other way . . . ”

“ . . . pay for passage . . . ” In her rescuer’s deep voice.

“We don’t need your money.” She could barely make out the *langue d’oil* of northern France, spoken with a distinctly British accent. “These little trips pay for themselves.”

“If you sell her,” her rescuer said, clear and cold, “I will destroy you.”

“We don’t traffic in children.” Equal disdain in the speaker’s voice.

She crept closer to the trapdoor, trying to get a glimpse of the men below. They were barely more than shapes in the dark: her tall rescuer in his broad-shouldered cloak; a burly fellow in an oversized coat and battered hat; a younger man, slim as a steel blade.

“Your girl isn’t the first aristocrat we’ve smuggled across the Channel,” the burly man continued.

“You’re one of us,” the younger man said. “You should know that.”

One of what? Aimée wondered. Smugglers? English?

A light flickered. Not a flare like a match, not the honest yellow glow of lamplight, but a slow growing silver light, cupped like a ball in her rescuer’s hand. The eerie light illuminated his face, cold, pale, and perfect as the statue of Apollo in the chateau gardens. Wide, clear brow. Long, straight nose. Firm, unsmiling mouth. His fair hair fell, unpowdered and untamed, to his shoulders.

She quivered deep inside with fear and an instinct she did not recognize.

“But I am not like you,” he said softly.

“Not yet, maybe,” the younger man said. He, too, was beautiful, with a lean, clever face and a handkerchief knotted around his throat.

“Just a matter of time now,” the older man agreed. “Lucky for you we found you.”

“You came for the girl.”

“We were looking for you both.” The burly fellow swept off his hat to scratch under it. “Lord Amherst’s orders. You’re under his protection now.”

“I do not serve your earthly lord. Or require his protection.”

The boy shot him a look from thick-lashed eyes. “You won’t feel so high-and-mighty after they toss you out of Heaven.”

The large man cleared his throat. “Amherst will take you in. Assuming you make it to England.”

Aimée frowned. But he was taking her to England. He had said so.

“Damon Carleton, Earl of Amherst,” the burly man repeated. He replaced his hat carefully on his head. “Try not to forget.”

“I believe my hearing and my memory extend that far,” her rescuer said dryly.

“You’d better hope so. When you lose your powers, your memory goes, too. You come down to earth as a child. A little older, if you’re lucky.”

“So I will be . . . human.” His voice was flat, strained of emotion.

Aimée blinked. Of course he was *human*. What else could he be?

An angel come to save us, Maman had said.

Ah, no. Aimée’s mind whirled. Phrases floated up in the dark, muffled and indistinct, like voices in a blizzard.

“. . . gone before morning.”

“. . . find her relatives. Basing, you say?”

“. . . I can feel . . . not much time.”

“It’s all right, lad. We’ll get her where she needs to go.”

They were talking about her, she realized dully. It was *her* future they were deciding, these strange men with their shabby clothes and English accents.

Her pride stung. Her throat burned. She was young and dazed with grief but not spiritless or stupid.

She erupted from her nest in a flurry of skirts and resolution. Bits of hay scattered on the men below.

“I do not go with anyone until I know who you are,” she announced.

What you are, she thought, and shivered.

They looked up, startled.

She had a brief glimpse of their faces, the young one, lean and sardonic, the older man’s, broad and shrewd, before the light winked out.

But her rescuer . . .

Aimée forced air into her lungs. Her tall, handsome rescuer was already gone.

Chapter Two

FAIR HILL, ENGLAND, OCTOBER 1800

Damon Carleton, the Earl of Amherst, pinned Lucien with a look like a rapier blade, glinting, gray, and cold. “You need an occupation.”

Despite the autumn chill of the library, sweat pricked under Lucien’s high, starched collar. He resisted the urge to tug at his neckcloth. “I had an occupation,” he reminded the earl. “I was an angel. Now I am nothing. A cipher. A human.”

“You have had eight years to accustom yourself to that condition,” Amherst said evenly. “During which time you have been sheltered, educated, and well provided for.”

Lucien stiffened. He was well aware that he owed everything to Amherst. Still, the reminder stung. “Because the world believes me your bastard.”

Amherst raised his eyebrows. Even if one disregarded the earl’s earthly rank and powers, he was a formidable man, with a brawler’s build and an aesthete’s face. “When the old earl took me into his nursery to replace his dead heir, only the boy’s mother knew of the substitution. But you arrived on my doorstep as a youth of seventeen. I could hardly claim you as my legitimate son.”

“Especially as you never married,” Lucien said.

Amherst shrugged. “I have brought eleven bastard children to live at Fair Hill. Fallen, every one, of course. No wife could be expected to tolerate such flagrant reminders of her husband’s excesses.”

Lucien inclined his head. “Indeed, sir, we are all grateful for your single state. As well as your ongoing liberality.”

“Ongoing,” Amherst said, “but not without limit.”

Lucien eyed him warily. It had been years since he was last summoned to the earl’s study for discipline, but he recognized that tone. “Sir?”

“It is time you demonstrated some initiative. Made something of yourself. Made a difference in the world.”

Lucien swallowed the bitterness in his mouth. “My last attempt at initiative could hardly be termed a success.”

And that, of course, was the source of his discontent.

Amherst, he was sure, was aware of the resentment simmering under his small rebellions. But even the earl, the head of the Nephilim, the Fallen ones, in England, did not guess at Lucien’s loss of faith.

His heart burned.

He had been punished—cast out of Heaven, demoted to the mortal world—for trying to make a difference. For trying to do some good. For answering a dying woman's selfless prayer.

In recent years he had concluded it was better not to try. Only with Fanny . . .

"You did well enough during the Terror." Amherst interrupted his thought. "Gerard tells me you saved his life or Tripp's on more than one occasion. The three of you rescued hundreds of innocents from the guillotine. You were only a boy then, but you cannot have changed so much."

He remembered. He had made the moonlit channel crossing too many times to count, nearly puking with seasickness and excitement. At least when he'd been dodging French gendarmes and secret police, he had not questioned the value of his existence or the rightness of his decisions. *Hundreds of innocents saved*. The memory kindled a flicker of satisfaction.

But then . . .

"The Terror ended six years ago," he said flatly. "Napoleon is in power now."

And Lucien had been bundled off to Oxford for a gentleman's education. To equip him, Amherst had said, for what was to be the rest of his life on earth. Older than most of his classmates, lacking any of the shared boyhood experiences that might have helped him fit in, Lucien had been stamped as Amherst's acknowledged bastard. Neither man nor angel, neither noble nor of humble birth.

Outcast in a completely different way.

"Napoleon's ambition threatens all Europe," Amherst said. "If it's action you crave, I will purchase you a commission."

"I have no wish to kill for England." Lucien stared out the library windows; the dying sun stained the winter brown hills the color of blood. "I have seen too much of men in war to believe one side is any better than another."

"Ah." The earl studied him with those too-perceptive gray eyes. "It will have to be the church, then. There are not many angels among the clergy, but if you are prepared to study and be patient—"

Lucien shook his head. He was disillusioned, even angry. But not yet so cynical he would lead others into unbelief for the price of a vicar's living.

"You must do something. I will not stand by while you waste your life along with my capital. I have here"—the earl tapped a sheaf of papers on his otherwise ordered desk—"a report of your expenses in London. Boots, wine, candles, horses . . ."

"I am not a schoolboy, sir, who has exceeded his allowance. Living in Town necessitates some expenditures," Lucien said.

"Doubtless that explains the residence on Maiden Lane occupied by a Fanny . . ." Amherst lifted a single sheet in one elegant hand and pretended to peruse it. "Grinton."

Lucien stiffened. How the devil did he know about Fanny?

"Miss Grinton is not your concern."

“Everything that affects the well-being of the Nephilim concerns me. It is my duty to watch out for you. For all of you. I would not object to your supporting a mistress. But apparently there are several other, ah, women residing in the house with her.”

Lucien stared at him in disbelief. “You’ve been spying on me.”

“You are not the only man seen entering the premises. Callers have been observed coming and going at all hours.”

Lucien gritted his teeth. “Are you accusing me of frequenting a brothel? Or of running one?”

“Whichever it is, it stops now.”

Fury tightened his throat. “You have no idea . . . You have no *right*—”

Amherst raised a hand, palm out. “Spare me your explanations. I have tolerated a certain wildness from you, Lucien, but I’ll not fund meaningless extravagance.”

A hot band settled around Lucien’s head and squeezed like a vise. “I haven’t asked for your assistance. I can support myself with the income from Leyburn.”

Barely. The realization settled coldly in his stomach. He would have to economize somewhere. Fanny would balk. She complained she could hardly manage now. But there was no choice for either of them.

Amherst regarded him with frustration. “And that is all your interest in Leyburn? The income you derive from the estate. You’ve never even visited the property.”

“You wish me to visit Leyburn?” Lucien asked slowly.

He was not averse to the idea.

Fair Hill was home. Or as close to a home as his earthly existence allowed. Unlike Gerard, the oldest of the Fallen, or Tripp, who had been raised by the earl since early childhood, Lucien had never accompanied Amherst on a tour of his other estates.

But Leyburn had provided him with a living since leaving Oxford. Amherst had made similar arrangements to support his other Fallen fosterlings. There was even an unspoken understanding that the earl would divvy his various unentailed properties, Leyburn included, among them when he died.

Lucien trusted—indeed, he hoped—the earl wouldn’t pop off anytime soon. The Nephilim could live almost twice the normal span of human years, and Amherst was a vigorous man.

Still, it could do no harm to take a look at the place.

“I expect you to do more than visit,” Amherst said. “You need to take some responsibility for the property. For your life.” He leaned back in his chair, regarding Lucien with cool gray eyes, obviously determined to force his compliance. “I will give you three months. If you can learn to manage the estate in that time, you’ll continue to receive its income.”

Lucien’s muscles were rigid. “And if I refuse?”

The earl’s face tightened in resolution. “I will cut you off without a penny. You’ll do as you are told.”

It was a punch in the stomach. A slap in the face. Lucien's ears rang with it.

In his mind, he understood Amherst's offer as fair and reasonable, even generous. But his soul rebelled at the ultimatum, the choice between abject obedience and penury.

Knuckle under or be cut off. Cast out. Again.

Insurrection flared in Lucien's blood. Pride hardened his voice. He would not plead with the earl for understanding. "I'll be damned first."

"Not damned. But condemned, nevertheless, to a significant decline in your standard of living." Amherst tilted his head. "Possibly even to debtors' prison."

"Unless I marry," Lucien threw at him.

Amherst stared as if a second head had sprouted suddenly from his shoulders. "Marry?"

Lucien clamped his teeth together. It was a stupid idea.

Or was it?

He needed money. He wanted his freedom. There was no way he was giving up the little house on Maiden Lane even for a hundred estates.

"If I must woo for favors, I would rather court a woman." Lucien forced his lips to curve in a mocking smile. "Unlike you, I do not doubt my ability to convince a wife to tolerate my flagrant excesses."

The library was very silent.

Bowing deeply, he left without another word.

And without looking back.

MOULTON HALL, ENGLAND, TWO MONTHS LATER

Miss Julia Basing leaned across Aimée's battered dressing table to tweak at a butter-colored curl in the mirror. She was a pretty girl, a true English beauty despite her half-French mama, but this afternoon she did not appear at all pleased with the image in the glass.

"This mirror is too small," she complained. "And very spotty. How ever do you see what Finch has done with your hair?"

Her cousin, Aimée Blanchard, sat on the bed, darning. The small chamber's only chair was presently occupied by Julia, who had gone to the unprecedented effort of climbing three flights of stairs to find her. Aimée doubted Julia had ever even seen the servants' quarters before. She thought of pointing out that Finch hardly had time to dress Aimée's hair in addition to all her other duties. But since she did not wish to

criticize the lady's maid, she merely shrugged. "One accustoms oneself."

Julia left off fussing with her curls to glance over her shoulder. "You truly do not mind, Amy? Giving up your room for the holidays?"

Aimée summoned a smile. It wasn't Julia's fault that she had been banished to the attics to make room for Lady Basing's other guests. Aimée had learned upon her arrival eight years ago that as a poor female relation she existed to serve the whims and convenience of others, to earn her place in her cousin's house—if not her cousin's affections—by acting as an unpaid, invisible drudge. "Indeed, I do not. And it is only for a little while," she said reassuringly.

Though which of them she was attempting to cheer she could not say.

"That's true." Julia brightened. "Anyway, it's quiet up here. Mama says you will be more comfortable away from the noise."

Aimée's hand tightened on the darning needle. Her new quarters *were* quiet. No one of consequence would hear her if she screamed. The maids at least shared a bed, which offered them some protection. Aimée had taken to sleeping with the chair propped against the door and her sewing shears tucked under her pillow.

"But I told Mama you must come down to dinner sometimes and not hide yourself away as you usually do," Julia continued, blithely unaware of the realities of survival on the fourth floor. "I want you to meet him."

Aimée pricked her finger. "Him?"

Julia dimpled. "Mr. Hartfell."

Aimée blinked, unable to contain her surprise. She had heard the name, of course. Hartfell's sire, the Earl of Amherst, lived half a day's journey away—not near enough to be counted a neighbor but certainly close enough to be topic of gossip. As for Mr. Hartfell himself, Julia could talk of little else since the family's return from the Naesmyths' house party a few weeks ago. Mr. Hartfell was tall—much taller than Lord Echlin, who had *almost* offered for Julia in London this Season. And handsome, more handsome even than Sir Andrew Waugh, who had danced two sets with Julia at her come out and had such a delightfully wicked reputation. And charming, far more charming than Tom Whitmore from the neighboring estate, who treated Julia with the blunt familiarity of friends who had grown up together.

Used to tales of her cousin's conquests, Aimée had received her confidences with a grain of salt. But . . .

"Hartfell? He is a bastard."

"Amy!"

"I do not criticize his character, you understand. But he is Amherst's natural son."

Many noblemen had children out of wedlock. But eleven seemed excessive, even for an earl as wealthy as Amherst.

Personally, Aimée did not care what Mr. Hartfell's birth was. But she worried her cousin might be courting heartbreak. Lady Basing did not in any way espouse the Revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and sovereignty of the people. Surely she would not approve of such a connection.

Julia tossed her curls, moving away from the mirror. "Lucien's father is an earl. Papa is only a baronet."

“But Hartfell has no fortune,” Aimée said.

“I believe the earl has settled some unentailed property on him. Anyway”—Julia lifted her chin—“what is the point of having a large dowry if I can’t buy the husband I want?”

“Your parents will never consent,” Aimée warned.

“Mama has already invited him. She’ll do what I want,” Julia asserted with all the confidence of a girl whose wishes had been indulged for the past eighteen years. “And Papa will do what she tells him.”

Aimée raised her eyebrows. “The perfect model for marriage, in fact.”

Her memories of her parents’ marriage were colored by the golden haze of childhood, when she had been safe and secure. But she liked to think they had loved one another. Certainly they had loved her.

Julia met her gaze, her eyes alight with mischief. “Precisely. A purchased husband will be so much easier to manage, don’t you think?”

Aimée laughed and shook her head. “I will tell you after I have met the gentleman. He may be less tractable once he has control of your fortune.”

“Unless he falls wildly and madly in love with me.” Julia did a little twirl of glee, almost knocking into the bed. “Oh, Amy, it’s going to be the most delightful Christmas ever.”

Aimée raised her eyebrows. She had always enjoyed the church service on Christmas morning, but the holiday was marked primarily by presents to the servants and children. She found it difficult to understand her cousin’s enthusiasm. “You expect Mr. Hartfell to present himself tied with a bow?”

Julia giggled. “No, silly. Mama’s promised to hold a ball on Christmas Day. A masked ball, just like at Vauxhall. Isn’t that exciting?”

A masked ball. At Moulton. On Christmas Day.

Just for a moment, Aimée’s heart lifted as if she were quite as young and pretty and privileged as her cousin. Her head swirled with visions of candles, dresses, and dancing.

“I shall be Venus, goddess of love and beauty,” Julia said dreamily.

Aimée smiled wryly, recalled to reality. “Naked on a clamshell?”

“I won’t be naked, silly. Mama has hired Mrs. Pockley from the village to make my costume.”

Aimée smothered a sigh of relief. At least she would not have to add costume sewing to her other duties. “I don’t remember Venus wearing many clothes.”

“Diana, then. The virgin huntress, fair and unattainable as the moon. With lots of silver drapery and diamonds like stars in my hair. And you must dress up, too.”

Aimée wondered what Lady Basing would say about that. Certainly, there would be no diamonds for *her* hair.

Her throat tightened. She had a sudden, poignant memory of Maman, her hair dressed high and a jeweled

locket—a gift from Papa—at her throat, swooping down to envelope Aimée in a warm embrace and a cloud of perfume.

Gone now. All gone.

But such thinking was foolishness.

Aimée straightened her spine.

She would *not* give in to self-pity. She was grateful to her mother's cousin for the roof over her head and the food she ate and . . . Well, she was grateful. With the servants already run off their feet with preparations for the house party, it would be her duty to make all of Lady Basing's arrangements go as smoothly as possible, to keep track of the guest list and write the invitations, to assist with the menu and the decorations and the hundred and one other details that must accompany a ball, even in the country.

This was her life now. Aimée stabbed her needle at a large darn, ignoring the jab at her heart.

What she made of it was up to her.

Chapter Three

Lucien had always scorned the London marriage mart, the annual parade of well-bred chits trotted out like fillies at auction by their fond mamas and ambitious papas in hopes of attracting a buyer.

But now he himself was on the block.

As the Basing house party assembled in the drawing room before dinner, he was aware of his supposed bloodlines being dissected, his grooming inspected, his likely performance assessed.

He made his bows, his collar chafing. His evening jacket squeezed his shoulders in a too-tight embrace. Miss Basing clung to his arm, hanging upon his every word.

Julia Basing was everything Lucien should want—pretty, young, rich, and compliant. A month ago, when he was still hot with fury over Amherst's interference, he had pursued her with single-minded skill and determination.

His blood had cooled before two weeks had passed. But his circumstances had not changed. His time was running out.

So here he was, committed to Lady Basing's house party for the holidays. Not simply as her guest but as a prospective son-in-law.

A chill traced down his spine like the brush of a feather. Almost, he wished he had not come.

Julia took his arm with a proprietary air to present him to the local squire and his two unmarried sisters.

The squire, Tom Whitmore, was a young man with thick dark whiskers that did nothing to disguise his very square jaw or his frown.

Possibly he disapproved of bastards, however well connected. Or perhaps he would look askance on any rival for Miss Basing's affections.

He stuck out his jaw belligerently. "What brings you to Moulton, Hartfell?"

He needed to marry money. Soon. Or crawl back to Amherst at Fair Hill. The rent on the Maiden Lane house was only paid through the end of the month.

"I am here at Lady Basing's invitation," Lucien said.

The squire's square jaw became even squarer. "You have no family who require your attendance over the holiday?"

It was a challenge, by thunder. A reference to his bastard status.

Whitmore's sisters looked anxious. Julia Basing caught her breath.

"I am fortunate to be free to follow my personal inclinations," Lucien said.

Whitmore glared. "And those are?"

Lucien smiled thinly. "Personal."

The sticky silence was broken by a rush at the door as a late arrival caught herself on the threshold. Lucien had an impression of bouncing dark curls and a wide, heart-shaped face before the woman lowered her head, slipping quietly into the room. Her unobtrusive demeanor was so at odds with her animated expression that his attention was caught. He narrowed his eyes, taking in her lace-trimmed cap and shapeless, faded gown. There were no rings on her fingers, no jewels around her neck.

Not a guest, then. Nor quite a servant. Most likely a poor relation, one of the army of drab, dependent, unmarried females clinging to shabby gentility in the corners of England's drawing rooms, indispensable and invisible to their wealthier relatives.

Normally he would not even have noticed her. But the energy of her entrance lingered a moment, charging the stale air like a blowing storm.

Lady Basing reclaimed his attention, leading the way into the dining room.

Despite his lack of title, he found himself paired with Miss Basing at dinner. Amherst's lineage, of course, was impeccable. And Lucien was connected, however irregularly, with Amherst. If Leyburn were truly his, if he were the man of property he pretended to be, he would be considered an acceptable match for a baronet's daughter.

He wondered how much time he had before Sir Walter demanded an accounting of his prospects.

He forced himself to listen to Miss Basing chatter about the Season just past—her first—about whom she had met and what she had worn and which gentlemen she had danced with. He sipped his wine, bored almost out of his mind. Fortunately, as long as he inserted compliments at appropriate intervals, Miss Basing did not appear to find his attention lacking.

Across the table, her brother, Howard Basing, made sly observations to the Misses Whitmore on either side. Lucien knew Julia's brother only by sight, brown-haired, handsome, with sharp white collar points and teeth.

A few places farther down, the poor relation divided her conversation between a country gentleman old enough to be her grandfather and a spotty boy barely out of the schoolroom. Lucien was not close enough to

overhear a word of their conversation. But something about her compelled his notice.

Beneath her cap, she had strongly arched brows and thick black lashes, a wide, curved mouth and a charmingly blunted chin. She tilted her head—the better to hear her elderly dinner partner?—when suddenly, for no reason at all, she raised her gaze across the table.

Eyes as blue as the October sky stared into his.

The charge this time sizzled clear to his toes. Like the shock of recognition, a bolt of lightning, a jolt of longing.

She was almost familiar to him. Not Nephilim, despite her angel's face. She was . . . He didn't know what she was. His hand curled around his wineglass.

She did not immediately drop her gaze as any well-bred lady ought, as any meek companion must. She stared back at him, her lips parted, her eyes wide and dark. He watched her take one swift, deep breath, giving shape to her shapeless dress, and his own breathing stopped.

Her lashes swept down. With a visible effort, she collected herself, turning to address a remark to the spotty youth at her side. The boy flushed and launched into speech.

Lucien released his grip on the glass. His hand shook slightly.

"Amy does not often join us for dinner when we have company," Miss Basing confided beside him. "I am so pleased Mama invited her to make up the numbers after Freddy threw the table off. But he is home from school so seldom, poor boy, it would have been a shame to exclude him."

Lucien dragged his memory. Freddy would be young Keasdon, the son of local gentry. And . . .

"Amy?" he repeated.

"Cousin Amy. Weren't you looking at her just now? Oh." Miss Basing bit her lip. "But you were not presented, were you?"

"I have not had that pleasure," he said curtly. "She was not in the drawing room before dinner."

"I expect she was still in the nursery settling my sister's children—my sister Susan, Mrs. Netherby," Miss Basing explained. "They were overexcited after the long carriage ride here."

"She is their governess?"

Miss Basing looked surprised. "Oh, no. My sister let the governess go to her family for the holiday. Why should Mr. Netherby be put to the expense of paying the creature a Christmas bonus when Amy is willing to watch the children?"

Lucien hid his distaste. "Very obliging of her."

"Amy is always obliging. Of course, she must be conscious of what she owes Mama. We took her in, you know, after her parents were killed. In the Terror. It was a great tragedy," Julia said comfortably.

She was French, then. An émigré. A refugee.

Perhaps that explained his jolt of recognition, his feeling of déjà vu. Perhaps he had seen her, even rescued her on one of his forays across the Channel.

He frowned at the ruby reflection of his wine on the snow white tablecloth. He and Gerard and Tripp had snatched hundreds from the shadow of the guillotine, men, women, and children. He could not remember them all.

“How long ago?” he asked tightly.

“Oh, ages. I was just a child when she came to live with us. Ten? Eleven. Amy was older, of course.”

Before his time on earth, he thought. Before he’d found Amherst.

His mouth dried. *Holy God.*

He remembered very little from before his Fall. The Nephilim were not born as human infants. That distinction was reserved for the Most High. They Fell as children or adolescents, losing their knowledge of Heaven along with their angelic powers, thrust into human existence in the land and year of their offense.

But the circumstances of that night were seared into his brain, the filthy prison, the dying mother, the defiant child in her nest of straw.

You are killing me, she had cried passionately.

He stared unseeing at the table, recalling her wide blue eyes, her rounded, jutting jaw. He had violated her free will, tearing her from both the life she knew and the death she had chosen.

And so he had been condemned to lose his own life, his very identity as a child of air.

His stomach knotted. *Was it possible . . . ?*

He reached for his glass, risking another glance down the table at Julia Basing’s French cousin.

Amy. *Aimée.*

She was not very old. Early twenties, at a guess. The cap aged her. She could be . . . Ah, he hoped she was not. He hated to think he had saved her from one prison only to thrust her into another. Both of them sentenced by his choice to live out their lives in the shadows, condemned to a life of servitude. Her bright light, dimmed.

He set down his wine untasted.

It made no difference, he told himself. His course was set. Even if she were the same woman, she was not his responsibility now.

He glanced again down the table. But he had to *know*.

He was staring at her. Mr. Hartfell. He had beautiful eyes, bright and green as emeralds, gleaming in the light

of the candles.

Aimée's heart beat faster. For a moment, when she first looked up and caught him staring, she had been drawn. Dazzled. Like a moth to a flame, like Icarus flying into the heat of the sun, completely insensitive to danger.

She clasped her hands together in her lap, focusing with determined concentration on sixteen-year-old Freddy Keasdon, who had launched into a description of his last cricket match at school.

“. . . off the wicket on the on side,” he said, his Adam's apple working earnestly. “So I went out at it on my left leg—no, wait, it was my right—and . . .”

She had no idea what he was talking about. But as long as their conversation revolved around him, he was quite willing to give her his full attention. Like any other man, she supposed.

Living in her cousin's house, she had learned to be wary of masculine attention. But Freddy—“caught it square a couple feet from the ground,” he told her—was charming in his enthusiasm. And quite harmless.

She felt very sure the same could not be said of Lucien Hartfell.

Really, he had no business staring at her at all. He was here to court Julia.

Her cousin was sitting right there beside him, looking as fresh and lovely as spring in a gown the soft pink of apple blossoms. The deep neckline and short, puffed sleeves revealed a great deal of her rounded bosom and arms.

Aimée had taken care that her own dress revealed nothing at all. Its original sour green color still showed faintly at the seams where she had picked them apart, letting out the bodice until her shape resembled nothing so much as a sack of flour tied with ribbon. She would not be accused of luring Cousin Howard's attention again.

At least Mr. Hartfell had been staring at her face and not her breasts.

It was a relief when Lady Basing signaled that dinner was over. The ladies withdrew, leaving the men to their port.

In the drawing room, the other young ladies engaged in polite competition to entertain the company. Aimée began to calculate how soon she could excuse herself. But then Julia required her sheet music and Lady Basing demanded her shawl. Aimée had just finished passing the cakes from the tea tray when the gentlemen trooped in.

A throat cleared behind her. “Er, Miss Blanchard.”

No escape. Her back stiffened. She turned to smile at young Freddy Keasdon.

And Mr. Hartfell. She caught her breath as her gaze tangled with his.

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