Summary

When Lucien proposes to Jean, he sets off a chain of events neither of them could have foreseen. Jean struggles to keep her faith in Lucien, in her church, in herself, as they embark on an unexpected sort of adventure.
For all that she adored him, Lucien Blake had always been something of a mystery to her. Dangerous but soft, brilliant but selfish, tender and yet capable of such rage. She had draped his arm round her shoulders and shuffled him off to bed when self-hatred and drink had made a mess of him, had watched in horror as he strode through a crowded gathering at the Colonists' Club laying bare his bitter heart and decked Matthew Lawson in the face. She had seen him weep for his child and smile as he danced with Mattie in the sitting room, had looked on in fascination as time and time again he unraveled some riddle that had stumped everyone else around him with grace and aplomb. Well, perhaps not with grace; he was wild, impulsive, eager, always, roaring through town like a bull in a china shop. But his heart was gentle, and loyal, and brave, and over the course of their acquaintance he had shown those virtues to her, had awoken the reckless beast that had slumbered in her chest since the day her Christopher had died, had reminded her what it was, to love another person.

Today had been no different, as he tried, so damnably hard, to find little Elizabeth's mother before it was too late. It had been nice, in a strange sort of way, having that little girl in the house, watching Lucien interact with her, knowing that he would do whatever it took to put her family back together. He had been so gentle with the child, and he was gentle with Jean now, as they made their way to the sitting room to settle down together on the sofa while the wireless played softly in the background.

Mattie had left them, spread her wings and raced off to London to chase her dreams, and now the house was quiet, theirs, for a time, as Charlie had gone out for the evening. It was nice, to be properly alone with him, especially now, after everything. After Adelaide. After he had run down the street like a man possessed, boarded that bus with nothing but the clothes on his back and his heart in his eyes. After he had told her, in a voice low and sincere and dripping with heat, that he loved her, that he did not want her to leave him, that he wanted her by his side, always. After he had stood on Christopher's little porch late one fine evening and wrapped her in his arms and kissed her like she hadn't been kissed for over a decade, a kiss full of want, of hope, of promise. Yes, after all of that, Jean wanted nothing more than to sit on the low sofa with him, alone in this house they shared, and let his tender voice wash over her, carrying away the troubles of the day and leaving her full of love and life.

And yet it seemed that a long slow evening was not in the cards, for Lucien was looking at her quite strangely, his breathing fast and staccato, his eyes somewhat wild. There was something on his mind, something that made him rather nervous, fidgeting like a schoolboy caught out in a lie.

"Jean," he said slowly, "Would you mind...erm," he stammered, lost his voice, took a breath, and tried again. "Would you mind, erm, just waiting here, just...just for a moment?"

Whatever it was that plagued him, Jean knew it would fall to her to help him through it. Though she was a bit concerned, a bit baffled by his sudden neurosis she was more than ready to help him find his way, whatever the cause of his distress. After all, she had been doing much the same from the moment they first met, helping him with his cases, talking with him quietly of all manner of things. That was how she had come to fall in love with him in the first place, sharing these pieces of his life.
with him, helping him to put them back together.

"All right," she agreed.

He hesitated for a moment. "Right," he said, and then bounded from the room.

Jean settled herself down on the sofa, her sherry and his whiskey sitting together on the low table in front of her. There was no point in trying to work out what had set him off like this, trying to interpret his hopeful, anxious gaze; he would be back in a moment, and then he would tell her the truth, and, knowing Lucien, that truth would be far stranger than any outcome she could imagine on her own. She ran her hands over her skirt, smoothing the fabric across her thighs, humming softly to the familiar tune coming from the wireless. She had missed this, during her brief sojourn in Adelaide, had missed their home, their easy way with one another, the thousand tiny details that made up her life in this place. A life she had chosen for herself, time and time again, as she turned down the job offer at the Royal Cross, as she turned down Robert's marriage proposal, as she ignored the earnest entreaties of her friends telling her she could find more stability with a more respectable employer. Jean didn't want a respectable employer; she wanted Lucien, and their home, and their life.

And then he returned, tugging anxiously at his waistcoat before clasping his hands together behind his back, blue eyes darting around like some kind of caged animal. The calm that Jean had been feeling, the certainty that whatever this was they could work it out together, was beginning to fade in the face of his agitation. Though she often found his vulnerability, his willingness to confess that he was not in fact some superior omniscient being rather endearing, seeing him so lost in this moment did not bring a smile to her lips. He had solved his riddle, and saved Judith Chapman; what on earth could have gotten him so worked up?

He stood before her, tall and broad and strong and tense, no trace of his usual confidence on his face. As she watched, he took a deep breath, and spoke.

"Jean," he said in a very serious, almost formal sort of voice. "Would you mind standing for me, please?"

Now her heart was racing in truth. Almost everything Lucien did was strange, to her mind, but there was no trace of the good humor that had carried him through their supper and to this place. There was no smile on his face, as she rose to her feet, eyeing him warily. There was a tension in him, a tension that communicated itself so articulately to Jean. Something was happening here, and though she was not entirely sure just what that something was, she was beginning to suspect that it might be the sort of thing that might just change her life forever.

He lifted his chin, took a deep breath, and then, maddeningly, he shook his head.

"Actually, do you know what? Let's...let's have a seat."

"Oh, for goodness sake," she thought, frustration rising as he continued to faff about, fidgeting, awkward, dawdling rather than getting right to the point. It was unbearable, really, sitting suspended in this moment with Lucien looking at her as if he were frightened of her. She narrowed her eyes at him, truly worried by this display and yet entirely uncertain as to what it was he wanted, needed from her in this moment.

But then, oh then, he reached into his pocket, and all of her fears were turned to wild, relentless joy in a moment.

"Jean," he said, holding out a little black and opening it carefully, "this was my mother's ring."
She drew in a sharp gasp, his name escaping her before she could stop it, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

Of course she had hoped, every day since he'd chased down her bus in the street, that this moment might come. She had hoped when he kissed her, when he held her, when he smiled at her, that one day, one day soon, he might ask her the question she knew was only seconds away from tumbling out of his stammering mouth. Little Elizabeth had called her Mrs. Blake, had asked her if she loved him, and though Jean had demurred in the moment her heart had known the answer. Yes, she loved him, loved his broad shoulders and his strong hands and his soft lips, loved his gentle heart, his unpredictable nature, loved the way he made her feel beautiful, and free, in a way she had not done since she was a girl. She loved his intellect, his passion, his hopefulness, loved him when he was furious and when he was laid low by grief, loved him in her own quiet, steady way, every moment of every day. The thought of being his wife left her feeling at once both deliriously happy and terribly baffled; they were so different, the pair of them, but they had already been living together for ages now, and they had come to understand one another, come to be comfortable with one another, and she had faith that if only they were brave, and kind, and honest with one another, they could be quite content, together.

But before they could start out on that adventure he would have to ask her, properly, and to that end he had found his mother's ring, that beautiful, sparkling ring he offered to her now with trembling hands. If Jean's own mind had not been racing, if she had not been tossing and turning on the swell of her rising emotion, her hope, her fear, her desperate love of him, she might have smiled, might have taken stock of the details of that beautiful ring. As it was, she had eyes only for Lucien, his trembling hands, the hope in his eyes, the neat line of his beard, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. For an instant she drank in the sight of him, this man to whom she was so inextricably linked already, this handsome, terrible man who had reminded her what it was to feel desire, to love, to dream.

"And I would very much like," he started to say, but before he could finish that sentence, before he could speak the words that would loose her heart in earnest and set their feet upon the path to joining their lives together, there came a most unwelcome knock upon the door.

"Oh," he said, trying to offer her a reassuring smile though Jean could see that he was just as disappointed, just as distressed by this sudden interruption as was she. "That's probably Charlie. Hold that thought. I'll be right back."

And with those words he left her.

Anxious, tense, boiling over with excitement and with hope and with longing she rose to her feet, pulled up right by sheer nervous energy. She did not pace, did not smile, did not go racing off after him; she stood very still, as if the slightest movement on her part might shatter this precious moment like a vase upon a marble floor. Lucien had left the ring on the coffee table, but she did not dare pick it up, examine it for herself, not now, not yet, when he had not properly offered it to her, when they remained trapped in a terrible sort of purgatory.

For a moment she remained there, alone, staring at that box, taking this opportunity to assess the state of her own fragile heart.

*Is this what I want?* She asked herself.

*To be his wife, to bear his name, to sleep in his bed, to claim this house, this life, as mine, truly? To hold him, to touch him, to be a part of his world, forever, irreversibly? To tie our fates together, never to be torn asunder?*
It was a heavy thing he was planning to ask of her, something she never would have considered just a year before. And yet, over all the days and weeks of their time together he had shown himself to her, had given her a glimpse of a life free from the constraints that had bound her almost from the moment of her birth, a life of dancing in the sitting room and dashing through crime scenes, quiet dinners and expensive presents and beautiful trips, a life full of so much more than she had ever dreamed herself worthy of. A life he wanted to give to her. A life of love, companionship, a life without the loneliness that had dogged her steps every day since she'd learned of Christopher's death.

*Is this what I want?*

*There is nothing I want more.*

"There's a plate on the table for you, Charlie," she heard Lucien say. The lad did not have a key to the house as yet, and Lucien must have locked the door earlier in the evening, hence the interruption. She could not be cross with the boy, however, for she would much rather he interrupt them in the manner that he had, rather than come walking into the sitting room to witness the scene for himself.

*That's the trouble with boarders,* she thought wryly. *There's never any privacy.*

"Mrs. Beazley has already gone up to bed," Lucien continued, and her brow furrowed in confusion, for Lucien knew she had done no such thing. "And I think I'm going to do the same. So unless there's anything else you need…"

They did not speak, either of them, until he had led her into his bedroom and closed the door firmly behind them. She was a vision, neat breasts heaving with each of her unsteady breaths, grey eyes wide and and bright and stained with tears, her back straight as she leaned against the door for support, her hand clutching his own fiercely. Somehow, strange though it was to contemplate, he felt more sure of himself now than he had done as he sat beside her on the sofa. She knew, now, what it was he wanted to ask of her, and she had not shied away, had not chided him, had not spurned him, had instead followed him into this place, no matter the potential for scandal inherent in her standing in his bedroom after dark. Having been almost denied the opportunity to propose to her he now knew, without a doubt, that there was nothing he wanted more, and it seemed to him that Jean was as fixed in her purpose as was he.

"Jean," he breathed her name, all of his nerves, his anxiety, his crippling self-doubt flooding out of his body in that soft exhale until all that was left was Jean, steadfast, true, more beautiful than words could say. With their hands still linked he leaned forward until his forehead was resting against hers, gently, his right hand wrapped tight around the little box that contained the sum total of all his hopes and dreams for their future. She pressed against him, warm skin and shaky breaths and the faint, lingering scent of her perfume calming him, reassuring him, giving him the confidence he so lacked in this moment. She was everything to him, and he could not bear the thought of a life without her in it. Her response to him made him bold, and at last, he found the words.
"I love you," he told her. "And I would like, very much, to ask you to be my wife."

It was not the most elegant of proposals. He had not dropped to his knee before her, had not swept her off her feet, had not composed a flowery speech for her benefit. And yet, somehow, he felt that it was right, felt that Jean would not have approved of anything other than this, his honest devotion, his hand in hers, his heart open and presented to her along with every bit of trust he possessed.

Beneath him she was trembling, his beautiful love. He knew what it was he was asking her, knew what this meant to both of them. They had done this dance before, with other people; they both knew the delirious bliss of love and the howling agony of loss, and now he was asking her to take a monumental risk, to lay their hearts on the line knowing that at any moment they could be plunged into such darkness again. To Lucien's mind it was a risk worth taking, if only for the joy of her skin beneath his fingertips, her lips against his neck, her sure and steady presence beside him, for all the rest of his days. He could only hope that Jean agreed.

"Well," she said in a shaky voice. "Ask me, then."

He laughed, or at least he tried to, though the sound that left him more closely resembled a sob. How like Jean, his clever girl; she had heard his words, and she had accepted him, he was sure, though a tear was sliding down the curve of her pale cheek, and now, in this moment of relief and joy she was teasing him. He wanted to kiss her, wanted to gather her into his arms and spin her around in circle propelled by his joyous love of her, but she was right. He would have to ask.

"Jean," he said again, her name the most beautiful word he had ever heard. "Will you marry me, my darling?"

"Yes," she answered at once, so quickly that he laughed again, and placed a gentle kiss against her cheek. "Yes, Lucien."

He wanted to do more than kiss her cheek, but there was a certain procedure to be observed, and so he withdrew the little ring, tossing the box carelessly aside and taking hold of Jean's left hand. Another tear had escaped her, now, along with a breathy sigh as he slipped the ring onto her finger, where it fit so beautifully, sparkling against her delicate skin.

"Oh, Lucien," she breathed, and he smiled, and kissed the back of her hand. He had done it, somehow, had found the courage and the strength to open his arms to her and she had stepped into them so willingly, so wholeheartedly, that he was left in awe of her, buzzing with an effervescent sort of joy, more alive and more content than he could recall having ever been before.

"It fits so perfectly," she mused as she raised her hand to cradle his cheek and in the process took a proper look at her ring for the first time. "How did you know?"

"Yes, well," he muttered, turning his head to kiss her palm and hoping to distract her from his foray into larceny earlier in the month. "I have my ways."

Her eyes widened, her brow arched, and he knew before she spoke that she had put it together, his clever, beautiful Jean.

"You took my ring," she said, her soft smile taking the sting out of the accusation, her thumb tracing the line of his beard as still she blessed him with the softness of her hand against his cheek.

"Are you very cross with me?" He tried to sound contrite, but it was difficult, in this moment, to hide the depth of his pleasure.

Her expression softened as her hand slipped around to the back of his neck, her eyes darkening with
intent. Already he could feel himself falling beneath her spell, giving into the pull of gravity that tugged between them, threatened to pull him under the waves of his longing for her. Slowly, he lowered his head, even as she lifted herself up onto her toes to meet him.

"No," she whispered, her breath washing warm and sweet across his lips.

"Good," he told her. And then, oh then, he closed the space between them and covered her lips with his own, felt the taste of her blooming on the tip of his tongue and rejoiced as she sighed and melted in his embrace. Somehow, miraculously, he had done it, and now they were at last of one mind, certain in their purpose and in their love for one another, stepping out into the unknown of their future together, their faith in one another and in their love giving them wings.
Jean lay very still, her limbs heavy and loose, her whole body warm and soft, her heart more joyful, more content than it had been in months, in years, in a decade. Beside her, beneath her, Lucien slept, one of his arms flung across her bare back, his heartbeat steady and comforting in her ear as she rested with her head pillowed on his chest. The little diamond ring sparkled on her finger, drawing her attention to her hand where it lay pressed against his golden skin.

For a time she simply stared at that ring, counting the little stones, following their winding pattern, thinking how strange, how wonderful, how lovely it was to be in this place, with his arms around her, his ring on her finger, his love and his joy filling her entire being. Perhaps it was foolish, the way she had tumbled into his bed, allowed his heated, hungry kisses and wandering hands to relieve her of her good sense, to catapult her into recklessness, and yet she had not so much fallen into this transgression as she had leapt, with arms wide open, knowing it was folly and yet winding her fingers through his hair and pressing her body closer to his, gasping, grinning, wild and free. In the end there had been no other choice, not for her, not for a heart that yearned to be seen, to be known, to be held, to be loved. They were already in his room and the bed was just there and he loved her and she had wanted, oh how she had wanted, every moment of every day since she first met him. Even when she hated him, even when he frightened her, even when every word they spoke to one another was thinly veiled criticism she had fallen asleep to the staccato rhythm of her wanting heart and the vision of those broad hands ghosting over her skin. She had wanted him when they were no more than strangers, and that want had grown, shifted, changed into a longing so acute that not even her closely held faith in the tenents of her church was so sufficient to stay her hand.

And oh, but Lucien had surpassed her every expectation, had been tender and strong and worshipful, had whispered love across her skin, had traced the shape of her with trembling, reverent hands, had coaxed her to a confidence and a desire she had not felt in so very long that before this night she had been certain she never would again. He had reminded her, with every powerful, certain movement of his body, why she had once been young and foolish enough to give herself to Christopher before they were ever properly wed, why the kitchen of their farmhouse had borne witness to a thousand silly, eager embraces, why the kitchen of Lucien's home had featured so vividly, so frequently in her dreams. He had reminded her, with every gentle, awestruck word that spilled out of his reckless mouth what it was to feel desired, needed, alive. And she could not bring herself to regret it, not now, not yet, when her legs were still shaky as a newborn colt's and her lips were still curved into that self-satisfied smile.

Later, she would regret. Later she would kneel by her bed with her rosary wound round her fingers and whisper out her contrition. Later she would confess, cheeks flaming, to Father Emory, and perform the penance he gave her. Later she would lie warm in her bath and feel the shiver of fear that twisted through her body as she recalled the vengeful god of her youth, the one who had struck her down one fine summer day, the one who had stolen her dreams as payment for her sins, the one who had reminded her that his word was law, no matter the desires of her heart. Later she might keep her eyes downcast and her hands to herself, would let fear keep her from repeating such delicious mistakes.

But not now, not yet. For this moment was too beautiful, too full of love and the steady intimacy she had so dearly longed for, and she would not spoil it with thoughts of grief and retribution and blood splashing across a worn wooden floor. In this moment she was determined to feel only love, and hope for a future that now looked so much brighter than it had done just a day before.
She had known, for quite some time, that Lucien harbored some affection for her. When he had gone tearing off after her the day she made to leave for Adelaide he had proven to her that what he felt for her was love, in truth. And in the weeks since her return he had, at every turn, showered her with that love. Always before he had been a tactile sort of person, his hand trailing fondly across the small of her back, squeezing her shoulder, fingertips brushing the back of her hand, but those casual almost-touches had changed, since Adelaide. He was deliberate, now, catching hold of her waist, not fleeting but maintaining the contact, drawing her to him, planting a kiss against the corner of her mouth. Dancing with her in the sitting room in the evenings, the wireless playing softly, their bodies pressed close together, hearts beating in time to the music. He had made no demands of her, had not pushed her, had not backed her against the kitchen sink and pressed his advances; he had simply opened himself up to her, created little moments for them to steal a taste of one another, and the result was an intoxicating churning deep in Jean's belly, an ache only he could sate.

And then he had; oh, but he had. Jean blushed to think of it now, to see the mark of her teeth against his chest where her mouth had latched onto him, desperate to stifle the sound of her pleasure as his arms bound her in place above him, as his hips drove up into her, as all conscious thought left her and all that remained was him. She blushed to think of it now, to see the mark of his lips against the curve of her breast where his mouth had taken up residence while his fingers plunged into her slick heat, sent her careening off into bliss. She blushed to think of it now, to think of all the secrets of her deepest self she had so easily shared with him, without a second thought, without a doubt. He had seen her, every inch, every imperfection, and declared her beautiful, so beautiful, my beautiful Jean. She had seen him, every inch, every scar, had run her fingertips over the ruins of his back and whispered you're safe, you're safe, my brave love.

This was not the proper way for a respectable widowed housekeeper to behave, ring or no. This was not the proper way for a good Catholic lady, for a mother of two grown sons, for an upstanding woman to behave, and yet she had done it just the same, had reveled in it, had loved every moment of her sin, had panted more, more, more, god, yes against her lover's skin like some wild, brazen thing. Perhaps all Lucien had done, in holding her close, in sheltering her beneath his own bedsheets, was to reveal her for the wanton creature she was, the hungry, wide-eyed girl she had always been. She had tried, god but she had tried, to be good, to be right, to follow the rules of her church, her priest, her family, to be selfless, to be kind, to encourage others to do the same. She had tried, god but she had tried, to silence the yearning of her heart, to ignore her bitter disappointments, her loneliness, to find solace in confession and a whispered Hail Mary and the icons of the saints and the companionship of the sewing circle ladies. She had tried, and then Lucien had come to her, and he had with warm eyes and a mischievous smile made her question all the years of effort she had put in, made her wonder if perhaps it wouldn't be best to simply let her heart do what it would, and forget the rest. He had had made her wonder, that brilliant, handsome man, if it wouldn't be better to simply let herself go free.

His hand twitched against her back, a soft, rumbling sound coming up from the depths of his consciousness as he slowly drew himself up out of dreams. It was late, terribly late, and much as she might like to spend the night just like this, breathing in the scent of his skin, warm and safe in the sanctuary of his arms, Jean knew she needed to leave him. Not just for the sake of Charlie's good opinion of her, but for the sake of her own soul; they were not married, not yet, had only been engaged a bare few hours, and she needed some time to herself, to plan, to think. Whatever passions he may have loosed within her he had not transported her to a different life, and there were considerations to take into account. Talk would spread like a brushfire, when it became known that they were engaged and yet living together. Father Emory might not consent to perform their marriage if it appeared they were living in sin, and Jean could not bear the thought of being married outside the church. Besides the damage it might do to her own sterling reputation she worried for Lucien, for the future of his practice, for his position as police surgeon, should it become common knowledge.
that he was in fact a lech. None of this would matter to him, she knew, and so it would fall to her to find a way to protect them both, at least until they were properly wed. And there was the matter of their children, her two boys and Lucien's Li, who would need to be informed gently, and soon, of their intentions. Christopher would be pleased, she thought, for he had seemed to accept Lucien from the very beginning, whereas Jack had been rather more disdainful of the good doctor and his role in Jean's life. She had no notion of what Li might think, hidden as she was on the other side of the world, and she worried about that, as well, wondered about what sort of grief might lie in wait for Lucien should his daughter respond to news of his engagement with disdain.

Lucien's fingertips drummed against her spine and despite those niggling worries she smiled, turning her head to press a gentle kiss to his chest.

"Good morning," he said in a voice gruff from sleep, and Jean laughed, just a little.

"Silly man," she chided him. "It's not morning. Not for a while yet."

"Even better," he answered playfully, and before Jean could stop it he had rolled her smoothly beneath him, covering her with his bulk, smiling down at her so brilliantly that she could not bring herself to reprimand him, could only reach out and smooth her palm against his cheek, ruffling his beard with her fingertips.

"We're going to get married, Jean," he said, his tone so full of wonder, and as she smiled up at him he bowed his head, and kissed the tip of her nose.

"Yes," she sighed. "But not today. I can't stay here, Lucien."

To his credit he did not pout, or try to change her mind. "I know," he said. "I know, my darling."

She wanted to stay, and so she was grateful to him for not insisting; she wasn't entirely sure she possessed the strength to leave him, should he beg her to remain. His bed was warm and soft, and he was so handsome, and kind, so full of joy. She decided to linger, just for a moment, running her toes against the backs of his calves and delighting in the way he trembled against her in response.

"What do we do next?" he asked her, and her heart sang, to see once again this evidence of his regard for. Always he turned to her, when he was lost, in need of assistance, when the tangle of his own thoughts proved impossible to unwind, and always she was there for him, ready and willing to help him through it. The way that he relied upon her, the way that he needed her for more than just this tantalizing brush of skin on skin, convinced her more than anything that theirs was a marriage that could work, built on love and trust and a strange sort of partnership that she enjoyed, very much.

"Well," she said, smoothing her hand over his wild hair, gone curly and soft beneath her fingertips, "first I'm going to go upstairs and try to get some sleep. And then tomorrow, we're going to wake up, and we're going to go to work like we always do. We'll talk to our children, and we'll talk to Father Emory, and we'll decide on a date. And then..." and then there would be flowers, and dresses, and suits, and invitations, and a whole litany of little details to be worked out. She would need to speak to her sister Eadie and to Danny - who no doubt would be delighted by the prospect of her marrying Lucien and write to Mattie. She would need to talk to Lucien about his expectations, and determine what sort of wedding would suit both their sensibilities. She would need to work out her living arrangements, decide whether to stay or find lodging elsewhere in town. They would need to decide whether to run an announcement in the paper, or whether to just let people see the ring upon her finger and whisper amongst themselves. Would they take a honeymoon trip? Where? For how long? The list went on and on, and already she felt almost dizzy.

Perhaps Lucien could sense her sudden distress for he leaned towards her then, and kissed her
"We don't have to decide everything right this moment," he whispered against her lips, and she smiled, thinking how well he knew her and her penchant for planning, her need to control her circumstances, thinking how well they balanced one another, as she encouraged him to be more circumspect and he reminded her how to live in the moment.

"No," she agreed, lifting her chin and giving him one last kiss. "But I do need to go."

"All right," he said, flopping over onto his back somewhat dramatically. The sheets were tangled round his waist but the broad expanse of his chest, the thick, corded muscles that bound his arms were on full display, and she blushed, and he grinned at her roguishly as she took in the sight of him, this glorious man who would be her husband.

"Go on, then," he said, and despite herself she smiled.

"Insufferable man," she chided him, swatting at his belly for good measure before she rolled out of bed, casting about in search of her clothes with the weight of his gaze heavy upon her back. Yes, there was much to be done, but for now she was determined just to enjoy this, to enjoy him, to bask in the knowledge that they loved one another, that they had a lifetime together to look forward to.

When at last she slipped up the stairs on silent feet, she was grinning fit to burst, the sparkle of Lucien's mother's ring giving her all the reassurance she needed. They were going to be all right.
Chapter 3

Jean awoke the moment the first light of dawn stole slowly through the curtains of her bedroom windows, though she lingered for a time beneath her crisp white sheets, stretching catlike and delighted as she took stock of her new reality. Had it not been for the little ring sparkling upon her finger and the old familiar ache between her thighs she might have thought the whole night had been no more than a blessed, beautiful dream, but as it was her body reminded her of that truth that seemed so strange to her conscious mind; Lucien had proposed, she had accepted, and they had celebrated in grand fashion.

It was a lovely thing, she decided, being engaged to Lucien Blake. It was a lovely thing to know that her feelings for him, however complex, however inconvenient, were returned to her in kind, to know that soon she would take his name and his hand and her place beside him. It was a lovely thing, to know that the dreams she harbored for her future might soon become a reality. In her joy and her relief it seemed to Jean that this was quite the most beautiful morning she could recall having experienced for quite some time.

There was much to be done, but they had time, time enough to sort through the details, time enough to steal a few kisses here and there, time enough to acquaint themselves with the idea of spending their lives together; they had all the time in the world, and so when Jean finally rose to face the day she was not troubled by the momentary distress that had fallen upon her the night before. Lucien was right; they did not have to decide everything all at once. They could take their time, and Jean was quite looking forward to every moment of their engagement.

Though, she thought with a crimson blush as she slipped into her undergarments, hiding the purpling mark of Lucien's mouth against the curve of her breast, they would have to discuss one matter rather urgently. As beautiful, as breathtaking, as utterly perfect as it had been to find shelter with in the circle of his arms, Jean knew that she had been reckless, the night before, and that she could ill afford to make such a misstep again. There would be talk, once they announced their engagement, and it would be hard enough to keep her chin held high without willfully committing the exact sin she stood accused of. It didn't bear thinking about, what might happen should her transgression be discovered, should Father Emory decline to marry them in the church. And there were other concerns as well, beyond her reputation. Jean had been a devout Catholic all her life, and she held firmly to the tenets of her faith. It was not just that the church did not allow fornication; it was that such flagrant disregard for the teachings of her Bible was wrong, pure and simple. And she had learned long ago that those who willfully committed wrongs would see the fruits of their misdeeds.

She shivered as she slipped into one of her favorite linen dresses, feeling as if a cloud had fallen over this beautiful morning. For a moment she stood staring out the window at the swirling fog, slowly burning off beneath the weak rays of the early morning sun, fingertips pressed to her lips as a single worry blossomed like a weed in the garden of her contentment. She was on track to begin her second marriage just as she had begun her first, but such a grievous thing must not be allowed to come to pass. She and Christopher had been young, so very young, and though they had loved one another dearly, her unexpected pregnancy had forced them into marriage long before either of them were ready. They had tried, so very hard, to do the right thing, to build a home together, but it seemed they were always one step behind, struggling to catch up, playing at being adults. There was never enough money, and they bickered rather a lot, those first few months - though each argument ended in the most pleasurable sort of reconciliation - and just when they finally felt as if they had found their footing, when Jean's belly was big with child and the nursery was all fixed up and for once things were going right, blood and pain had come for them, had stolen their happiness, had left them both in darkness. She had wept for days, and Christopher had been distant as the moon. It was not
until she'd found her way to Sacred Heart, until she'd unburdened herself to Father Morton and become the most faithful of penitents, that she and Christopher found their way back to one another. She had repented, and lived a life according to the Church's decree, and they had been blessed with two healthy children and a home that rang with laughter, for however brief a time.

No, it would not do to disregard the will of God, particularly now, now that she had learned that cruel lesson, now that she was so much older, and so much wiser. Lucien's love of her was a beautiful thing, and what they had done together the night before had been beautiful, too, but it could not be repeated, not until they had said the words and had their marriage blessed by a priest.

Thus sure of her purpose she made her way downstairs to start the day, some of her earlier good humor returning. They would be circumspect and chaste, from now on, and they would grow together, in love and happiness, until the day came when they would finally be wed. And then, oh then, she would love him like she had never loved another living soul.

Lucien woke to the faint scent of Jean on his pillows, and smiled to himself in the darkness. For days, for weeks he had been waiting for the right moment to ask her, and it would seem that he had succeeded, for he could still feel the warmth of her skin against his own, could still recall so clearly every moment of the time she'd spent in his bed, could still hear the sound of her voice whispering, yes, Lucien, and he rejoiced because of it.

He was not foolish enough to believe that Jean would allow him a second showing before the wedding; she had her convictions, and he loved her for them, and would not presume to ask of her anything she was not willing to give. He could content himself with spending a few months in blissful hunger, knowing the taste of her and yet denying himself, for in the end, he knew, the reward would be all the sweeter for the months of self-denial that had preceded it. He would do anything she asked of him, would do whatever was required to sustain this fledgling commitment they had made to one another, and though he might long for her with every bone in his body, he would be content with no more than a kiss and the brush of her fingertips, until the time came when he could claim her, wholly, completely, forever.

Outside his bedroom door he could hear her bustling about, humming to herself as she made her way to the kitchen, and so he hastened to dress, tugging on shirt and trousers and neglecting the rest. With the buttons undone at his collar and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows he left his room behind, walking on bare feet as he followed the siren song of his beloved's voice, soft and radiant as she worked.

In the kitchen doorway he paused and simply drank in the sight of her, his beautiful Jean. She was wearing a simple dress, one she favored on those days when her work would keep her confined to the house, a bit looser than her usual skirt and blouse, the fabric soft and worn. In point of fact, he thought as he gazed at her, she had been wearing that selfsame dress in the sunroom a few days before, when he had clasped her arms in his hands, bowed his head to kiss her, been interrupted by the blasted telephone. And as he looked at her now he wanted nothing more than to right that wrong, to bestow upon her the sort of kiss she should have received the last time she'd worn that dress. It was early, yet, and there were no patients on his schedule, and, he hoped, no murders to be solved. He would go to her, his Jean, and enjoy her company uninterrupted.

She sensed him coming, somehow, despite his attempts at stealth, and turned away from the stove with a gentle smile upon her face. The light of her love for him shone in her glorious eyes, and in that moment he was certain that he had never seen anything more beautiful than her, his darling Jean.

"Good morning, Lucien," she said, her cheeks coloring faintly as he continued his approach. She was proud, his Jean, and strong, and their newfound closeness did not make her stammer or look
away; she held his gaze, delighted and overcome, and he could not stop himself. The moment he reached her he caught her hips in his hands, drew her body flush against him.

"A bloody good morning," he answered, and he swallowed the sound of her laughter with his own gentle kiss.

It was Jean's habit, when he kissed her like this, to catch his cheek in her hand, to smooth her palm against his skin, to trace the line of his beard with her thumb, and his heart purred in his chest like some great satisfied cat as she held him now. Though he could not see her bright red fingernails against his own ruddy skin he could feel the cool band of her ring, and he could not stop himself from pressing still closer to her, walking them back until they reached the counter. Jean leaned against it for support, arching into his embrace, her tongue sliding against his own as hot, as hungry, as eager as it had been the night before, and he groaned against her lips, all thoughts of decorum and chastity disappearing beneath the onslaught of his regard for her.

They were saved from their own raging desires by the sound of an uncomfortable cough echoing out behind them. Jean squeaked like a frightened animal and shoved him away with both hands against his chest. Still enamored by the beauty of his new fiance and the glorious light of this new morning Lucien just grinned and turned away from her to face their somewhat astonished-looking boarder.

"Charlie!" he said in a booming voice. "Good morning. Come and have some tea."

"I can come back later," Charlie said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder and making as if to leave. "If now is...a bad time."

Lucien chanced a glance at his beloved Jean, who seemed equal parts chagrined and mortified at having been discovered snogging him while the morning's breakfast lay utterly forgotten behind her, and suddenly the whole thing was so very lovely that Lucien could do nothing but laugh.

"It's quite all right, Charlie," he said. He reached out and snaked one arm around Jean's waist, drawing her to his side as the young man still lingered in the doorway, looking at him as if he had quite suddenly gone mad. Beside him Jean was tense, her whole body rigid, and he could feel her ire growing, and so he kissed her cheek, softly. "He was bound to find out anyway, my darling," Lucien told her. "Why not now?"

For a moment fear gripped him, as Jean leveled him with an intense stare and one delicately arched eyebrow. They had wanted to take their time about it, informing all the right people in the proper order, wanted to enjoy their little secret, but Charlie lived with them, took supper with them in the evenings, was every bit as much a part of their family as his nephew Danny, and it seemed to Lucien that there was no harm in letting the lad in on their secret. Whether or not Jean agreed remained to be seen.

But then she sighed, and buried her face against his chest in defeat. She grumbled unintelligibly against him for a moment, and then she raised her head to face their now completely befuddled boarder.

"Charlie," she said with a defiant tilt of her chin. "Lucien has asked me to marry him, and I have agreed."

Lucien laughed again, at the way Charlie's mouth fell open and his eyes went wide with shock for a moment. He tightened his grip on Jean's hip, holding her close to him, and then Charlie was laughing, too.

"Well, then," he said, crossing the kitchen to join them in a moment. As he did Jean pulled away
from Lucien's side, and allowed Charlie to brush a kiss against her cheek. "Congratulations," Charlie said, and his voice was so very earnest that Lucien knew he meant it wholeheartedly. He beamed at them, Jean looking a bit misty-eyed and out of sorts, Charlie looking rather as if Christmas had come early. "Really," Charlie continued, "that's wonderful."

"Yes, well, I rather think so, too," Lucien told him.

After a quick cup of tea and a bite of toast Charlie bolted from the table, and Lucien and Jean lingered together over their breakfast, his hand resting against her thigh, his smile so bright she could not help but return it. He had been right, of course, to tell Charlie right away; the poor boy deserved to know how things had changed, how things were going to change, so that he might be prepared, whatever came next. Jean quite enjoyed having him around, and she hoped that news of the engagement would not inspire him to strike out on his own at once; on the one hand, he made a rather convenient chaperone should anyone take offense at Jean living in the same house as her fiancé, and on the other, she genuinely enjoyed having him around. It had been so long, since her boys left home, and she liked having a young man, one just about Christopher's age, to fuss over. The house felt more like home, with a young person in it. She missed Mattie fiercely, but she cared for Charlie, too, and she had been delighted by his response to her news.

"I think I'd quite like to ring Matthew today," Lucien told her softly as they picked at their food and grinned at one another. "I thought perhaps our good news might cheer him up."

Matthew was still in Melbourne, recovering from his grievous injury, and she knew that Lucien worried for his friend. She rather thought he had it right; Matthew needed something to smile about, and she hoped that some of Lucien's happiness would communicate itself to Matthew.

"That's a good idea," she told him. "I want to ring Christopher, this afternoon. I've no idea how to reach Jack, but he might be able to help me track him down."

Quite spontaneously, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Lucien lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss against her skin, silently communicating his support to her, for he knew well the troubles her two boys had brought to her, each in their own way. "Will you write to Li?" she asked him.

"I've already started," he confessed. "After you left me last night I couldn't sleep, and so I thought I might as well make myself useful. I'll finish the letter and post it today."

That's that settled, then, Jean thought. They would tell Matthew Lawson and their children. It seemed more than enough for one day, given that Jean had plans for work around the house and supper would need seeing to; the rest could wait another day. After all, they had all the time in the world.

Much as she might have liked to continue sitting there with Lucien all day, her hands began to itch for something to do. Idleness did not come easily to Jean, and so she slipped to her feet, pressing a gentle kiss to the corner of his pouting lips just because she could, because he was there, because they were going to be married. Her heart was singing, as she gathered up the dishes, as Lucien watched her with an expression caught somewhere between bemusement and elation. His happiness at her acceptance had filled her with an impossible, wild joy; how easy it seemed, to be with him like this, to be open with their affections, now that they had made their desires known to one another. How right it seemed, to go about the business of her day with him close at hand. Their lives had traced a long and winding path to bring them to this point, and Jean found herself overwhelmed with a sort of gratitude, to think that every heartache, every grief, had ultimately resulted in this most wonderful bliss.
Lucien would not be content to watch her, it seemed, for he sidled up behind her as she set about washing the dishes, his body slotting into place along her back, his lips taking up residence along the curve of her neck.

"Do you know," he murmured against her skin, "how beautiful you are? How happy you've made me?"

She hummed; yes, she knew, for he had made her quite happy, as well.

With deft hands he caught hold of her hips and spun her around; a sound that was very nearly a squeal escaped her at this reminder of just how strong, how capable he could be, but then his lips were on hers again and her arms were wrapping around his neck and nothing else seemed to matter. Not the sound of the front door, as Charlie made his way out into the morning, or the water dripping from her hands to soak the back of Lucien's shirt. All that mattered was this, the heat, the joy, the gentle wonder of Lucien kissing her as if she were the most precious thing he'd ever seen.

But then, for the second time that morning, they were interrupted by the sound of a smug little cough.

Lucien whirled away from her, and she raised a hand to her lips, trying not groan aloud at the sight of Frank Carlyle, watching them both with a wide, knowing grin.

"Good morning, Doctor Blake," he said. "Mrs. Beazley."

"It is a bloody wonderful morning, Frank," Lucien told him jovially. "What can I do for you?"

Jean turned her attention back to the sink, trying to hide her flaming cheeks. She didn't know very much about Frank Carlyle; Lucien seemed to like him, and he was new in town, and he did not seem the sort who would go gossiping about what he'd seen to everyone he met, but still, she was somewhat ashamed at having been caught out by him. She could only hope he would be kind, and not make a fuss about it.

"I'm afraid you're needed at the track," Frank told him. "There's been an incident."

"Right," Lucien answered. "Well then, I'll just...er, change my shirt, shall I?" Jean grinned, thinking of her wet hands pressed against his shoulders. "Frank, why don't you come in? Perhaps Mrs. Beazley could fix you something to eat while you wait."

"That would be lovely, Lucien, thank you," Frank answered in a gently mocking tone, for in truth Lucien's words had been almost painfully formal. In defiance of the awkward tension that had begun to settle on her shoulders Jean turned, and faced them both with a smile fixed firmly in place, but before she could say a word Lucien departed, all thoughts of their quiet morning together forgotten in the face of this new mystery.

"Come and have a seat, Superintendent," she said, and at her words Frank gave her a little nod. "There's a bit of toast and some sausage left, if you're hungry."

"Thank you, Mrs. Beazley," he said politely, taking a seat in the chair Lucien had only just recently vacated. As Jean plated up his breakfast she bit her lip, warrying with herself; Frank Carlyle wasn't on the list of people she'd wanted to tell right away, but given what he'd seen, she felt compelled to tell him the truth, lest he get the wrong idea about her, and Lucien, and their relationship. Yes, she decided, it would be for the best to clear the air at once.

"That's Jean to you, Superintendent," she said as she placed his food in front of him. "And I would like for you to know, Lucien has proposed." She held up her hand so that Frank could see her little ring, sparkling against her finger.
His answering smile was surprisingly soft, shockingly kind. No, she did not know him well, but as he looked at her now she rather got the feeling that he could come to be a friend, to both her and Lucien.

"Congratulations," he said around a mouthful of toast. "It's about time."

Jean just smiled and turned back to the breakfast dishes, humming softly to herself as the morning carried on. Yes, she thought, it was about bloody time.
Six weeks later…

Jean was trembling as she knelt in the loo, trying not to make a sound. The house was all in darkness, Charlie and Lucien fast asleep, and it would not do to disturb them, to draw attention to Jean and her current distress. She had long since emptied the contents of her stomach, but she lingered, worried that perhaps this sickness had not run its course, worried about the potential for discovery whenever she did finally leave that little room.

She'd been out of sorts all day; her thoughts had drifted, little boats lost on currents she could not master, and her body seemed to find itself in a state of revolt, her hands trembling, her stomach churning. Though she had made a fine supper she had not eaten a bite of it; Lucien had been concerned, at first, but her insistence that all was well had eventually won him over, and they had retreated to the sitting room for their usual after dinner drinks. Jean had forgone her sherry in favor of a cup of tea, hoping for some end to the tumult that gripped her. In the end, not even the tea had helped, and she had made her way to bed early, dropping a gentle kiss against her bemused fiance's cheek. And now she was here, shaking like a newborn colt, her stomach empty and her heart topful of fear.

There was something dreadfully, ominously familiar about the strangeness of this day. Some things, once experienced, were not easily forgotten, no matter how much time passed, some knowledge so deeply ingrained it lingered in the very fibers of her being, dormant, waiting for a moment like this to return to the forefront of her consciousness and strike her down.

You can't stay here all night, she told herself sternly. The sickness seemed to have passed, for now, and in its wake it left a ravenous hunger. She didn't dare make her way downstairs for a snack, however, frightened that her rummaging around in the kitchen would wake Lucien.

And so she rose, slowly, clutching her faded pink robe tight to her body as she swayed on the spot, a little light-headed, her pulse racing. One step at a time she slipped away, leaving the door open a crack rather than risk making any sound as she closed it, passing through the corridor silent as a shadow until she was back in the comforts of her own bedroom.

This was Jean's second-favorite room in the house. Her favorite, of course, was the sunroom, with its bright flowers so carefully tended by her own loving hands, with its nice soft sofa and low tables where she so often sat and sipped her tea in the late afternoon sunshine. From the moment she first arrived in this house, the sunroom had been her sanctuary; it had been utterly devoid of life when she arrived, but Thomas had graciously allowed her free rein there, and it had become her own blossoming kingdom. But she loved her little bedroom at the top of the stairs as well, with its large, beautiful window overlooking the garden, its soft wallpaper, the furniture she'd brought with her from the farmhouse, the old photographs tucked away in a little box under the bed. Anyone could wander in and out of the sunroom as they pleased, but the bedroom was hers, unequivocally, and it was her right to determine who could and could not enter there. It was full of her belongings, the gentle scent of her perfume, the accoutrements of a small life gathered together and neatly tended. It was safe.

Only it did not feel very safe just now. This room, where she had spent so many years of her life,
would not be hers for very much longer. Oh, they had not set a date for the wedding, had not even discussed it, but she could feel it looming like some great ticking clock hanging just over her head. The walls of her room closed in around her, left her feeling vaguely suffocated, even as she could feel the sanctuary of this place slipping away from her. It was an unsettling sort of sensation.

But the silence and the darkness and the familiarity of her surroundings slowly calmed her racing heart, and she sank down onto the bench in front of her dressing table, thinking very hard.

First, she took stock of the way she’d felt for the last few changes, the subtle, shifting signs that something was, if not wrong, at least...different. Taken individually, none of it was particularly serious, but as whole, it painted a very troubling picture. And then she took stock of the days, counting them off on her fingers, dread settling low in her gut. One day, perhaps, was nothing to blink at. Neither was two. Six days was strange, but not alarming. Fourteen days, though, a whole fortnight passed since the day she’d anticipated the arrival of her monthlies, and yet they had not come. Two weeks, and no sign of them. Before today, though Jean had taken note of the delay, she had attributed it to age; she would be forty-five, at her next birthday, and she assumed that perhaps she was approaching that time in her life when certain things would inevitably begin to change.

The sickness, though, gave her pause. Two weeks late, struck down by sudden illness after skipping a meal, only to have it pass as quickly as it had fallen upon her. Such circumstances had visited Jean in the past, three times. And each time, a baby had followed.

Startled by the ferocity of the fear that gripped her at that thought she lept to her feet, tearing her robe from her shoulders. Her lightweight pajamas soon followed; she felt feverish, trapped, clawing at some unseen oppression that weighed her down, left her drowning. Naked and gasping as if some ghostly hand had wrapped around her throat she spun, and stopped dead at the sight of her own body reflected back at her in the mirror.

Jean was not one given much to vanity or self-study; she set her hair and painted her nails and tailored her own clothes, but she did not agonize over her appearance. A family disposition towards slenderness coupled with deprivation - and later, hard-work and self-control - had blessed Jean with a fine figure, and she knew it, but she took no more pride in it than she did in her skills as a seamstress or her singing voice. This body had borne her children, and carried her through poverty and into comfort, remained strong and supple, if softer in some places than it had been in years past. All in all, her body sustained her, and she did not devote a great deal of time to thinking about it, but now she poured over every inch of herself in that mirror.

Those were the lips that had kissed Lucien so fiercely, more than once. Those were the arms that had held him, the breast where he had left the mark of his teeth, the stomach where he had pillowed his head and rested, after. Those were the thighs she’d wrapped around his hips, the calves that had slipped against his skin beneath the bedsheets, the toes she had dragged against the length of his trembling legs. She had loved him, with her whole body, with her whole heart, with every piece of her soul. Just once, she had given him the gift of her whole self, and now she was truly, deeply worried that she would pay for that generosity with her own damnation.

Idly she dragged her fingertips against the soft skin of her belly, thinking. Six weeks had passed; she’d spoken to young Christopher, who was surprised but delighted, and had tried and failed to reach Jack. She had not spoken to Eadie or Danny just yet, but Lucien had written to his Li, and eagerly awaited her response. Frank Carlyle had kept his silence, though he threw a sly grin her way whenever he saw her, and Matthew Lawson had proclaimed Lucien a lucky bastard. Six weeks, since Charlie had discovered the truth and begun contriving ways to stay out of the house so that they might have some solitude. Six weeks, since the night she’d spent in Lucien’s bed, when he had spilled inside her with such abandon that she had laughed, in the moment, pleased beyond measure.
by the desire she seemed to inspire in him. He had seemed as shocked by his performance as was she, but they had not discussed it again, as he slipped into dreams almost immediately after. Even with the intensity of his affections, however, Jean had given no more than a passing thought to potential consequences; everyone said it was all but impossible for a woman her age to find herself in the family way, and Jean's youngest child was twenty-two. It hardly seemed plausible, for her to become a mother again.

And yet.

There was the sickness, and the absence of her expected monthlies, and the trembling in her hands, the fuzzy, distracted nature of her thoughts, the ravenous hunger swirling through her stomach. She turned, studying herself in profile, but there were no visible signs she could discern of such calamity unfolding. Her stomach was rounder now than it had been when she was young and poor and hungry more often than not, but that gentle curve was hardly noticeable, even in profile, and seemed no different tonight than it had any night before. Her perfectly tailored skirts still fit her just fine, but she found little reassurance in that thought just now. If her suppositions were correct, if that beautiful night six weeks before had resulted in a little life now nestled inside her, she knew she could hardly expect to be showing so soon.

For all that she could not see it, the evidence seemed impossible to ignore. Too many things appeared to be working in tandem, proof of some greater force she could neither control nor deny.

A shiver raced up her spine and she reached for her robe, no longer feeling claustrophobic, but rather suffering from the sensation that the world, her life, everything was suddenly much too big, too unpredictable, for her to bear. Wrapped in the safety of her robe she curled up on top of her duvet, drawing her knees to her chest and closing her eyes.

Ordinarily when Jean found herself so troubled, so uncertain, she would kneel beside her bed, and whisper a prayer. Even if the answer to her problems did not immediately reveal itself, she always found comfort in laying her burdens before God, content that his will would prevail, and that she would choose to delight in it, whatever it might be. Now, however, tonight, even that usual reassurance seemed out of reach. How could she kneel, and pray for forgiveness when she had not confessed her sin, when she could not bring herself to repent for a transgression she had gloried in? She had loved every moment of the night she'd spent in Lucien's bed, had not regretted it, though she expected to. It felt...right, to be with him that way, and the little ring on her finger had bolstered her confidence, had told her that while she had violated the commandments of her church in this way for a second time, surely the circumstances were different enough to allow her some leniency. She wasn't some green girl, dallying with a handsome lad while she still lived beneath her parents' roof. She was a woman grown, and engaged, promised to Lucien and intending to see that promise through to the very end, certain that no force could stop their marriage, certain that she had made the right choice.

And yet.

She had formed a union not blessed by the church, and she recalled all too well how that had ended for her before. Blood, and pain, and grief, boundless grief, a grief that lingered, even now, two and a half decades later. Oh, time and the joy of her sons had dulled the sting of it, but sometimes she looked at Mattie and her friends and her heart ached, for a moment, thinking of all that could have been, all she was denied, as payment for her sins. From the moment it happened until the day he left her Christopher had been adamant that it wasn't her fault, that the loss of their daughter was not punishment, was no more than the cruel lash of nature running its course. He had held her while she wept, and run his fingers through her hair, and whispered words of love and comfort to her, all to no avail. Once Jean Beazley made up her mind, it was all but impossible to change it.
Would Lucien be the same now, she asked herself as she lay in the darkness. Would he tell her she was being too hard on herself, that she was assuming responsibility for forces beyond her control? Would he be delighted by this twist of fate, or devastated at the loss of the quiet, beautiful future he had envisioned for them? Lucien had promised to take her to Paris, for their honeymoon, promised they would walk hand-in-hand along the river, promised to take her to London to see Mattie, who was as good as their daughter for they loved her so well. He had promised to take her to China, to meet his beloved Li. So many promises, and in that moment Jean could feel every single one of them slowly slipping through her grasping fingers. A baby meant home, and exhaustion, and work, with no time for gallivanting around the globe. A baby meant a life of being tied to this house when all she longed for was the world, the world Lucien had promised her.

Maybe not, she tried to tell herself. A child can travel, if you plan accordingly. We could see those places together, all of us.

It was a hollow thought, however. Jean had raised two children, and she remembered all too well the lean days of their infancy. The thought of starting out such an endeavor again, and at her age, was daunting. Her mind returned, again and again, to the idea that this was somehow a punishment, the hand of retribution falling upon her for daring to claim that which was not hers. And yet she tried to still that dreadful voice; she conjured an image of young Christopher, the day he was born, the joy she had felt when she held him for the first time, the joy she felt, so many years later, when he placed his own daughter in her arms. Her sons had been blessings, both of them, even wild, wayward Jack, and if she had fallen pregnant again, she knew that she would love this new child just as much.

If you ever get to hold him, that dreadful voice whispered, and fear lanced through her sharp as a knife. The last time - the first time - this had happened, things had not ended well for her. Would she be doomed to endure such grief a second time? Could she stand it? Could she stand to watch Lucien suffer so, Lucien who loved his daughter with all his heart and wept for all that he had lost, all that he had missed as she had grown up on the other side of the world?

Stop this, she told herself, drawing in a ragged breath. It would do no good to lay there and worry, to weep for losses not yet suffered, to lament for opportunities not yet squandered. It could be that all of this was no more than coincidence, and there was no child at all, no reason for alarm. She would need to find out, and quickly.

Alice, she realized. That was the answer. She would go and speak to Doctor Harvey first thing in the morning, as soon as Lucien was on his way. Though Lucien could just as easily take her blood and assess her condition in the surgery downstairs she did not want to trouble him unnecessarily, did not want to raise the specter of this catastrophe until she knew for certain. Alice Harvey was quiet and discreet, and Jean was confident the good doctor could help her. It would be a comfort, she thought, to share this burden with another woman, even one as strange and taciturn as Alice. There would be no surly, judgmental man staring down his nose at her, just Alice, lovely, slightly awkward Alice, and that was a trial Jean was sure she could endure for the sake of her own reassurance.

With a plan in mind and a soft pillow beneath her head Jean closed her eyes, and drifted off into a restless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Just a head’s up, there’s a big storm heading my way, and every chance it may impact my ability to access the internet and post an update. It may be fine, but if you
don't hear from me for a few days, that's why!
Jean sat very still on a bench in the hospital corridor, her handbag clutched tightly on her lap, her eyes fixed firmly on the opposite wall. Upon arrival she'd had the good fortune to encounter a nurse she recognized as one of Mattie's friends, and the nurse had been more than willing to go and fetch Doctor Harvey for her. So Jean waited, and fretted, and prayed that no one would take any notice of her. Her already tarnished sense of morality would not permit her to lie on this day, but she likewise could not bear the thought of anyone discovering what had sent her to the hospital in search of Alice.

It had been a strange morning. As soon as the sun rose Jean was down the stairs, forcing herself to eat a bite of toast while she made a proper breakfast for Charlie and Lucien, hoping that her earlier indisposition would not return, hoping that Lucien would not notice the pale cast to her cheeks, the worried furrow of her brow. It was not time, yet, to lay her burdens upon him, and she needed, more than anything, to get him out of the house and on his way so that she could see about her own business. Mercifully the disaster at the track seemed to consume him; as he sipped his tea and wolfed down his bacon he was all bright smiles and wild ideas, though his blue eyes lingered on her, not appreciative as he so often was when he looked at her, but contemplative, as if some of her distress had communicated itself to him despite her best efforts to conceal it.

"I want to speak with Frank, and I've asked that they release Alex's belongings to me," Lucien told her as she approached him. "I have an appointment with Agnes later, and I think she ought to have them." With one hand Jean placed a fresh piece of toast on his plate while the other landed on his shoulder, Jean leaning over him all unthinking to plant a gentle kiss against the top of his head. He really was a dear, sweet man when he was not so lost in his own selfish quagmire that he ignored everyone around him; to his credit, he had not been so distant for months now, and Jean was grateful for it.

"That sounds lovely, Lucien," she'd told him, then, smiling despite her turmoil as he reached up and wrapped his hand around her own where it rested against his shoulder, drew her to him so that he could place a tender kiss against her palm. His eyes had held her, begged her to tell him, to unburden herself to him, but she was saved by Charlie's timely arrival in the kitchen. Distracted by the business of breakfast and determined to keep a brave face Jean had spun away from her beloved, and they had not touched upon the topic of her tired eyes or weary shoulders. The boys had set off for the police station together, Charlie receiving a fond farewell from Mrs. Beazley while Lucien received a kiss that was too lingering to be entirely chaste and yet too brief to be considered inappropriate. The moment they were gone Jean had attacked the breakfast dishes with a will, rushing through her preparations with one thought on her mind.

She had to speak to Alice.

To that end she sat here, her back ramrod straight, her clothes neat and pressed, not a strand of hair out of place, her face assuming the most neutral expression she could muster. Everyone in the hospital knew who Jean was, knew of her connection to Lucien - though perhaps not the depth of that connection - knew that Doctor Harvey was an acquaintance of hers, and Jean hoped that her appearance here would not seem too unusual. The harsh lights overhead caught the diamond of her engagement ring and set it to sparkling, and Jean's gaze shifted down to it, a sudden, overwhelming sense of sadness washing over her at once. She knew she ought to be grateful; Lucien had given her this ring, had asked her to be his wife before either of them had any inkling of the catastrophe to come, and so at least she could reassure herself that he wanted to marry her because he loved her, not because of some traditionalist sense of duty. Until the day young Christopher was born, Jean had often asked herself if perhaps her first husband had only married her because he had to, but the
moment she first saw him cradling their son in his arms, reaching out once the baby was settled to take hold of her hand in his own, she had seen the love, the devotion, the affection in his sparkling blue eyes, and every doubt she had ever harbored as regarded his feelings for her vanished in a moment. He had tried to tell her a hundred times, a thousand times, how much he loved her, how much she meant to him, but it was not until that very moment she realized that every word he'd ever spoken to her was truth. It had been a beautiful thing, for the two of them, the birth of their child cementing their connection to one another.

With Lucien, no such doubt lingered, not since the day he'd chased down her bus in the street like a madman. His actions gave evidence of his regard for her, and she knew, she knew, that he had asked her willingly, that he wanted, very much, to marry her. She could only hope that the ties that bound them would be strong enough to sustain them through the trials that were to come.

All night long she'd thought about her little problem, her little indiscretion, her little sin, and she had risen from her bed certain of the truth. It would be up to Alice to prove with science what Jean had already discerned through her feminine clairvoyance, and so Jean waited, and fretted, and resisted the urge to worry the strap of her handbag between her fingertips until Alice came sweeping down the corridor and saved her from herself.

"Mrs. Beazley," Alice said as Jean rose to her feet. There was a curious, almost frightened sort of expression on Alice's face, as if she were worried that Jean's presence in this place was some sort of portent of evil things to come. Jean could not fault her for such worries, for the hospital was not Jean's place, and since the birth of her children she had never visited there under cheerful circumstances.

"Doctor Harvey," Jean said, giving her a sickly sort of smile that seemed only to increase Alice's sense of foreboding. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all," Alice told her. "I was just speaking to Lucien, it seems his initial theory about the bruising pattern was correct."

"Lucien is here?" Jean asked faintly. Once Alice had spoken his name Jean's ears had begun to ring, and she had not heard another word Alice had said. Her hands began to shake in time to the pounding of her heart, and she started to feel a bit dizzy; an overreaction, surely, she tried to tell herself, and yet she could not stop it.

Alice was looking at her strangely. "On the phone," she explained, and the relief that overcame Jean at the realization that she was not about to be discovered by her fiance left her feeling rather sheepish. "Mrs. Beazley, are you quite all right?" Perhaps Alice had noticed the sudden flush of her cheeks or the way her fingers curled around the back of the bench, clinging to it for support as she was buffeted by the emotions that gripped her heart.

"Doctor Harvey," she said, "Alice. I need to talk with you, if that's all right. Privately."

"Of course," Alice said. "I'm sure one of the examination rooms-"

"No!" Jean cut her off sharply, wincing at the harshness of her own tone. "What I mean is," she added, more gently this time, "I would rather not be seen walking into an examination room with a doctor. People like to talk, you know."

Alice gave her a strange, appraising sort of look. Not that Jean could blame her; the circumstances were strange enough. After all, why would Jean, who lived above a doctor's surgery and had her own tame physician at her beck and call trouble the good Doctor Harvey in the middle of the day like this if the circumstances were not terribly intriguing?
"How do you feel about dead bodies, Mrs. Beazley?" Alice asked her.

And so it was that Jean came to be sitting on a little stool in the morgue, with her back turned firmly to block out the vision of Alex Martin, stripped bare and lying cold on the table in the center of the room. It was not the most auspicious of surroundings, and it seemed to Jean hardly appropriate, given the delicate nature of the conversation she was about to begin. And yet, Doctor Harvey didn't seem disturbed by it in the least, and after all, Jean had asked not to speak in an examination room; she had brought this upon herself.

"Now," Alice said, settling onto the stool next to Jean. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Beazley?"

"Please, call me Jean."

A bright, genuine smile lit up Alice's face at those words, and for a moment Jean forgot her troubles, thinking only how kind, how sad Alice was, how she seemed to have so few friends in the world, and how much Jean suddenly wanted to be counted among that number. The time had come, however, for her to give voice to her terrible fears, and she dropped her gaze to her lap, staring hard at her hands as she held them clasped together so tightly her knuckles had turned white. There would be no turning back, she knew, once she spoke those words. Though Alice was hardly the sort to gossip about Jean and her delicate situation to anyone else, Jean could not help but feel that once she spoke the words aloud she would breathe life into them, would cement the course of fate and open herself up to a world of cruelty and vitriol. Not from Alice, of course, but from the people she counted as friends, the community that had embraced her, so long as she remained a proper widow. It had to be done, however, and so she took a deep breath, and spoke.

"The thing is, Alice, I think I might be...expecting."

Alice Harvey was a quiet woman, not given much to grand displays of emotion, but likewise she was not particularly adept at schooling her features, and her surprise was evident at once.

"Oh," she said, clearly startled. "Well, that's...Have you spoken to Lucien?"

Jean shook her head. "No. I don't want to worry him with this. Not until I know for certain."

"I see," Alice said, and Jean could see at once that she did, that she had taken stock of the situation and realized precisely why Jean had come to her. "Well, there are tests we can run, if you want to know for sure."

"Please," Jean answered, her very heart in her throat. "I was hoping you could take a blood sample, and tell me."

Alice was all business now, rising from her stool and opening one of the nearby cabinets in search of some sort of equipment. "We've made great strides, recently, in determining pregnancy, but blood isn't really the best method." She made a small sound of triumph as she retrieved a small specimen jar.

"What is the best method?" Jean asked her warily, eyeing the jar with some distaste.

"Urine," was Alice's cheerful answer. "We'll take a sample from you and send it off to the lab. It will take a few days to get the results, but we've developed a very accurate test involving rabbits and-"

Jean was feeling a bit faint again. There was no dignity in this, she thought grimly, staring at that little jar, and she hadn't considered that Alice would not be able to do the test herself while Jean waited. The thought of sending a...sample off to the lab, with her name affixed to it, was deeply unsettling.
For all that Alice was a bit strange and not particularly adept at reading social cues she paused, for a moment, at the sight of Jean's stricken face.

"You don't want anyone to know about this, do you?" she asked softly.

Jean almost laughed. Of course she didn't want anyone to know about it, didn't want to reveal her shame, didn't want to endure the whispers that had haunted her when she was nineteen and married so quickly that everyone in town knew what she had done and marked her for a wicked creature. Of course she did not want such gossip to haunt her, or Lucien, to damage his reputation more than his own recklessness had already done.

"We'll put a false name on the sample," Alice said decisively. "No one needs to know, until you're ready to tell them."

Had they known one another better, Jean might have embraced Alice in that moment, driven by sheer gratitude for the other woman's gentle understanding. So far Alice had not once done or said anything to make Jean feel guilty for what she'd done, to chide her or judge her, and Jean was rather unaccustomed to receiving such unquestioning kindness from anyone.

"You have done this before, Jean," Alice continued, sitting down beside her once again, setting the specimen jar on the counter in front of them. Even though it was empty - for now - it still seemed somehow dirty to Jean, and she avoided looking at it. "We can run the test, but if you think you're pregnant, well...you'd know better than anybody, wouldn't you?"

It was a very earnest sort of question, coming from a most unusual source. Jean considered the woman beside her for a moment, her long, dark hair, her lipstick - not quite the right shade, which seemed to Jean somehow sad - her bright white coat, her earnest gaze. Alice had no personal knowledge of what Jean was enduring, of course, but she was trying so hard to understand, to be supportive, and Jean was determined that one day, one day soon, she would pay the good doctor back in kind.

"Well," she said, somewhat lamely. "I...it's very difficult to say for sure, Alice. If I am, it's very early on, and there could be all sorts of explanations."

"Would you mind listing your symptoms for me?" Alice asked, bright eyed and eager as she always was when presented with a puzzle. "We might be able to rule out some of those other explanations, without the test."

Jean stared at her, suddenly aghast. There was no topic more delicate than the one Alice had just broached with her, and while she knew rationally that Alice was a doctor and was simply asking out of a professional sense of duty to a patient, her rather fierce desire for privacy shrieked in resistance to the very idea of unburdening all those unpleasant little details. In that moment, she would have much preferred to simply leave a...sample for Alice, and be done. But the good doctor had asked, and so Jean haltingly laid out the truth for her, cheeks flaming as she explained every little symptom that had led her to this place.

"You said it's very early on," Alice mused when Jean's litany was done. "Does that mean you have a fair idea of when...it might have happened?"

Alice was not well known for her delicacy, and so while Jean's cheeks burned red and her entire being recoiled at the question she bit her tongue, determined not to lash out at Alice. It was a fair question for a doctor to ask, even if that doctor worked closely with the man who might well be the father of Jean's bastard child. There was nothing salacious in Alice's intent, Jean knew, and so she tried, very hard, to go against her own nature and answer the question in good faith.
"Six weeks ago," she said primly.

Alice's eyes flashed down to Jean's ring and a small smile tugged at the corners of her lips, and Jean was so very mortified that she wanted nothing more than to flee from the room.

"Well," Alice said, "the lab will be able to say for sure, but based on your symptoms I think you were right to come and see me. I know this is...difficult, Jean, but..." she floundered for a moment, and Jean felt a grim sort of satisfaction. She had been chewing over that but for nearly twenty-four hours now. But what? She thought. But perhaps Lucien will be happy, when he finds out he's going to be a father again at fifty? Perhaps people won't gossip about me, perhaps I won't be thrown out of my own church, perhaps it's not a bad thing if my child isn't baptized, perhaps if we move quickly enough no one needs to know what I've done, perhaps I can make new friends after everyone abandons me, perhaps Christopher won't mind having a little brother who's younger than his own daughter?

"Lucien loves you," Alice said softly, and all of Jean's bitter thoughts fled at once as she stared at Alice, open-mouthed and stunned by the quiet sincerity of the doctor's words. "Surely that's all that matters."

Tears gathered in the corners of Jean's eyes, tears of relief but of recrimination, as well, as she chided herself for getting so lost in her own misery that it had taken Alice Harvey of all people to remind her of that most vital truth. Yes, Lucien loved her, and maybe, just maybe, Alice was right. Maybe that was all that mattered. She would do what she must, so that the lab could run their tests, and when she knew for certain, she would tell Lucien the truth, and they would face it, together. While Jean rather felt as if her entire life was falling apart in her hands, Alice Harvey had, with three little words, restored some of her faith in her own future. Whatever happened next, Lucien loved her, and Alice was terribly kind.

"Alice," Jean said suddenly, "would you like to have dinner with us?"

The doctor's answering smile was equal parts hopeful and confused, and Jean could not stop herself from reaching out and giving Alice's knee a gentle pat.
That same evening...

It had been a long, strange day, in the midst of a long, strange week. Though he had met with Agnes midmorning for her standing appointment Lucien had spent most of the day out of the house, reviewing the case with Frank, checking in with Alice at the hospital, pestering Charlie as he followed up on a lead, but in truth, Lucien's heart wasn't in his work. His heart was rooted in the kitchen back home, fretting over Jean and the sudden shift in her demeanor.

There were myriad causes for his concern, though taken individually they each seemed trivial. Though she was fond of her sherry it was not unusual for her to substitute it with a cup of tea of an evening. Though she had been somewhat reticent with him of late he had to admit that his Jean always held her cards close to her chest, was always reluctant to openly discuss her feelings - unless, of course, what she was feeling was displeasure, in which case she usually told him outright just what he had done to vex her. Though she seemed tired, and pale, and rather wan, he knew that their engagement was weighing on her mind, particularly given that she had yet to reach Jack, and her youngest son almost certainly would not be pleased by the news. Each of these things could be dismissed, and yet taken altogether, they painted a worrisome picture.

To his great distress, Charlie had chosen not to go out that evening, and had instead accompanied him home. It was unkind, he knew, to wish that the lad would stay away, when most nights Charlie went out of his way to manufacture some excuse to given Lucien and Jean a bit of privacy. It was just that this particular evening Lucien had been rather looking forward to speaking with Jean alone, and Charlie's presence at the dinner table would delay that conversation still further. She had retired early, the night before, and he was terribly worried that she would do so again, that he would be forced to spend another day wondering what was bothering her, and yet unable to discuss the matter with her openly. It chafed, just a little, to know that even now when they had declared their love for one another and she wore his ring she still did not bring her troubles to him. It was just the sort of woman she was, he supposed, private and fiercely independent, so long a widow that she had forgotten what it was to share her life with another person. He hoped to remind her.

But not now, for he and Charlie were marching through the front door together.

"Jean!" Lucien called out to her as he hung his hat on its accustomed peg just inside the door.

"In here!" she answered him, as if he had any doubt. Jean liked her order, her routine, and he knew that there was nowhere else she would be at this time of day save for the kitchen. In the beginning, when he was just starting to get a sense of who she was, what sort of woman she was, it had troubled him, somewhat, to share his space with a woman who cooked his meals and washed his unmentionables and swept his floors. What he had learned, over time, was that Jean was possessed of a nurturing spirit; she would not be taken advantage of, but she showed her affection for the people dearest to her by looking after them. She took pleasure in her cooking, trying new things often, delighting in the presence of guests sitting round her table, taking pride in her labor when they complimented her on the meal. Beneath the surface, his Jean had the soul of an artist, her hands constantly busy making something, and whether that something was a roast or a new dress for herself or a blanket for her granddaughter, whatever she created was always stitched together with love, a beautiful thing in its own right.

He made his way towards her, smiling, just a little, as he thought of how he loved her, how he loved coming home to her, how he loved sharing his space with her, how much he would love calling her wife. Lucien had every intention of walking right up to her, wrapping her in his arms, pressing
his lips to the curve of her neck - for Charlie has already shuffled off to his room to change out of his uniform, allowing them a moment's peace - but his hopes were dashed as he entered the kitchen.

Inexplicably, Jean was sitting at the table with Alice Harvey, each of them nursing a glass of sherry and smiling at him strangely. For a moment he simply gawped at them, mouth dropped open like a fish hauled out of the sea; as far as he could recall he had never seen Jean and Alice in the same room together, let alone in his house, drinking before dinner. He had spoken to Alice earlier in the day, but she had made no mention of her intention to visit, and he could not fathom what she was doing here now.

"Alice!" he said, trying to find his footing as his mind whirred, searching for an answer to this riddle. "Lovely to see you."

"Jean's been advising me about cooking," Alice told him, though he could not possibly see how Jean was teaching her anything, given that they did not appear to be paying any attention to the food simmering quietly on the stove behind them. "She suggested I hire someone rather than try to learn."

"She's a working woman, she doesn't have time to cook," Jean said sagely, though when she caught Lucien's eye there was a mischievous expression on her face that told him all too plainly that it was skill, and not time, that Alice lacked.

"Of course," he said lamely. "Who's for another drink?"

"Honestly, Jean, I don't know how you do it," Alice said as they lingered over their empty plates, enjoying a bit of Lucien's wine, all of them content following a lovely meal, despite the occasional awkwardness of the conversation. When Jean had invited Alice for dinner, she had not necessarily meant that very evening, but then Alice had appeared on the doorstep, and Jean found herself rather grateful for the other woman's company. She had attempted, briefly, to show Alice the ins and outs of preparing a nice roast, but the good doctor had in truth been so woefully inept that for the sake of their supper Jean had banished her to the table, and when the work was through she had sat beside her, and they had talked, and it had, in truth, been completely lovely. With every moment that passed Jean had found herself growing more and more fond of Alice; yes, she was a bit strange, and had a direct, guileless way of speaking that tended to come off rather abrupt, but she was earnest and well-intentioned, and in some ways Jean found her directness refreshing. Jean's friends from the film society and the sewing circle were hardly so forthright, and it was nice to speak to someone who made their opinions plain, and did not obfuscate.

"Oh," Jean demurred, trying not to smile too broadly at the compliment. "It isn't that hard, you know. It just takes time, and practice. I learned a lot from my mother."

"What sort of woman was she, your mother?" Alice asked.

Charlie shifted in his chair, uncomfortable the way he so often was when the conversation drifted towards the topic of family, and Lucien leaned towards her, one hand wrapped around his whiskey glass, as if he were rather interested in the answer. Jean blushed and stared down into her own half-empty glass; her stomach was in a riot again, and Alice's question brought with it a whole host of unpleasant memories. The tears in her mother's eyes and the accusation in her voice when Jean had revealed her youthful indiscretion, the cool way her mother treated Christopher, for all the rest of her days, the constant sensation of having been judged and found lacking that dogged her steps whenever her mother was in close proximity. No, Jean did not often discuss her family or her life before the boys were born, not even with Lucien, and she was not eager to do so now. But Alice had been so kind to her that day, and Jean was so very glad to have someone to share the load of the burden she carried, that she could not bring herself to dismiss the question out of hand.
"She was a very hard worker," Jean said diplomatically. "We lived on a farm some distance from
town and my mother had to make do with very little. She taught me how to cook, and how to
sew." And how to keep my mouth shut.

"I take it she's no longer with us?" Yes, Jean had grown quite fond of Alice, and she was thankful to
the good doctor for her discretion, but this particular line of questioning, however well-intentioned,
was setting Jean's teeth on edge.

"Yes, she passed when Jack was a baby." And my father not long after, Jean added silently. There
was a sympathetic sort of look on Alice's face; perhaps she was thinking, as Jean was, that it might
have been helpful for her to have her mother around, all things considered. Perhaps she was thinking
that it was quite sad, that this new child - if indeed there was any child at all - would never know any
of his grandparents. She did not press the issue, and Jean seized the opportunity to call an end to
dinner.

"Well," she said, rising to her feet, grateful when the others all began to do the same. "It's been
lovely having you here, Alice. You should come round more often."

"I'd like that," Alice said, and her tentative smile gave evidence of her sincerity.

"I'll see you out," Lucien volunteered gallantly, but Jean overruled him.

"No, I'll do that, Lucien, you finish your drink."

The evening had been a strange one, and it was getting stranger by the second. Jean had about her an
air of distracted wistfulness he liked not one bit, and her insistence that she walk Alice to the door -
when ordinarily she would have begun the washing up and left the pleasantries to Lucien - struck
him as most unusual. Though he knew it was perhaps impolite of him, he left Charlie to make a start
on the dishes and wandered out of the room, loitering near the end of the hall, straining to hear the
ladies' conversation.

"It will likely be next week," Alice was saying, "but I'll ring you, as soon as I have the results."

Dread settled heavy as a stone in his gut. What's this? He asked himself. Could it be that Jean's recent
malaise had nothing at all to do with the wedding, and was instead the result of some other, more
nefarious condition? And if it was, why on earth had she gone to Alice about it, rather than speak to
him directly? Unless it was something truly dire, something she did not want to burden him with.
That thought was a deeply unpleasant one.

"Thank you, Alice," Jean said sincerely, reaching out to clasp the good doctor's arm in a brief,
spontaneous seeming display of affection. "Really, you've been so kind."

"I'm happy to help. Get some rest, Jean," Alice said, and the fear gnawing at Lucien's stomach grew
stronger at the sound of those words. "Good night."

And then she was slipping through the door, and Jean was closing it behind her, turning to rest her
back against the door for a moment. As she did, her eyes landed on Lucien there at the end of the
corridor, and she arched her brow, silently asking him what on earth he was doing, eavesdropping on
her conversation. Feeling rather chastised Lucien nonetheless squared his shoulders and made his
way to her, not stopping until he could reach out and rest his hand against the curve of her hip.

"Is there something you need to tell me?" he asked her softly, his eyes dancing over her face.

She blushed as if embarrassed at having been caught out, but she did not smile, and she did not try to
defend herself, and in the absence of her usual passion Lucien keenly felt the gravity of whatever troubled her. Something, he realized, was terribly, terribly wrong.

"Jean," he breathed her name when she did not speak, leaning forward so that he could rest his forehead against her own, his hand still tight against her hip. "You can tell me, my darling. We're going to be married. Whatever this is, we can sort it out together. You can trust me."

He kissed her temple once, gently, and then raised his head to look at her. To his mortification, there were tears in the corners of her grey eyes, but she lifted her chin proudly, refusing to let them fall.

"I do trust you," she assured him, though she was not confessing her troubles, and in the lack of such confidence he found he could not quite believe her words. "But right now, I need you to trust me. When I have something to tell you, I will."

He read her meaning in the set of her shoulders, in the firmness of her tone; she would brook no more discussion, but she would tell him, likely once she had the mysterious results from Alice. The thought of sitting idly by while Jean worried with this problem did not sit well with him, but he had done the same thing himself, more than once, had drawn his own blood and sent it off to the lab with Jean's name attached so as to avoid arousing suspicion, had refused to let her comfort him in his distress; true, they had not been engaged then, but even then he had been fond of her, had deemed her one of the most important people in his life, and he had not told her. Perhaps she was right, and it would be best for him to extend her the same courtesy.

"I love you," he told her, kissing her again, this time at the corner of her full lips.

"I know," she answered, reaching out to cradle his cheek in her palm, tracing the line of his beard with her thumb.

"That's a very unsettling response, my darling," he told her wryly. To his delight, he saw her smile. He could do this for her, he told himself, could respect her desire for privacy, could wait until she was ready to tell him the truth about whatever was bothering her. He would have to trust her to come to him when the time was right, to unburden herself when she was ready.

"Good night, Lucien," she murmured softly. And with those words she lifted herself up onto her toes and kissed his cheek, before turning to make her way up the stairs, to her little bed tucked away so far from his own.

And though it was a small thing, hardly consequential, Lucien could not help but think how strange it was, that she should be so distracted as to take herself off to bed without seeing to the dishes. He could still hear Charlie hard at work in the kitchen, and so with a heavy sigh he turned, and went to help, his thoughts all in tangle. The very idea of Jean suffering some sort of illness was intolerable to him; she was the very center of his world, that slight but indestructible woman, and it would be cruel indeed, for fate to strike her down now, when the future they so longed for was within their grasp. She had found him, saved him, revived him, reminded him what it was to care for another person, given him hope, and joy, filled him full to bursting with love. She was everything to him.

*Perhaps it's not so serious,* he tried to tell himself as he began to dry the dishes, chatting distractedly to Charlie about their current case. But if it were not serious, when then should she go to Alice, and not to him?

Unless, of course, it was a matter that concerned him personally.

Unless, of course, it was the sort of thing she would feel more comfortable discussing with another woman.
When I have something to tell you, I will.

Rather quickly he began to count off the days in his head, asking himself just how long it had been since the night she'd spent in his bed. There were certain intimate details he lacked, of course, but given what he knew of Jean’s current indisposition, and the time frame, and the fact that she refused to discuss it with him...well, it all seemed to point in one inevitable, completely shocking direction.

Surely not, he wondered to himself. Surely she couldn't be...

"Doc?" Charlie asked him, shaking him out of his reverie. "You all right?"

"Just fine, Charlie," Lucien answered, feeling a silly, almost manic grin tugging at the corners of his lips as his heart began to race. "Absolutely fine."
A/N: I've sketched in a rough timeline, and will start adding the dates in the headers so we can all keep up with what's happening when.

22 July 1960

"It will likely be next week," Alice had told her, and so Jean spent the next few days in a state of distraction such as she had not known for quite some time. Waiting did not come easily to Jean; she did not thrive in idleness, her hands itching for work, for something to keep her busy, and yet her troubled thoughts dragged her away from her current occupation again and again as she fretted, and doubted, and ate herself alive with uncertainty. She needed answers, and quickly, needed to know what was to become of her, needed to know whether all her agonizing was justified or whether her symptoms were no more than the onset of the change, come to claim her a few years earlier than expected.

It had been her intention to go direct to Father Emory and confess her sin, and yet her steps had faltered, and she had done no such thing. Why she hesitated she could not say; perhaps it was shame, for despite the supposed anonymity of the confessional she knew that Father Emory would recognize her voice, and that when she and Lucien came to him later to ask that he marry them he would know what she had done. Perhaps it was fear, that dreadful beast that whispered to her in a terrible voice, warned her that should she breathe life into her transgression, reveal herself and her errors to God, she would be forced to pay a terrible penance. Perhaps it was no more than sloth, given that she was feeling rather more tired than usual these days, and the thought of making a special trip to Sacred Heart left her as weary as if she had done the thing already. Whatever the reason, she did not go, and with each passing day the need to confess was slowly drowned beneath her desire to keep her secrets.

Throughout the endless days of waiting Lucien had been hovering always just on the periphery of her vision; he'd taken to looking over his files and patient notes at the kitchen table, rather than in his study, and everywhere she went his soft blue eyes followed her, filled with worry. Though he had respected her wishes and had not raised the issue again, had in conversation done his very best to pretend that nothing was amiss, he could not hide his over-attentiveness, could not disguise his apparent concern. And though she knew he meant well, that he cared for her and he only wanted, in his own way, to help, Jean could not help but resent, just a little, his earnest smothering.

Has he guessed the truth? She asked herself, more than once, when he insinuated himself into her work, taking over any sort of task that required her to lift or stretch. He was a clever man, and a doctor besides; she supposed it wouldn't have been so very difficult, in the end, for him to piece it all together. The thought did not sit well with her; she did not want to be fussed over or coddled, and if indeed she were already in the family way his current behavior did not bode well for the months ahead. I have done this before, she grumbled to herself, more than once. She had carried two healthy children to term, and had done it while working on a farm and looking after her husband. She had not needed such accommodation then, and she would not ask for it now.

Still, though she was frustrated and a bit cross with him, she did her best not to take her ire out on
him. After all, she had not confided in him, and she supposed he had every reason to worry. She felt a bit guilty about that, knowing that she had left him in the dark, but she would much rather come to him at the end of this trial and tell him for certain, one way or another, than broach the subject before either of them were really prepared for it. She did not want to know, just now, how he might feel about their having a baby, how he might feel about this change in their circumstances, did not want to know if it filled him full of hope or dread. If he wanted a child, and she was not about to give him one, she did not want to see his hopes dashed. If he did not want a child, and she was about to give him one, well, she didn't want to face that prospect either. Yes, she told herself, better to wait. Wait, and enjoy the time as she best could, to find the beauty in even this most uncertain of times.

Whatever came next, for right now, these few days, they were simply two people in love, engaged to be married, and she tried very hard to focus on that. It had long been their custom to sit together in the evenings, sipping their drinks and speaking softly to one another, but now they could sit on the same sofa, her fingertips tracing the veins over the back of his broad hand, his palm resting against the curve of her knee, soaking in the warmth and proximity of one another, thinking quiet thoughts of the days ahead. Yes, he vexed her, left her so cross she sometimes wanted to stomp her feet in frustration, but each evening she sat beside him and felt, not the stifling oppression that had haunted her during the day, but a strange sense of calm. She loved this man, neurotic and impulsive and unpredictable as he might be, and he loved her, and for those few precious moments each night, she found she could believe that they would be all right.

The call came on a Friday afternoon. Lucien did not see patients on Friday afternoons, and Frank had no body for him to dissect, and so he was hovering, once more, sitting at the table with the paper open in front of him, though Jean was fairly certain he couldn't have been reading it, for every time she turned around she found his gaze fixed on her. If only he would speak, perhaps the atmosphere between them would not have been so strained, but he seemed almost frightened of her, and for once in his life, he bit his tongue. The silence weighed heavy upon her, and she had just made up her mind to send him into town on some fabricated errand when the phone began to ring.

Lucien started, at the sound of the phone, as did Jean. For a moment they both stared at the phone, and though he could not say exactly how, he was nonetheless certain that their thoughts were running in the same direction. Alice had said the results would likely come in this week, and this week was very nearly over. It was an unusual time for a patient to be calling, and though he supposed it could have easily been Frank, still, somehow, he suspected not.

After that terrible moment's pause Jean wiped her hands on her apron, and crossed the room, and when she reached for the phone he saw that those hands were trembling. His own were clasped together on the table top, his knuckles gone white with the struggle to restrain himself.

"Doctor Blake's surgery," she said, her tone calm and collected as always, giving no sign of the distress that must surely have gripped her.

Would this be the moment, he asked himself, the moment when the truth came out, when she finally told him just what exactly had been ailing her, when he would be freed from the restraints she'd placed upon him and finally be allowed the chance to tell her just what he thought about their...predicament? He hated keeping his silence, longed to offer her his reassurances, but she held him at bay, and he felt both their hearts suffering for the sake of that distance. Whatever had caused this turmoil he was certain that it could not have been half so devastating as the pain of spending these few days dancing around one another.

Jean was quiet, for several long moments, listening to the mystery caller. And then, to his great distress, she ended the call rather abruptly, and through it all she spoke not a word.
Lucien rose to his feet at once, his heart in his throat. Across the room Jean, his brave, beautiful Jean, pressed her fingertips against her lips, her eyes glassy and unseeing. She lifted her chin in that proud way she had, when she was determined to hold her emotion inside, to give no evidence of what she was feeling. His heart ached, to see her trying so hard to be strong, when all he wanted was the simple truth of her, no matter how unseemly she thought that truth might be.

"Jean?" Lucien asked softly.

It was as if she could not hear him; still wearing her apron she turned away, walking slowly out of the kitchen. He sank back into his chair and buried his face in his hands, listening to the sounds of her footsteps on the stairs. It grieved him more than he could say, that in the moment she did not speak to him, did not trust him with her grief, her burdens. Over the last few days he had begun to suspect that she did not quite know how. There had been moments, in the past, standing in the sunroom after Jack's departure or in the sunlight of the garden after Ben Dempster's death, when she had revealed herself to him, had let him see her weep, had spilled out in a rush of words the deepest secrets of her heart. Such moments had only come at the end of such great calamity, when she simply could not contain herself any longer, and though he knew it was perhaps a bit cruel, he had wished that this might be such a moment, that she might come to him, at last, and let him hold her. And yet she hadn't; she had walked away.

How long he sat there he could not say, worrying over Jean, over what was to become of them, over his own battered heart and uncertain longings, but in the end her prolonged absence compelled him to move. With a heart full of dread he mounted the stairs, and made his way down the little corridor to her bedroom. He took a deep breath and rapped his knuckles against the door, calling softly, "Jean?"

No answer, no sound of sobbing or shuffling movement came from inside, and so he tried again.

"Jean?" he called, a little louder this time.

Still there was no response from her, and though decorum might have dictated that he should go back downstairs he chose instead to throw the door open at once. He was not one to stand on propriety, and they had thrown modesty and decency out the window that beautiful June night when she had fallen into his bed. Whether she knew it or not, he suspected that Jean had need of him now, and so he went to her.

She was lying on her bed, facing away from him, and the sight of her, so small, so lost, so utterly hopeless, tore at his heart afresh. Carefully he closed the door behind him, and when she did not acknowledge his presence he made his way to her, clambering onto the bed beside her. With all the tenderness he possessed Lucien slotted himself into place against her back, wrapping his arm around her waist and burying his face in her soft dark curls. As he touched her some of the tension seemed to leave her; she relaxed against him, covering his hand with her own where it rested against her belly. She smelled vaguely of flowers and fresh baked bread, and the softness of her called to him, though she was trembling from head to foot.

"Jean," he said, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

"I think we may need to move the wedding forward," she told him in a small voice.

Such simple words, obfuscating her true meaning and yet telling him at once exactly what she'd just discovered. He would need to hear her say it, of course, would need to hear it outright just to know that it was true, that she was not dying from some terrible illness, that her malady was more blessing than curse. His heart knew the truth already, though, and it was racing in his chest, his mouth too dry to speak. How could it be, he wondered, that one indiscretion, one beautiful, blissful night, could
have such far-reaching consequences? At their ages it was unthinkable, really, and yet he had his observations and Jean's behavior as evidence that the unthinkable might well have already come to pass.

Over the last week he'd hardly slept, wondering what it might be like, should Jean really be with child. It was not his way, to worry over what other people might think, how they might best go about hiding the depth of their transgression from others, how their grown children might respond. His thoughts had not drifted to Christopher and Jack and Li and Charlie and Mattie and Frank and Father Emory and all the rest, but had instead charted a more gentle course. He had thought, long and hard, of how Jean might look, her belly large with child, how his heart might soar, to see her cradling their baby in her arms. He had remembered, with much lament, the few precious years he'd been allowed with Li, remembered how he had loved to hold her, to sing to her, to sit her on his knee and read her stories, and he had wondered what it might be like, to be granted such a gift again. He had wondered if Jean might be happy, if she might be well, if they might together make a space for a child in their lives. And deep within his heart, he knew that he already had.

"I'd marry you tomorrow, my darling, if I could," he told her sincerely. He brushed her hair aside with the tip of his nose, and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck.

"Oh, Lucien," she gasped out his name, her voice a breathy wobble, and though he could not see her, he knew that tears must have been running like rivers down her cheeks.

"Tell me, Jean," he urged her quietly. He needed to hear her say it, needed her to unburden herself to him, needed her to trust him to make this right, to look after her and anyone else who might come after. A child had not been in his plans for them; he was fifty years old, and a grandfather already, and though he still grieved for all that he had missed while his Li grew up so far from his side, he had not harbored any desire to start such an undertaking again. He had only wanted Jean, his brilliant, beautiful Jean. Now, though, now that he had been given a chance to think it through, to truly consider this possibility, he found himself rather optimistic about the whole thing. Jean was a wonderful mother, he knew, and he had always been fond of children, and the thought that they might have one of their own, a little life borne of the love they harbored for one another; well, that was no bad thing.

Somehow, she managed to choke out the words.

"I'm pregnant," she told him, but there was no joy in her as she began to weep so hard she could not speak. Though he knew that this was likely something of a shock for her, that she - like Lucien himself - had never planned on anything like this, he could not fathom why she should respond with such a depth of sorrow. Without a second thought he caught hold of her and turned her in his arms; she moved with him willingly, arms and legs slotting into place as she buried her face in the crook of his neck and painted his skin with her tears.

The time would come when they would need to discuss their situation in detail. They would need to make plans for the wedding, quickly, for the sake of Jean's pride if nothing else. They would need to talk about her health, and someday soon they would need to talk about names and furniture and how they intended to go about the business of raising a child. They would need to talk, most urgently, about the real source of Jean's distress, for Lucien imagined it was not only the indignity of finding herself pregnant out of wedlock that caused Jean's tears now. Something dark was brewing, hidden deep within her heart, and he would need to coax that secret into the light, if only so that he could reassure her that no matter how great the challenge before them they would overcome it, together, that his love for her had never, would never, could never waver. She was everything to him, and he would keep her safe and happy, to the best of his ability, for all the rest of his days.
The time would come for talk, but even Lucien could tell that this moment did not call for words. She was too lost in the maze of her own heart for him to reach her, and besides, he worried that anything he might say now would only serve to increase her distress. And so he only held her, brushing his lips against her temple, running his hands across the slope of her back, waiting for the storm of weeping to pass, waiting for the chance to tell her just how much he loved her, no matter what might happen next.
Jean could not say how long it took, for her weeping to run its course, for her to come back to her senses and regain the composure to speak. Seconds, minutes, whole lifetimes passed as she lay nestled within Lucien's embrace, the scent of his spicy cologne and the soft sound of his voice soothing her, quieting the raging of her heart. She was quite exhausted, when at last it seemed she had no more tears left to shed, and though this was due in part to the cataclysmic storm of emotions that had overcome her in response to Alice's revelation, she knew now for certain the more pressing cause of her fatigue. Weariness, and nausea, and swollen feet and an aching back; she knew well the delights that waited for her, in the months ahead.

That thought was dark, and brought with it bitter memories she was loath to contemplate. Oh, both Christopher and Jack had been delivered easily enough, and she had delighted in them, loved them with everything she had, gave thanks with every day that passed from their births to this one that her children were well and healthy. But Jean's heart bore scars from a battle lost long before that, and dread filled her. She had done this thing, this terrible thing, for a second time, and she could not help but feel as if a reckoning were coming.

But if it were, she could not stop it. There were plans to be made, tasks to complete, meals to cook and people to look after, and most of all there was Lucien, Lucien who held her close, who had not run from her when she'd revealed the awful truth.

He had, in fact, not spoken a word after her confession, she realized with some distress. Quite suddenly she sat up, a little oomph of surprise escaping Lucien as her elbow caught his belly in her haste to move. With her hands in her hair, desperately trying to regain some semblance of control over herself, she looked down upon him. Beside her he was reclining, his elbow resting on the mattress and his chin cradled in his palm, blue eyes staring up at her in wonder. There was no anger in him, no unhappiness now that he knew he was about to made a father again and all their plans were ruined; if anything, he looked almost...hopeful.

"Jean," he murmured, reaching out with his free hand to wind their fingers together. "Tell me what you're thinking."

She almost laughed; what an impossible request it seemed. Her thoughts were so many and so varied she could hardly give them voice, now; she was thinking about him, how she loved him, how she longed to be free to do as she wished, to wander the world with his hand in her own, how she felt that freedom had been snatched from her grasp. She was thinking about doctor's visits and bedrest and the endless months of fear that loomed in front of her, as she waited with bated breath for some sort of cosmic punishment that might tear her heart in half, or might never come at all. She was thinking that they ought to speak to Father Emory, and perishing with shame at the very idea of that conversation. She was thinking about what she needed to make for dinner, and how inappropriate it would be for Charlie to come home and discover that Lucien was hiding in her bedroom. She was thinking about the first time she'd held young Christopher in her arms, and the last time she'd seen Jack. A million things, most of them unpleasant, occupied her mind, and she did not know how to even begin sharing those things with him, or even if she should.

It wasn't that she didn't trust him; she trusted no one more. It was just that she had never been particularly good at revealing her vulnerabilities, confessing to weakness, airing the dearest longings of her heart. Christopher had not needed such emotional forthrightness from her; he had needed her strength, and her laughter, and accepted what she gave him without question. Lucien, though, he had
pushed through her reticence, in the past, had ignored her attempts to steer the conversation to safer
ground and reached for her with gentle hands and in so doing had succeeded in, however briefly,
braking through her defenses. Perhaps now would be such a moment, with him lying beside her,
speaking to her so softly. Then again, perhaps not; her tears seemed concession enough, for she did
not readily let others see her weep.

"I don't know," she told him. It wasn't entirely a lie, for she truly could not fathom the pattern of her
own racing thoughts. "What are you thinking?"

That was easier, for her, pushing him instead of giving into his urging. And she did want to
know, needed to know, how he felt about their having a child, now that it was a reality and not just a
terrible gnawing fear.

He smiled, a bit sadly. "I'm thinking about how much I love you."

Her breath caught in her throat; damn him, for with a few simple words he had once more shattered
her restraint and left her desperate for his comfort and reassurances, no matter how weak it made her
appear. Sensing her distress Lucien hauled himself upright; he caught hold of her hips and with
surprising strength he lifted her and gathered her into his lap. Reflexively her arms slipped round his
neck, searching for something solid to cling to, her body molding against his and her eyes now on a
level with his own.

"Jean," he told her seriously. "I know that we haven't discussed it, and I know that the timing is...not
the best."

She scoffed, and he frowned.

"But," he continued, reaching out to brush a wayward lock of hair back from her face, "a child is a
wonderful thing. We'll sort it out, and when he - or she - gets here, we will love them, and we will be
happy, my darling."

If he ever gets here, Jean thought sadly, though she did not dare share her fears with Lucien, taint his
hopeful optimism with her grief and her doubts. If I don't lose him, and break your heart in the
process.

"Everything will be all right, Jean," he said, his brow furrowing as he watched her, as if he could see
in her eyes the darkness that haunted her.

She did not answer him, and in the silence his expression grew expectant, as if, having told her the
truth of his heart he now expected the same in return. Jean wanted to give him that, to give him all of
herself, for she adored him, and she never felt so safe as when he held her. But her heart was too
raw, her mind too chaotic, and she feared she would say the wrong thing, feared she would wound
him, upset him, shatter this fragile moment of peace. No words came to her, of hope or reassurance,
no blessing she could offer him in exchange for his tender kindness. The silence dragged on until the
tension between them became all but unbearable, and she dug deep in search of some resilience that
would carry her through this moment.

"Well," she said, and beneath her Lucien's body relaxed as he breathed a sigh of relief. "That's that
settled, then."

"Jean-" his voice carried with it a note of warning, and she ducked her head, fussing with his
hopelessly wrinkled waistcoat and hiding her face from his piercing gaze.

"I do want to marry you, Lucien," she told him softly. "I've wanted this for...such a long time. I just
don't know what happens next."

He caught her chin with the tips of his fingers and lifted her head so that she could see him smiling at her when he answered.

"First, I think you and I need to go down to the surgery so I can give you a proper examination."

"Lucien!" she hissed, swatting at his flank with her hand, outraged at the very suggestion, but he just laughed and held her tighter, pressing his lips to the curve of his neck.

"All right," he said in mock defeat. "That can wait until after we're married, I suppose. We will go downstairs, though, Jean. We will have our supper and we will do the washing up together and then I will fix you a cup of tea. And when you're ready, we can start planning the wedding."

A sudden bout of nerves gripped her, and she ducked her head once more, borrowing into the crook of his neck. It was strange, how easily they fit together like this, how even when he vexed her she loved him with everything he had, how he could make her feel small and delicate and yet powerful all at the same time. She was small, in comparison to his broad, strong frame, but in moments like this she keenly felt the sway she held over him, the way he deferred to her in most everything he did. When you're ready, he'd said, leaving the choice entirely up to her.

"How soon-" he started to ask, and she groaned.

"The sooner the better," she muttered into his neck. "People will talk, no matter when we have the ceremony, but the longer we wait, the more obvious it will be."

Her heart sank even as she spoke those words, as she realized the truth of them. It was nothing she hadn't endured before, the sidelong looks and the snide whispers when she passed by; back then her belly had grown too big too fast, and they all knew she could not possibly have fallen pregnant on her wedding night, no matter what she - or her mother - tried to tell them. And it would happen again; they would point at her and whisper, say how Lucien had only married her because he had to, saying how scandalous it was, that he had fallen in with his housekeeper and been stuck with her as a result. No matter how earnest her words might be, no one would believe that Lucien had proposed to her because he wanted to, because they loved one another, even before the baby. They would only see what they wanted to see, and mock her - and him - endlessly for it. Surely even Charlie and Frank and Matthew and young Christopher, who had all been informed immediately after the event, would have their doubts, for the timing was too conspicuous, and they could not hide it.

Alice knows the truth, though, she told herself. At least there was one other person outside her room who would believe her, and not judge her for a wanton, or Lucien for a letch.

"You know I don't give a damn what people will say," Lucien told her fiercely. "I love you, Jean."

"I know," she told him sadly, her face still buried in the crook of his neck. "Still. It will have to be soon. In August, if we can manage it."

That would cause whispers all its own, she knew, the haste with which she intended to marry him, but she could bear that part of it. She would only smile, and say how much they cared for one another, and how they did not want to waste another minute. After all, they were already accustomed to living together, and neither of them relished the prospect of changing their living arrangements for the duration of a long engagement. A second wedding for both of them, no need for a big fuss, that's what she'd say, and perhaps for a few months they could enjoy their life in peace. Before the baby made its presence known and everything fell apart.
The baby. Once more Jean felt the sting of tears, though these were easier to hold at bay. They were going to have a baby, and as frightened as she was, she could not deny that in her heart, some piece of her wanted it, wanted a child with Lucien's eyes or his soft blonde curls or both, a little life to hold in her arms, to nurture, to love. It would be difficult, nearly impossible at times, she was sure, but Lucien was right. A child was a wonderful thing.

"Next month?" he asked, sounding somewhat surprised, and she raised her head sharply, unsure of why exactly he had responded to her so, but when she looked at him she saw only joy in his eyes.

"Yes," she said firmly.

His broad hands reached for her, cradled her face, traced the lines of her cheekbones as his eyes welled with some emotion she could not name, but which brought her joy to see nonetheless.

"One month, and you'll be my wife," he breathed, and then she understood. One month, and then she would share his bed and his name, would no longer have to hide how she felt for him. One month, and she could hold his hand in public, stand proudly beside him, and no matter how people might whisper, no one could say it was wrong, for they would be bound together in the eyes of God and the law. She would be his wife, and he her husband, and that simple truth meant everything to her. It was all she wanted, all she longed for. One month, and then they could be together, in every way, always.

There was much to decide. They would have to choose a date, and tell their friends and family - those that could be prevailed upon to attend at such short notice - would have to decide whether to have a reception and a honeymoon trip and where and how. She would need a proper examination - though the thought of receiving one at Lucien's hands, even after they were wed, made her blush - and they would have to begin preparations for welcoming this new addition to their home. This last gave her pause, for she was so frightened of allowing herself to hope only to have those dreams cruelly disappointed, and yet she knew that she must behave as if all were well, must try not to trouble herself unnecessarily. There was much to do, and very little time it seemed, but she could spend a few minutes more in this place, sitting on his lap, his arms tight around her, safe in the knowledge that he loved her, no matter what happened next.

"Jean?" His voice was gentle and his eyes full of concern, and she realized she had gone quiet again. In response she offered him a gentle smile.

"I love you, Lucien," she told him. She had not spoken those words very often, not nearly often enough, for her heart was a strange and fearful beast, but she spoke them now, needing him to know how earnestly she meant them, how much she cared for him, how grateful she was, for the gift his love and his presence in her life.

He smiled, and then ducked his head to kiss her, and she held him close and kissed him back, softly, sweetly. It was that kiss, more than anything else, that sealed their commitment to one another, for she had made her choice, and chosen him, without reservation.
Chapter 9

25 July 1960

They spent the weekend in a quiet sort of tension, hesitant to drift too far from one another. The initial tumult of emotions that had come spilling out of his beloved upon the revelation of her condition made Lucien loath to leave her side. He knew what it meant to her, to know that she had so blatantly, obviously failed her church, knew how worried she was about perception, and reputation, and their future. While Lucien himself harbored no particular qualms about such idle gossip he worried for his darling Jean, worried what effect the coming months might have on her. It was all right for people to be discourteous to him, to make assumptions about him and his comportment; he had been living with the constant disappointment of his neighbors most all his life. Jean, though, Jean was a different story altogether. She remained the best, most wonderful woman he had ever known, and he would brook no disparagement of her.

For two days they remained confined to the house, sitting quietly on the sofa in the sunroom, his arm draped around her shoulders, Jean curled into his side. There was much to do, much to consider, plans to make and letters to write, but those two days they stole for themselves, a quiet sort of solitude in which they could simply soak up the truth of the sudden gift they had been given, the depth of their love for one another. One day, one day soon, they would be married, and he found himself looking forward to that more than most anything else. Watching her walk away from him in the evenings, mounting the stairs to go and spend the night far from his side, was a constant challenge for him now, now that he knew how well they fit together, how lovely, how peaceful it was to lie with her beside him. For a moment he had considered suggesting that given her current condition and the choices they had already made surely it wouldn't hurt for her to come and sleep beside him now, for him to offer her what comfort he could, but he held his tongue, knowing that despite her previous infraction - or perhaps because of it - Jean would be determined not to take such a liberty again until they were properly wed.

They had decided amongst themselves to speak to Father Emory on Monday afternoon, and so Lucien dutifully took himself off to the police station in the morning, though he liked not one bit the distance in Jean's eyes, the distracted way she brushed her lips against his cheek before he left. He wanted, very much, to stay with her, every moment, to hold her hand, to reassure them both that all would be well so long as they were together, but she had told him to go, and he was helpless to defy her. Perhaps she wanted a few precious hours to herself, to sort through her thoughts, to prepare for what was to come, or perhaps she had grown tired of his constant, hovering presence, or perhaps she simply felt that it was the right thing to do, that they ought to try to go about their lives as normal. She did not reveal her motivations to him, and he did not press her.

He made his way to the station, but Frank was in one of the interview rooms, and so Lucien was forced to wait. He made himself a cup of tea and leaned against Charlie's desk, alternating between sipping his tea and thinking dark thoughts of Father Emory. He had never gotten along particularly well with the man, and it was no secret that Lucien was not a regular attendant at the church. Would the thorny priest still consent to marry them if Lucien did not agree to abide by the decree of the church into which he'd been born? As a child his parents had put him through the paces, had him baptized, forced him through the process of confirmation, dragged him along to confession and mass with alarming regularity. The school to which he'd been exiled upon his mother's death had been loosely affiliated with the church, and there had been prayers and homilies and canings aplenty throughout his years there. Once he was grown, though, able to make his own choices, he had walked away from the church more out of stubborn resistance than anything else. It was the long years of the war, the atrocities he'd seen, the lash of the whip upon his back, the endless parade of
death and devastation, the loss of his family, that had in the end sealed his apostasy. When he'd first been imprisoned in Selarang he had prayed most fervently. They had all prayed, in the beginning. But the days dragged on and the horror mounted, and no salvation came for them. What sort of god, he'd asked himself, could hear his children crying out for mercy and yet leave them doomed to such unimaginable pain?

And then he'd been released, and he had learned that as grave as his own suffering had been it paled in comparison to the torment that had unfolded in Europe under the Nazi regime. If there was a god, he'd decided then, a god who could sit idly by while people died in their millions, innocent men, women, and children, under such brutal conditions, it was a god he wanted no part of. After that, it was no longer a causal defiance of authority that kept him from the church; now, it was a quiet, seething rage.

Jean, though, Jean took comfort in her faith, drew strength from her whispered prayers, and he had no intention of forcing her to part with it. In some ways he envied her that certainty, that trust, that devotion, for in its absence he found the world a mean and terrible place. He would do whatever it took to protect her gentle heart, would defer to her in this so that she might keep her head held high, so that she might still take part in the rites and rituals that formed the backbone of her spiritual life, so different from his own weary soul. He would be polite to Father Emory, would follow his pronouncements and bow his head and say the words so that Jean might be happy.

"Lucien?"

The sound of Frank's voice startled him so severely that he nearly dropped his cup, splashing tea all down the front of his fine blue suit.

"Damn," he muttered, leaving the dripping cup on Charlie's desk and wiping ineffectually at his ruined clothes.

"Everything all right?" Frank asked him with a sardonic lift of his eyebrow.

Lucien just sighed, and gave up his efforts. No, everything was not all right, not really. Jean was distant and troubled, Father Emory was a pompous, self-righteous bugger and Lucien was not eager to speak to him in the least, there were a thousand worries hanging on his mind, and the tea was soaking through his waistcoat to stain his shirt.

"Just lovely," he grumbled.

Though he counted Frank a friend, the time had not yet come for him to unburden himself to the Superintendent. He and Jean had agreed not to tell anyone of this news until after the wedding. Though he had agreed ostensibly for the sake of her reputation, the truth behind his motivations was rather more distressing. He loved Jean, with his whole heart, but he was a doctor, too, and he knew that given her age the risk of miscarriage was great. It was a burden he did not wish to place upon her shoulders, the knowledge that the odds were not in their favor; it was a burden he wished he did not have to carry himself. Already a small seed of hope had been planted in his heart, a blossom of joy tentatively taking root. To have a child, a child with Jean, would be a beautiful, miraculous thing, and to see that blessing unfulfilled would shatter him, he knew, and likely Jean as well. Better to bite their tongues, and keep their secret, and wait in silent hope than to reveal their situation to all and sundry when they did not yet even know if it would come to fruition.

He had been quiet too long, it seemed, for Frank was looking at him strangely.

"Really, Lucien," he said seriously - and wasn't that odd, for Frank was not a particularly serious man - "you look like you haven't slept in a week. Is there anything I need to know?"
"No," Lucien told him at once. "I have the autopsy results for you here. By all accounts, it was just a heart attack. We found no signs of foul play."

He retrieved the file and handed it off to Frank, and did his best to appear engaged in the conversation, but in truth his mind was miles away, at home with Jean and their worries.

All morning Jean had floated from room to room, wiping ineffectually at the bookshelves and the table tops and thinking morose thoughts of the conversation that was to come. It would not be the first time she had gone to ask a priest for the boon of a quick and quiet wedding, but she feared it would be more difficult, this time. Father Morton had smiled at her softly and told her in a tremulous voice that while he could hardly approve of their actions he believed they had made the right choice, and that once they had set things to rights with God their union, their family, would be blessed. Father Emory, she feared, would be a different sort of beast. He was stern, and taciturn, not particularly warm or friendly, and she could not forget how easy it had been for all of them to jump to the conclusion that he had been involved with Father Morton's death. He hadn't, of course, but the fact that she could have considered it even for a moment had colored her impression of the man most negatively.

And then Lucien had come home, rushing to change his suit and muttering about spilled tea and heart attacks, and before Jean knew quite what was happening they were in his car and he was whisking them off to Sacred Heart. She did not speak much, as they drove, because in truth she could not find the words to say. Though Lucien had been nothing but kind and supportive she had not yet told him the entire truth, had not revealed to him the manner in which her marriage to Christopher had begun, and that thought weighed heavy on her mind. It wasn't that she didn't trust him, that she worried his opinion of her might change; she knew that one youthful indiscretion would not be sufficient to sully the good esteem in which he held her. It was simply that she could not bring herself to say the words aloud, that she feared what might happen to her heart should she breathe life into such bitter memories.

The car lumbered to a stop outside the church, and before she could move, Lucien reached out and caught her hand in his own.

"Jean, my darling," he said softly. "Are you ready?"

She took a moment to study him, this handsome man she loved so well, who despite his reckless nature seemed so determined to care for her, to lavish her with love and affection at every turn. Was she ready to face the priest? Not in the slightest. Was she ready to marry Lucien, to join their lives together, forever? Unequivocally yes.

"I am," she told him in a steady voice, giving his hand a squeeze.

He smiled at her and kissed her hand, and then he was out of the car. Though Jean stepped out before he had a chance to open the door for her he reached out and caught her hand at once, lacing their fingers together, quietly communicating his strength to her as they walked towards the church. Jean lifted her chin, and clung to him fiercely.

It did not matter now, she supposed, if people saw her holding his hand. It did not matter, really, what Father Emory might think of her. All that mattered was that Lucien was here, beside her, that he intended to marry her, baby or no, that they loved one another, that they would face their every challenge together. They walked towards a conversation that might well be the most uncomfortable of Jean's entire life, but she would bear this indignity for the sake of the man who stood beside her.

They entered the quiet serenity of the sanctuary, both of them stopping by the font to cross
themselves as the sunlight filtered in through the stained-glass windows and painted everything in
rainbow hues. Jean loved this place, the peace that filled her when she strode across the marble floor,
the beauty of the saints, the reassurance of the words, the flowers she and her friends had so carefully
arranged, the smell of incense, the whispered prayers. Father Emory was standing by the altar, deep
in conversation with Evelyn Toohey, but as they approached Mrs. Toohey mercifully departed, and
they were allowed to speak to Father Emory in solitude.

"Mrs. Beazley, Doctor Blake," he said solemnly. "Good morning."

His eyes flickered from their faces to their hands and back again, a question in his gaze though he did
not give it voice. Jean kept her back straight and her voice even as she answered him.

"Good morning, Father Emory," she said. "We were hoping to speak to you in private, if you have a
moment."

"Of course," he responded, and then he was ushering them through a side door and down the
corridor to his cramped study. Inside they found a large wooden desk faced by two hard-backed
chairs, the room lined with bookshelves, every inch of the space scrupulously neat and methodically
organized.

"Please," he said, gesturing as he made his way behind the desk. "Have a seat."

Lucien stepped back and allowed Jean to settle in first before dropping into the chair beside her. She
crossed her ankles demurely and Lucien leaned forward slightly, as if to shield her from Father
Emory's impending ire even as Lucien once more reached for her hand. There was silence, for a
moment, as the priest waited for them to speak and Jean struggled to find the words. She had tried,
rather hard, to order her thoughts before arriving, but now that they were here, now that she was
face-to-face with the reality of the situation, she found she could not speak. Mercifully, Lucien felt no
such hesitation.

"Father Emory," he said, giving a somewhat forced-looking smile. "I have asked Mrs. Beazley to
marry me, and she has agreed."

"That's wonderful news," Father Emory said, though he was not smiling.

"We were rather hoping we could be married here at Sacred Heart."

"Here we go, Jean thought glumly."

"Of course," the priest answered. He reached for a heavy, leather-bound book and pulled it towards
him, leafing through the pages as he spoke.

"Do you have a date in mind? Perhaps a year or so from now?"

Jean knew he meant well, that most couples who came to him would be planning to wait that long,
would be saving up their money and making arrangements and would be grateful for the time. She
had rather more pressing concerns, however.

"The thing is, Father," she said, trying to keep the tremor from her voice. "We were thinking
something a bit sooner. We've both been married before, and our living arrangements are already
settled."

"I see," he said slowly, steepling his fingertips together atop his datebook and eyeing her
thoughtfully.
"Are you both widowed, then?" he prompted, his gaze shifting to Lucien. Of course he didn't know, Jean realized, the tragedy that had befallen Lucien's first marriage. The two men had hardly spoken to one another at all following the investigation into Father Morton's death, and Lucien had not had any reason to unburden himself.

"Yes," Lucien said cooly, and Jean's heart sank at his tone. The last thing she needed was for the two of them to antagonize one another in this delicate moment. The two men eyed one another warily, their distaste for one another plain.

"Perhaps December, then?" Father Emory suggested after a moment of terrible tension.

Jean's cheeks flushed crimson with frustration, already tired of this dance. She wanted the thing done, but she could hardly see a way to survive this conversation with her dignity intact.

"Actually," she said, "we were thinking August."

Father Emory was not a particularly expressive man, but even so his surprise was evident upon his face.

"August?" he repeated. "That's...rather sudden. There are certain observances that must be made, Mrs. Beazley. We require that all couples attend our marriage preparation course, and we won't be having another until September."

Jean's heart sank, and she looked to Lucien at once with pleading eyes. They would have to tell him, she realized. Of course she'd had no intention of lying to him outright, but before this moment she had rather hoped that perhaps they might be able to navigate this conversation without having to speak the truth so plainly. Now, it seemed they would have no other choice. Lucien's eyes were kind as he returned her gaze steadily, his hand in hers offering her his quiet comfort. Perhaps he could see the sorrow, the hopelessness in her face, for it was Lucien, and not Jean, who finally told the truth.

"The thing is, Father," he said, "we really can't wait that long. Mrs. Beazley is...in a somewhat delicate condition."

There it was. There would be no turning back from this now. Jean tried to keep her chin up, though her heart was aching, though she wanted nothing so much as to flee from this place and the silent recrimination of Father Emory's steely gaze. He knew, now, and in his eyes she could see his judgement of her, his disappointment. And, quite suddenly, she found that her dejected sorrow was overwhelmed by a petulant sort of defiance. Who was he to judge her, anyway? Yes, he was a priest, a man chosen by God to lead his people, but he was still just a man, a man who had sworn to never love a woman, and so by definition a man who could not ever understand the beauty of what she and Lucien had found together, the ties that bound them, the joy of their union. He did not know her, truly, and he did not know her circumstances, and to see him already deciding that she was somehow tainted by her love of Lucien made her very cross indeed.

"I see," he said heavily, and she knew then that he did, that he had heard the truth of Lucien's careful words and had come to the conclusion that before him sat two sinners in search of grace.

"We had already decided to be married," Jean told him firmly. That was important to her, somehow, that he know they had not only decided to wed because of the baby, that they loved one another truly. It mattered to her, that people know this was what she wanted, a decision she had made freely. She was an independent woman, and she had made her choice, had chosen Lucien, because he was what she wanted. "This has only...moved up our timetable. Is it possible, Father?"
For a moment he simply considered her in silence, taking stock of her determination and the title of
her chin and the way she still held Lucien's hand so tightly.

"I think it's necessary," he said at last. Once more he turned to his date book, searching it for an
opening. "The church is available on the 27th of August, if that suits you."

Jean breathed a small sigh of relief. Yes, that suited her just fine; one month, almost to the day, and
she could rest easy in the knowledge that Lucien was hers, before God and man.

"You'll still need the marriage preparation course," he continued, though Jean was hardly listening
now. "We can arrange to hold a special session for you in two weeks."

"That would be wonderful, thank you, Father," Jean told him earnestly. Beside her Lucien remained
still and quiet, tense as if he was ready to jump in and defend her at any moment and yet biting his
tongue out of respect for her faith and her connection to this church. She loved him for it, truly, his
willingness to be married in a church he had previously wanted no part of.

"I must say, however, that marriage is a sacrament between two believers. Doctor Blake-"

"I was baptised in this very church, Father," Lucien interrupted him smoothly. "I haven't been
as...observant as I could be, that's true, but surely that counts for something."

Father Emory sighed, and scrubbed his hand across his face. "If you will consent to make
confession, and make an effort to attend mass more regularly, I see no reason why you can't be
married here."

He seemed somehow disappointed by that fact, but Jean's heart was singing. They were going to be
all right; they would have their wedding in the church, and then they would have their life, together,
and though she harbored no fond feelings for Father Emory, she was nonetheless grateful that he had
agreed to help them.

The rest of their meeting went smoothly enough. They had made their plans and Father Emory
dismissed them, and they made their way back through the church, hand-in-hand. Once they were in
the car, however, Jean placed her hand upon Lucien's thigh, stopping him before he had a chance to
start the engine.

"Thank you, Lucien," she murmured softly. She knew what it had cost him, to maintain his
composure in the face of Father Emory's judgment, and she needed him to know what it meant to
her, that he had done this thing for her sake.

"Anything for you, my darling," he answered.

In that moment, Jean did not spare a thought for her fears. She did not consider the unpleasantness of
the confessions both she and Lucien would have to make, the awkwardness of the course they would
be forced to endure, the worries that tormented her regarding the health and safety of their child. She
thought only how she loved this man, and how happy she was to know that they would soon be
wed. And so she leaned over to him, and planted a gentle kiss against his lips.

"I love you," she whispered. The words were coming more easily to her now, as she grew more
secure in their connection to one another, as she allowed herself a glimmer of hope. She loved him,
and they would be all right.

Lucien just grinned, and kissed her again.
"Christopher," Jean murmured into the telephone, leaning back against the chair tucked away behind Lucien's desk. He had encouraged her to make this call from the privacy of his study, and she was grateful to him for it, for the chance to speak to her son without an audience. The conversation wasn't going at all the way she'd hoped, and she didn't want anyone to see the frustration written all over her face.

"I'm just trying to understand, mum," Christopher said slowly, his voice coming tinny and annoyed through the receiver. "It just seems so sudden-"

"We've been engaged almost two months now," Jean pointed out stubbornly. For a moment she felt as if she could hear Christopher grinding his teeth through the phone.

"I know," he said. "And I'm happy for you, mum. The Doctor is a good man and I think you'll be good for each other. But next month? I just don't see how we can manage it. I'd have to put in a request for leave, and Ruby's still a bit delicate, and Amelia's teething."

Jean sighed, her frustration giving way to disappointment as she realized that he was right. It was a long bus ride from Adelaide to Ballarat, and a lot to ask of her son's little family. But she wanted so much, for her sons to be in attendance, especially Christopher, that sure, steady, serious young man with a heart so like her own. For a moment she considered asking him if he couldn't just come on his own, but she knew he would not consent to leave Ruby alone, and she could hardly blame him.

"It's all right, sweetheart," she told him sadly, one of her hands coming to rest idly against her stomach. She wasn't showing, yet, but still she knew now there was another child nestled inside her, that soon she would have to tell Christopher he had another little brother on the way. For one mad instant she considered telling him there and then, but she bit her tongue, remembering the promise she and Lucien had made to keep this secret to themselves for as long as they could. "I knew it was unlikely, I just wanted to ask."

"Are you sure you can't put it off, just a few more months? Maybe when Amelia's a bit bigger, we could-"

"Maybe you could come for Christmas," she interrupted, changing the subject hastily.

There was a startled silence on the other end of the line, as if Christopher had seen through her cheerful tone and recognized her dogged instance that the wedding carry on as planned for August.

"Maybe," he agreed half-heartedly.

"Have you spoken to Jack?"

Christopher sighed, and she knew before he spoke that the answer would be no.

"Bloody hell, Lucien, next month?" Matthew grumbled.

Lucien laughed, leaning back against his chair, feet propped up on the desk and a glass of good whiskey clutched in his hand. After Jean had finished her phone call to Christopher - and escaped to the sunroom with her chin held high and tears in the corners of her eyes, despite her insistence that
everything was fine - Lucien had taken her place, and rung his dear friend.

"No time like the present," he said jovially. "I know they've got you locked up there in Melbourne, but do you think they could spare you for a few days? I would very much like for you to come, if you could."

"I'd like to see them try to stop me," Matthew said darkly.

"Good man," Lucien laughed again. Though he had plenty to worry about his heart was lighter than it had been in years. Yes, he was worried about Jean, worried about her health, the baby, whatever Christopher had said that so upset his mother, but she was going to be his wife, soon, and they were inviting friends to their wedding, and he would not let doubt spoil this lovely moment.

"Do you think you could manage to stand for an hour or two? I'm told I need a best man, and I would quite like for it to be you."

There was another job he had in mind for Matthew Lawson, when the time came, a very important title he wished to bestow upon the grumpy former Superintendent, but he had decided to wait to make that request until after the baby was born. *All in due time*, he told himself.

"Well," Matthew said, no longer grumpy but pleased indeed at the prospect. "For you, Lucien, I'd be happy to."

They did not often go in for sentimentality, Lucien and Matthew, but they had come to rely on one another, to trust in one another, most completely, and Lucien counted Matthew his closest friend in all the world. It would mean a great deal to him to have Matthew standing beside him on the day he was wed, and he found his voice choked by a sudden rush of emotion.

"Bravo," he said in an unsteady voice.

There was a long pause, as both Matthew and Lucien shifted in their seats, made suddenly uncomfortable by the fondness they'd both just displayed for one another. It was Matthew who finally broke the silence.

"What's she doing marrying a miserable old bastard like you anyway?"

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1 August 1960

"It would mean so much to me if you could come," Jean said earnestly. She was once more perched on a stool in the hospital morgue, her back turned firmly to block out the sight of the body laid out on the sterile steel table in the center of the room. The smell of the place - antiseptic and bleach, thankfully, not death and decay - was enough to turn her stomach, but she was determined to make this invitation in person.

"Oh!" Alice said, sounding somewhat surprised. She had been staring through the microscope at the far end of the counter as Jean spoke, but now she raised her head, her expression incredulous but not displeased. Jean smiled softly, trying to appear encouraging. This was not exactly the reaction she'd expected, but then Alice so rarely behaved in a way that Jean expected, and she found such unpredictability refreshing.

"It's just, I would have thought you'd only want friends and family there," Alice told her.

"You are our friend," Jean insisted. "In fact…" she hesitated just for a moment. It felt strange, the request she was about to make of Alice, but it felt *right*, too. She had come to the decision the day
before, and she was eager to plead her case. "I was hoping you might stand with me, at the
ceremony. Be my maid of honor."

Alice looked at her askance, as if Jean had just started speaking another language altogether, and she
rushed to explain herself.

"You see, Alice, I've quite enjoyed talking with you, these last few weeks, and I want to have some
with me who supports me. My sister and I get on well enough but she..." she's a judgmental cow,
and I can't trust her with anything. "Well. She's not a good fit." And the ladies from the sewing
circle, always saying one thing and meaning another, I don't want them with me, either. "I would
have asked Mattie, but she's all the way in London, and she won't be able to come home for the
ceremony." But, God willing, we may see her for Christmas, and that's good enough for
me. "You've been so kind to me, and...well, I would appreciate having you with me."

Alice Harvey was not one given to big displays of emotion, and she did not burst into tears or a wide
grin, did not throw her arms around Jean's neck. She only smiled, gently, and nodded her head.

"If you want me there, Jean, then I would be...honored to stand with you."

"Good," Jean said, a bit thickly. Alice might have been stoic and reserved but Jean was finding
herself flung from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other so quickly she could hardly keep
up. Blinking rapidly in an effort to stop her tears she smiled tremulously at Alice.

"Thank you," she said, reaching across to give the doctor's hand a gentle squeeze. "Matthew will
stand for Lucien, and it will be such a comfort to us to have you both there."

"Bloody hell, Lucien, you don't waste any time, do you?" Frank laughed, leaning back in his chair.
For the first time in days the station was quiet enough for Lucien to offer his invitation to the
Superintendent, and though he was getting a bit tired of hearing that same question, he still smiled.
No, they weren't wasting any time at all; only three months before he'd gone tearing after Jean's bus
in the street, and now they were engaged, set to be wed in just a few weeks' time, with a baby on the
way. Yes, life was changing rapidly all around him, so quickly that at times he felt he could hardly
keep up. In effort to keep his mind from becoming too consumed with thoughts of the future and all
the many questions they still had yet to answer he chose instead to focus on the wedding; if they
could just get through that part, somehow he felt everything else would be all right.

"No time like the present," he said, for what felt like the hundredth time.

Frank grinned at him, lazy and self-assured as a cat sunning itself beneath a window. It was Frank,
after all, who had encouraged him, told him in his own roundabout way to get a move on, and he
wondered if Frank was remembering that conversation now.

"I'll be there," Frank said, rising to shake his hand. "Congratulations, Lucien," he added in a
somewhat more serious tone. "She's a wonderful woman."

"Yes, she is," Lucien agreed heartily.

With his business done he turned away, and very nearly walked straight into Bill Hobart.

"Bill!" he cried jovially. "Wonderful to see you."

Bill looked him strangely, taken aback by his sudden enthusiasm, and Lucien barrelled on, bolstered
by the good cheer that had filled him as a result of his brief conversation with Frank.
"Tell me Bill, are you free on the 27th of August? Around say 3:00 in the afternoon?"

"Why?" Bill asked warily, watching him through narrowed eyes.

"I'm getting married, and I'd quite like for you to be there."

Lucien couldn't help but laugh at the look of bewilderment on Bill's face, and he reached out to clasp his shoulder. "Bring a girl, too, why don't you," he added, and then he was off, laughing again as he heard an utterly gobsmacked Bill ask Frank "who the hell would want to marry him?"

3 August 1960

"Oh, Jean, that's wonderful!" Emily crowed delightedly. Nancy chimed in her agreement, though Evelyn Toohey looked faintly scandalized upon hearing that Jean not only intended to marry her employer, but that she intended to do so in just three weeks' time. Emily and Nancy had joined the sewing circle the year before; Ceila had divorced her husband and moved away to start a new life with her baby, and Dorothy hardly ventured from her house these days. The new additions were nice enough ladies, and Jean appreciated that they did not seem to think it so very strange, that she should be marrying Lucien.

"I know it's short notice," she added, somewhat apologetically, and to her horror she saw Nancy raise her eyebrow mischievously.

"Just couldn't wait, could you, Jean?" Nancy said. She meant well, Jean knew, but the insinuation was an unpleasant one, and she was beginning to worry that Mrs. Toohey was in danger of having a stroke right there at the table.

"Well," Jean said, trying to sound dignified, "second marriage for both of us. I already live here. We didn't see any need to make a big fuss."

"Has he been married before then, your Lucien?" Emily asked. Though they were at that very moment gathered around Lucien's kitchen table with their work forgotten in front of them the truth was that Jean did not often speak of Lucien to the ladies. They knew, of course, that she'd decided to move to Adelaide, and that she had abruptly changed her mind and returned not long after, but they had no idea what had transpired between Jean and her intended. Many times she had wondered if she ought to tell them more - they were her friends, after all - but she had, as always, chosen to bite her tongue, and kept her feelings to herself. Which had led directly to Emily's deeply uncomfortable question.

The air in the room seemed to shift, and Jean took a deep breath, trying to find a way to break the tension.

"Yes," she said softly. "He lived in Singapore, before the war. He was captured when the Japanese invaded. His wife was killed, and his daughter was taken to an orphanage."

Though so many years had passed it was still terrible to even think about, the horror that Lucien had endured, the disaster that had befallen his family. Though she had not seen them Jean had felt the ridges of the scars that laced his back beneath her fingertips, and that alone had been enough to break her heart afresh. Her words had a similar effect upon the other ladies at the table, for they all appeared shocked and somewhat saddened by the news. No one seemed to know quite what to say, until Evelyn reached across and laid a gentle hand on Jean's forearm.

"Thank goodness he found you, then, dear," she said. "We'll all be there, won't we, ladies?"
And thus the sorrow of a moment before dissipated beneath a sudden rise of chatter as they discussed the arrangements for the flowers and Jean's dress and all the fun that was to come.

"Haven't seen you here for a while, Lucien," came a rumbling voice behind him.

Having been kicked out of his kitchen by the arrival of the sewing circle ladies Lucien had taken himself off to the club for the first time since discovering that Jean was pregnant. He felt a heavy hand settle on his shoulder, and turned his head to find Patrick Tyneman standing behind him, drink in hand.

"Patrick," he said by way of greeting. "Join me, won't you?"

Patrick eyed him warily for a moment, as if he were wondering what sort of trick Lucien might be trying to play, but in the end he agreed, folding himself into the adjacent chair with a sort of grace that was surprising in one so portly.

"I trust you're doing well," Patrick said.

"Never been better," Lucien answered truthfully. "I don't know if you've heard, but Jean has agreed to marry me."

For perhaps the first time in their entire acquaintance, Patrick Tyneman smiled at him. "Yes," he said, with a sly sort of smile. "I had heard something to that effect. Can Susan and I expect an invitation?"

"As a matter of fact, I'd like to offer you one right now. The wedding is the 27th of August, at 3:00 in the afternoon, if you're available. We're not bothering with formal invitations, given the time frame."

"Bloody hell, Lucien," Patrick said, shaking his head.

"There is nothing you can say to me that I haven't heard a hundred times already, so please, spare me the lecture," Lucien said, raising his hands as if in defeat. Yes, things were moving quickly, yes they would be the talk of the town for weeks to come, but Lucien knew in his heart they were doing the right thing for all three of them.

"I'll just say congratulations, then," Patrick said. He raised his glass, and Lucien clinked his own against it softly before they each took a long drink.

"She's a wonderful woman, Mrs. Beazley," Patrick continued after a moment. "I got to know her quite well, when she worked for your father. You're a lucky bastard."

"You don't know the half of it," Lucien told him earnestly. Yes, he was a lucky bastard indeed, lucky to have the love of a beautiful woman, lucky to have a second chance at raising a family, mercifully lucky that they were well, and whole, and on the way to a wedding that would usher in a new phase in both their lives. *May it be a happy one*, he thought as he took another drink.
With two weeks to go until the wedding Jean stood nervously in her tiny bedroom at the top of the stairs, gazing at her reflection in the full-length mirror Lucien had graciously placed in the room at her request. She smoothed her hands across her hips, turning to the side and studying her profile intently, searching for some sign of the little life she carried within her. Ten weeks gone, now, not quite three months, and to her great relief her figure remained lithe and trim as ever. That wouldn't last, she knew, but she hoped to make it to the wedding with her chin held high and her secret under wraps.

"You look lovely," Alice said from her perch on the bed, and Jean lifted her gaze to catch Alice's eyes in the mirror, to smile at her softly.

"I think it will do," she conceded.

The dress was of necessity a simple one; she did not have time for much embellishment. It was made of white satin, closely tailored from her décolletage to her waist, flowing into a soft bell-shaped skirt, with sheer white lace sleeves. Jean's hands fluttered back to her hips, and she frowned, feeling as if something were missing. She'd been working on the dress for just over two weeks now, spending every moment she could tucked away in her bedroom with her sewing needle. It wouldn't do, to for Lucien to see her dress before the wedding, and so she worked on it here, in this sanctuary that was still hers, and hers alone, for however brief a time.

There was a great deal of clatter and banging coming from downstairs where Lucien, Frank, Charlie, and a rather befuddled looking Bill Hobart were getting up to something in the studio; a particularly loud thump made Alice jump, and Jean smiled ruefully. Whatever the gentlemen were doing, Lucien had been quite secretive about it, perhaps as secretive as Jean herself had been regarding her dress. The days passed in a flurry of activity for them both, as phone calls from well-wishers and presents from absent friends came flowing in at all hours, as Jean organized the florist and worked with Cec Drury to make the sure the reception at the Colonists' would be to their liking. Lucien had told her grandly not to worry about money, to send every bill to him to settle up, but it was an empty gesture, really, when Jean was the one who had been handling his books for years now, and knew the state of his finances far better than Lucien himself did. True, he had no cause for alarm; the most grandiose wedding imaginable would not have been sufficient to ruin him, but Jean's tastes were rather more simple, and as it was they stood to enjoy a perfectly lovely wedding without too much expense.

"You really have no idea what they're doing down there?" Alice asked as raucous laughter came drifting up the stairs.

Jean sighed, reaching for a fabric remnant and carefully wrapping it around her waist, wondering if perhaps a nice little bow - something to accentuate her still-flat stomach, perhaps - might do the trick.

"As far as Lucien is aware, I have no earthly idea what he's doing," she said.

"But?" Alice prompted with a knowing glance, reading the truth from Jean's tone.

"But, between you and me, I think he wants to make the studio into a bedroom. Our bedroom." Her cheeks flushed scarlet at the very thought. Here she was pregnant with his child, standing in
what was to be her wedding dress, speaking to the only other person on the planet besides Lucien and herself - and Father Emory - who knew of her predicament, and still she found it somewhat difficult to speak that truth aloud. They would be married, soon, and with that came all sorts of challenges and delights, not least of all the sharing of a bed. It had been so long, so very long, since Jean had last shared her bedroom with another person. Comfort in winter and sweat in summer, soft skin sliding, sticking, shifting in sleep, the low rumbling growl of a man's contented snores, the heavy, oppressive sensation that she could never get a moment to herself; all of this she remembered, and found herself looking forward to with some trepidation. Of course, this was not her farmhouse; this house was grand and sprawling, and there were places to go, should she find herself in need of a few moments' privacy. The studio was larger than the sitting room in her former home, easily twice times as large as the bedroom she now occupied; surely, she told herself, there would be room enough for them both there.

And a bassinet, when the time comes, she added to herself.

"Is it a very nice room? I don't believe I've ever been inside the studio."

Alice was pleasant enough company, and speaking to her kept a smile on Jean's lips almost constantly. She pondered the question for a moment; yes, she thought, it is a very nice room. There was the grand old fireplace, the large, stately windows, a little bathroom tucked off to the side. Of course, it would need quite a bit of work; it was topful of dust and memories, old furniture and paintings and the bits and bobs of a life in statis, covered with plastic the day Genevieve Blake had died, untouched for decades until the morning when Lucien had finally opened the door and let Jean step inside. That moment she recalled fondly, both of them half asleep and dreamy-eyed as the dust danced in the sunbeams and her heart warmed to him while he shared this secret with her. It was a beautiful room, separate from the rest of the house, allowing them privacy should Charlie choose to stay on, with space enough for a comfortable sofa; with care, she thought it could become an altogether different sort of sanctuary, a place they went not only to sleep, but to share their time together, comfortably. That Lucien would have come to this conclusion and gone to such trouble to fix it up for them - and to keep it a secret for her benefit - was a kind and wonderful thing. Of course, Jean had seen the bills, for paint, for furniture, for a few new pieces of art, and determined at once what he was up to, but she loved him too much to spoil his surprise.

"It's lovely," she said decisively.

"That's a job well done, I'd say," Frank told him, clapping him on the shoulder as they surveyed their handiwork. The younger men had left them already, but they lingered together a moment, speaking softly to one another.

"Yes, I'd agree," Lucien said happily.

It was a job well done. When Jean sequestered herself with her dress or went out on some errand Lucien and the other gentlemen spent every moment they could in this place, had sorted through everything, carting off various articles to the tip or to the charity shop, until the room was revealed to them. A nice lady friend of Bill's had come with several compatriots in tow to scrub every inch of the place, and then Lucien and his cohort had fallen upon it, sanding and painting the walls, laying down a fresh new rug, moving in a fine new bed and a sofa and all the other elements that would make this a comfortable place to live. He looked at it now, the sunny yellow drapes over the windows, the painting of Agnes hung in pride above the fireplace, the soft navy coverlet on the bed...

The bed. He swallowed hard and looked away, hoping that Frank had not followed his stare to that place, had not taken note of the momentary expression of longing that overcame his features at the sight of it. Until this moment, he had felt less as if he were planning a wedding and more like he was
organizing some sort of military operation. Arranging all the moving pieces, following Jean's instructions to the letter, these things he had done with vigour, and somewhere along the way the truth had got lost beneath the details. It came back to him now, however. Standing in this room he intended to share with her, the bed looming large in the corner of his eye, he could deny it no longer. This was to be their place, not his or hers, but theirs, together. Forever.

He wanted her, that much was certain. He had wanted her for quite some time - almost, but not quite, from their very first meeting. What man could withstand such a temptation, a beautiful, passionate woman close at hand, one who was brilliant and kind and yet strong as steel? Yes, even before he loved her he had wanted her, wanted the curve of her hip beneath his palm, the taste of her skin beneath his tongue. He'd had her, once, and that all too brief taste of bliss had told him plainly that once would not, could not ever be enough. They had been so rushed, before, under cover of darkness, keeping their voices low so as not to disturb Charlie, hurried, fevered, mad with need, and then she had gone, and he had been left alone, exulting in the knowledge that she had agreed to marry him and yet lamenting that he had not taken the time to explore her properly, as he so dearly longed to do.

That gift was waiting for him now, he knew, the gift of a lifetime together, countless nights to spend as slowly or as quickly as they wished. She was waiting for him, every exquisite inch of her, if only he could survive until this blasted wedding was through. What had been impulsive and reckless before could be soft and beautiful now, and he longed for it. Still, though, he had to acknowledge that things had changed; she was soon to be his wife, but she was already the mother of his child. Her body was changing day by day, he knew, and while he was almost gleefully looking forward to mapping those changes in her he could not deny that worried filled him, now and again, as he considered the prospect. Oh, he knew that he loved her, that she loved him, that they would love their child, that every moment they spent together - in bed or out of it - would be soft and sweet and wonderful. What worried him was all the questions he could not answer, questions about Jean's health and safety, about her happiness.

"Are you going to tell me what's really going on here?" Frank asked him, one eyebrow arched as if daring him to deny that something was amiss.

Lucien stared at him, his thoughts racing as he tried to come up with some sufficiently reassuring remark, but Frank pressed on relentlessly, ever the determined copper.

"Really, Lucien," he said. "A three month engagement? A new bedroom? You're getting married so fast your children won't be able to attend and your best man can barely stand. You've been distracted and quiet, and I know we haven't known one another very long, Lucien, but I know enough. Something is wrong. She's not ill, is she?"

The genuine concern in Frank's eyes was enough to temper Lucien's inclination towards churlishness in that moment. Yes, the Superintendent was irritatingly observant, but his worry over Jean's health, the compassion in him, was born of friendship and not just professional curiosity. Suddenly Lucien remembered that Frank had lost his own wife to illness, and he shifted uncomfortably on his feet. For Jean's sake he had agreed not to speak the truth aloud - not yet - but he did not fancy lying to Frank outright.

"Jean is perfectly fine," he said finally. It was not a lie, but not entirely the truth, either, as Jean seemed occupied with a private grief she would not share with him. She did not speak of the baby, did not speak of the morning sickness that had her rushing to the loo most every day, did not speak of whatever it was about this child that made her so very glum. She shrouded herself in mystery and smiled at him when he pressed her, giving him no hint as to the nature of her feelings. The one reassurance he had was her honest excitement at the prospect of the wedding; the baby might trouble
her, but she was happy to marry him, and Lucien knew that would have to be enough for him. For now.

"We have our reasons," he continued gently. "But I promise you, everything is all right."

He only wished he could believe those words; excitement and fear twined together in his chest, and he did not know yet which would win.

"Are you all right, my darling?" Lucien asked with some concern as Jean leaned back against the sofa, kicking off her shoes in an unusual display of casual laxity. She did not miss the way his eyes danced from her stocking-covered feet up the length of her calf, and she chose to smile at him, when his gaze finally caught hers, rather than allow herself to bristle at his constant need for reassurance. With one rather monumental exception Lucien had never seen her without shoes, and she knew that he only pestered her because he loved her, because he wanted her to be well.

"I'm fine," she told him firmly. "My feet ache, that's all."

And they did; once their tasks were complete Frank and Alice had joined them for supper, and Jean had been busy every moment, cooking and serving and tidying up after. Her belly might have been flat but her feet were already beginning to swell, and she could not abide the constraints of her favorite suede pumps a moment longer. With the dishes washed and their guests sent home for the evening, Jean had been rather relieved to kick them off.

In a flash Lucien was beside her; he sat down heavily, and before she realized quite what was happening he had caught her calves in his broad hands and lifted her feet to rest in his lap. An undignified yelp escaped her at the sudden shift in her position, and she reflexively tried to pull back from him, unaccustomed to such familiarity in the openness of the sitting room. His hands were strong and heavy, however, and he held her fast.

"It's all right, Jean," he said gently. "What sort of fiance would I be, if I didn't rub your feet at the end of a long day?"

His expression was earnest enough but the sparkling of his blue eyes spoke of mischief. Much as her rational mind told her to draw back and assume a more refined pose before Charlie walked in on them her heart urged her to ignore such caution in favor of his hands upon her body, and it was her heart, and not her head, that won the battle. She leaned back against the arm of the sofa, and breathed a soft sigh of relief as Lucien took up one of her feet in his hands.

The sigh turned to a moan as he started his work; damn that man, she thought fondly. Damn him and his soft lips, parted slightly as he watched her respond to his touch, damn his strength, damn his methodical fingertips, pressing gently against the arch of her foot. She could feel the heat of his skin, even through her stockings, and she shivered as he increased the pressure against her. In silence he continued, thumbs pressing against her heel, fingertips brushing against the delicate line of her ankle. He glided his thumbs along her arch once more until they pressed into the ball of her foot, kneading her tender flesh, and with each touch an altogether different sort of tension began to build.

It was strange, really, how such a simple thing, ostensibly rather chaste, could make her belly flood with heat. She watched him through hooded eyes, soft sounds of pleasure escaping her unbidden with every pass of his thumbs. He knew what he was doing, knew what course her thoughts had taken, as she watched his thick fingers at work, recalling how they had felt drumming inside her. Though it still covered all that proprietary demanded her skirt was rucked up above her knees, and when she shifted absently against him she saw the flash of want in his eyes that told her perhaps he had glimpsed more than she intended beneath the fabric. Still he carried on, relentless, gentle but
insistent as always was with her, and her heart began to race. Yes, they had fallen prey to the
madness of desire once before, and yes, she knew she was damned for it, and yes she was
determined not to do it again, but oh this man, this beautiful, glorious man; the devil did not need to
tempt her, for Lucien was temptation enough.

*That's how you got into this mess in the first place,* a bitter voice whispered in the back of her mind,
but then Lucien bowed his head and brushed a kiss against her ankle through her stockings, and she
gasped at the wet heat of his mouth. He grinned at her, and took up the other foot, looking pleased
with himself indeed.

"Is that better?" he asked her in a low, rumbling voice.

"Much," she panted in response.

_Soon,* she reminded herself. _Soon he could touch her, wherever she wished, without stockings or
skirts or obstacles of any sort between them. Soon she could feel this swirling need for him, and no
longer be ashamed of it. _Soon, they would be wed, and she could hold his hand, and find her way
through the mess._

Still his gentle massage continued, and Jean leaned her head back and closed her eyes, allowed
herself to enjoy this moment of peace. Yes, she felt a terrible, aching, all-consuming sort of guilt, for
failing God, her church, herself. _Yes, she worried, every day, about what sort of terror might be
coming for her, worried that this little one might be taken, too, as payment for her sins. She worried
that Lucien might crowd or overwhelm her, that he might grow bored with family life, that they
would quarrel, that they would wound one another. She worried about what people would say, when
the truth came out, worried about what might happen should the miracle of this baby be realized, and
she find herself with another child to care for her until her dying day. She worried about so many
things, but the warmth of Lucien's hand against her body comforted her. Whatever came next, she
loved this man, and he loved her, and that would have to be enough._

At last he finished, but he did not release her, choosing instead to run his palm along the length of her
calf, up to her knee and down again, repeating the motion over and over in a soothing rhythm.

"I am so happy, Jean," he said into the stillness.

Her heart sank, just a little, not because she wanted him to be unhappy, but because she could not
match his joy. On this day she should have been deliriously happy, and though she had found some
sense of contentment while he touched her still her doubts lingered, and left her feeling as if she had
disappointed him somehow. Surely she should have been every inch the glowing bride-to-be, but try
though she might her smiles never seemed big enough, her words never seemed soft enough. Grief
had soured her pleasure, but still she struggled, tried to cling to the peace that had filled her, however
fleetingly.

"I'm happy, too, Lucien," she told him. "Really. I'm so glad we're going to be married."

His brow furrowed slightly, and she fought the urge to sigh in frustration; were her words not
enough to reassure him? What more could he want, than to know that she longed to be his wife?

"But you aren't glad we're going to be parents," he observed softly.

Jean jerked her feet out of his lap and planted them flat on the floor sitting up straight at once. She
took a moment to straighten out her hair, trying to find the words to express her feelings. At every
turn he had showered her with words, had told her of his heart, had revealed himself anew to her
again and again, and she felt he deserved much the same from her, no matter how reticent she might
be to speak. Not all of it, not yet, for she did not wish to sully the joy of their impending marriage with memories of her former life, did not want to speak of heartache lest it come for her again, but surely, she thought, she owed him something.

"This isn't the way I wanted things to go," she said slowly, haltingly. "We had so many plans, to travel, to spend time together, and I feel as if I've ruined our marriage before we've even begun."

Jean was shocked by her own words, but Lucien did not recoil from her; instead he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and drew her down against him, pressing his lips to her temple reverently.

"This isn't your fault," he began, and she frowned, for he had not corrected her, but then he was speaking again, and relief overtook chagrin in a moment. "And nothing has been ruined. We can still do everything we planned, go everywhere you dreamed of. Our life together may look a bit different than we imagined, but it will still be good. Wonderful, even."

He really believed it, she knew. And maybe, just maybe, if they were very lucky, if they were blessed with a beautiful, healthy child, it could be that he was right, and that they could be deliriously happy just as they were. It was rather a big *maybe*, however, and it troubled Jean a great deal.
Jean and Alice stood together in a small room off the main sanctuary, waiting for the signal, waiting for the time to come when Jean was to make her way down the aisle to Lucien. The last two weeks had been a whirlwind, the last twenty-four hours doubly so. She had spent the evening in the spare room at Alice's little rented cottage to ensure that Lucien did not see her the day of the wedding; the last thing she needed was more bad luck. It had been a long night, a sleepless night, as she lay with her palm pressed flat against her belly, staring at the ceiling and thinking all manner of thoughts, some of them gentle and sweet, some of them terrible in their implication. She had gone to Father Emory, made her confession as she knew she must, had knelt beside her bed and whispered her rosary, had begged the Holy Mother to intervene on her behalf, to keep her child safe, to grant Jean and Lucien this blessing. She had done everything she could, and now she was standing in this place, minutes away from taking Lucien's hand and starting their life together as she dearly longed to do.

Alice was peaceful company; she looked quite nice in a dary navy dress Jean had altered to suit her figure, her hair artfully curled though her face was serious as always. As they stood together, Jean anxiously smoothing the front of her satin dress - a dress that showed off a mercifully flat stomach, for now - Alice radiated a sense of calm, and Jean tried to absorb some of that calm for herself. Through all the many weeks since this trial had begun Alice had been a godsend to her, not judging her, not pressing her for details, expecting nothing at all from her except that she be herself, that she tell the truth when they spoke. Jean was grateful for such a friend, and she found it rather refreshing to enjoy the company of a woman who did not demand perfection from her in every word and deed.

The whole day had been planned, from start to finish. Matthew had whisked Lucien off to Frank Carlyle's house, and Jean had descended upon the Blake residence with Alice, Emily, Nancy, and Evelyn Toohey in tow. The ladies had assisted one another with hair and make-up, passing around a bottle of champagne that Emily had produced with some delight, though Evelyn had been nearly apoplectic at the thought of drinking so early in the day and Jean had only sipped a little, her stomach already roiling with nerves. They ate a little lunch together, and then they rushed off to the church, and now Jean and Alice were waiting while the other ladies had taken their seats. Jean knew what came next; Frank would come to them at the appointed time, and Alice would make her way down the aisle, and Jean would follow, alone and determined. It would have been nice, she supposed, to have someone to walk with her, and she had considered for a moment asking Alice to do her that honor, but in the end she had decided against it. There was no one to give her away, her father long dead and the sort of man who would not have approved of Lucien Blake anyway, her sons far from her side, and the truth was that this was a decision Jean had made entirely on her own. She had chosen Lucien, had chosen to go to his bed, had chosen to follow through with this wedding so that they might build a new life together. She did not need the assurances of anyone else, not her friends or her family, to tell her she was doing the right thing. She knew she was.

Still, it would have been nice to see her sons, to share the uncertain joy of this day with them. It grieved her to know that Christopher would not be able to attend, that Jack had rebuffed all her attempts to contact him, but they were grown men, now, and they had to make their own choices. Their mother might wish for more, but it was no longer her place to dictate where they should go or what they should do.

Even as her thoughts drifted morosely to her wayward boys the door swung wide, and she took a deep breath, fully expecting to see Frank, trying to prepare herself for what was to come next. And
yet, to her utter shock, it was not the Superintendent who came walking hesitantly into that room.

It was Christopher.

Alice - who had never met Jean's sons and so could not be expected to recognize him on sight - began to protest at his sudden interruption, but the words died on her lips as Jean drew in a sharp breath at the sight of him.

"Hello, mum," he said in that soft voice of his, and her eyes filled with tears unbidden.

"Oh, sweetheart," she breathed, and before she quite realized what was happening she had wrapped him in a fierce embrace. Though he appeared a bit shocked at this sudden display of affection her oldest son nonetheless hugged her back, his voice a little unsteady as he explained how he had come to be in this place.

"I managed to arrange leave for the weekend," he said.

Jean drew back from him, carefully dabbing at the tears that stained her cheeks, trying not to ruin her makeup.

"Ruby had to stay behind with Amelia, but she insisted that I come. And I'm glad."

"So am I," Jean answered, reaching out to brush her hand affectionately over his hair. He had grown so tall, her darling boy, his frame and his face and his manner more reminiscent of his mother than his father, and her heart burst as she thought how proud she was of him, of the man he had become, the way he cared for his family.

"I don't know if you have someone to walk with you," he said, shifting somewhat uncomfortably, "but I thought, since I'm here…"

Jean covered her mouth with a trembling hand, trying so hard to maintain control over the storm of weeping that threatened to overwhelm her. He had come all this way to surprise her on this momentous day, and now he was offering her his support, telling her in no uncertain terms that he was pleased about the choices she had made, that he would stand beside her the moment her life changed forever. And though Jean had been quite content to walk by herself in the ceremony, now that he had offered she found that there was nothing she wanted more.

"That would be lovely, darling," she told him.

Behind her she could hear the rustling of Alice's dress, and she rushed to make introductions, fighting the urge to reach out and take hold of her son's hand the way she would have done when he was small. Somehow having him here, knowing that she was not entirely alone, that she had friends and family who loved her, quieted the doubts that plagued her, and left her full of joy instead.

All too soon Frank made his appearance. Jean straightened her shoulders, and took her son's arm when he offered it. Following Alice at a stately pace Jean lifted her chin, and tried to focus entirely on the small seed of joy she carried within her heart. She was surrounded by friends, with her son beside her, and she loved Lucien more than she ever thought possible. Yes, there would be trials ahead, but for this day, this one day, she was determined to be happy.

If asked about it later, there was very little about the ceremony itself that Lucien would be able to recall. Surprise - and relief - at the sight of young Christopher leading his mother down the aisle, certainly. But for the rest of it, the only thought, the only image, the only sound for him was Jean, the radiant beauty of her smile as she caught his gaze and held it, the brilliance of her eyes, the softness
of her hand in his, the lilting sound of her voice. When she first came to stand beside him he had shaken Christopher's hand once in thanks, and then reached for Jean immediately. Though it was hardly the moment for such a display he had lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her before twining their fingers together.

*You look beautiful, my darling,* he'd told her then, and she'd blushed prettily and offered him that smile that set his heart to racing, and he had known in that moment that they would be all right.

The rest of it was a blur, Father Emory's voice, the prayers, the sight of their friends and family fading into a hazy nothingness, cast into shadow by the brilliant light of Jean, standing beside him, taking his hand, agreeing to join him on this journey, wherever it might lead. In fact, he was quite surprised when the ceremony at last came to an end, when he was instructed by the pinch-faced priest to kiss his bride. He did so with great delight, to the polite applause of the crowd, and as they parted he whispered to her softly *I love you.*

She had squeezed his hand, not speaking but still returning the sentiment with all of her heart, and he had accepted what she offered him gladly.

And now they were here, standing at the Colonists' Club, surrounded by food and drink and laughter, and Cec Drury was calling their names, inviting them to have their first dance.

"Shall we, my darling?" Lucien asked her, offering her his hand.

She smiled up at him, and took his hand, and his heart sang.

They flowed together like water, fingers intertwined, his arm snaking around her waist as they swayed slowly together in the center of the room. This was hardly the first time they had danced together, and that comfort, that familiarity, showed in every move of their bodies. His blood was racing through his veins, his heart pounding in his chest, and Jean was the only thing his eyes would see. The dress she wore was lovely; of course it was, for she had made it herself. It did not escape his notice that given the fit of the dress no one in that room who did not know the truth was likely to suspect the secret that she carried beneath her skin, the secret that warmed his heart through just to think of it. He held her that little bit closer, this woman was his wife, now, who was the very center of his world.

"You're my wife," he told her, his voice full of awe.

In his arms Jean looked up at him, her smile soft and more genuine than he had seen it for months now.

"I am," she answered. "And I couldn't be happier, Lucien."

He chose to believe her, for the expression on her face and the brilliance of her gaze gave evidence of her words. Lucien pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek, and they continued their dance, in perfect harmony with one another.

As they spun slowly around he took in the full view of the ballroom; there was young Christopher, looking decidedly uncomfortable as he stood alone on the edge of the festivities, Charlie and Rose locked in an animated conversation, Alice sitting at a table with Matthew off to one side, Frank Carlyle busy at the bar. With a nod from Cec a few other couples joined them on the floor; Patrick and Susan Tyneman were first, Jean's friends from the sewing circle not far behind them. Bill Hobart's young lady was tugging on his hand, trying to encourage him to do the same, and still Lucien and Jean swayed together, elated beyond all measure.
Perhaps things had not gone entirely according to plan, he mused. Perhaps they had done things out of order, bitten off a bit more than they could chew. His beloved was all smiles today, but he had not forgotten the way the darkness had claimed her when she first discovered that she was expecting, and he knew that he had not seen the last of her sorrow. The day would soon come when they would have to face the judgement of these people who even now were celebrating their happy union; how strange, how terrible it was that such joy could be snuffed out by propriety. What would young Christopher say, he wondered, when he learned the truth? And what about Li, his darling little girl, that stoic, unyielding young woman she had become? He had worked so hard to earn her trust, writing letter after letter, delighting as the tone she took with him became friendlier. She had accused him once of abandoning his family; would she think that his new wife, his new child, were no more than his latest act of betrayal?

Jean brushed against him and his thoughts snapped back to the moment, to the beautiful woman in his arms, the delicate burden she carried. They'll get used to it, in time. No sense worrying about it now.

No, right now he had other things to worry about. He would need to make sure Jean actually ate something, would need to make sure he danced with her as much as he could, though he knew he ought to let Christopher take his turn with his mother, ought to give them a moment together. He would need to be gracious to his guests, and not immediately drag Jean out of the ballroom and back to their home. Charlie had arranged alternate accommodations for the evening, so that Jean and Lucien might have the house to themselves, and he was so eager for that blissful solitude he ached with it. Tonight he would show Jean the little project he'd been working on, would reveal the way the studio had been remade into a place that would serve them both, beautiful and theirs. Though he suspected that she had long since worked out what he was up to Jean had been kind enough to feign ignorance, and he was very much looking forward to seeing the expression on her face when finally the truth was revealed.

More than that, more than anything else, he was looking forward to holding her, properly, the silk of her skin beneath his fingertips, the trappings of their lives and their society left behind them until all that remained was them, Jean and Lucien, two people who adored one another, two people whose souls were now permanently, irreversibly linked, til death do us part. For three long months he had been waiting for this, waiting for the chance to hold her, to fall asleep beside her and wake with no trace of guilt, only with love, endless, boundless love.

"What are you thinking, Lucien?" Jean whispered. She cocked her eyebrow at him, as if in challenge, as if with a single glance she had determined the somewhat tawdry turn his thoughts had taken.

"I'm thinking how beautiful you are, and what a lucky bastard I am," he answered, not untruthfully.

"Well," Jean sniffed, that ever-present blush still staining her cheeks. "I think I'm quite lucky, too, you know."

Lucien grinned, and kissed her cheek, and still they danced, together.
Chapter 13

27 August 1960

"Shall we, my darling?" Lucien asked, holding out his hand.

For a moment Jean simply stared at him, her heart in her throat, all of her hopes and fears seeming to hang in the balance as Lucien waited for her to accept him, to follow him into the house and into all the joy and heartbreak that awaited them there.

Taking a very deep breath she took his hand, allowed him to lift her gently from the car, to stand for a moment with him on the drive, looking up at their home. The house had never seemed quite as fine, quite as intimidating, as it did in that moment, now that it was hers, truly, her responsibility, her claim, just as was the man who stood with his hand wrapped around her own. This was it, she knew. The house was empty, Charlie would be away for the evening, her very blood seemed to hum and fizzle from what little champagne she'd drunk, and Lucien was holding her hand. Night had fallen, their friends had all gone home, and there was nothing for it now but to step into that house, together, to make their way to bed, to twist and wind themselves in and around one another until they were both of them sweaty and gasping and spent.

Jean was trembling from head to foot.

It was very silly, she knew, to be afraid of him now. It was completely ridiculous, to feel all this anxiety over something they had already done - quite well - once before, something that had resulted in the little life growing inside her. He had seen her already, had touched her, kissed her, loved her, wholly, completely, only three months before. What they had done then, the fervent desperation they had given in to so readily, the eager kisses, the grasping hands, the panting, heaving breaths, that had been a sin. Whatever they did now, however they chose to entertain themselves beneath the sheets would be a union blessed by God, acknowledged by the Church, sealed in ink by the State.

And yet, still, her heart was full of fear, of worries, of questions. She followed along beside him, their fingers still interlaced, until they reached the front door. *What does he expect?* she asked herself. *What does he want from me?*

When they had fallen together before there had been no time for such concerns; they were both of them utterly overwhelmed, lost to sensation, acting on instinct. There had been no time to plan, no time to consider much of anything at all; they simply *did it*, and let the chips fall where they may. Things were different, this time. This time, Jean had spent three months dreaming of him, the breadth of his chest, the solid muscles of his arms, the delirium he brought to her with every surge of his hips. Jean had spent the last six weeks counting down to this day, trying to imagine how it would go, what things might be like between them. And over the course of that time, with each day that passed, her fears mounted. It was one thing, to slip and fall into intimacy, but to approach it deliberately removed some of the charm, to her mind.

At the door Lucien paused and looked down at her strangely. It was not quite a frown she saw on his face, but his brow was furrowed, his sparkling blue eyes uncertain.

"What is it, Lucien?" she asked him quietly. The fear simmered, low in her belly. They had not talked of this, what they might do, how things might go once they were home again. Jean had absolutely no idea what was expected of her and in the absence of such clear boundaries she felt herself to be utterly, completely lost.
"Shall I carry you across the threshold, my darling?" he asked.

Oh, Lucien. It was a kind thought, a gentle one, but still Jean felt frustration rising like bile in the back of her throat. If he had only done it, had only wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up and carried her laughing through the door, perhaps it would have been all right. Perhaps that closeness, that sudden burst of joviality, would have been all that was needed to shatter the restraints of Jean's anxious heart and set their feet upon the path to wedded bliss. And yet he had not taken such liberty; in asking her, so bluntly, while they stood awkwardly together by the door, Lucien had removed any possible charm from the gesture and left Jean feeling out of sorts and distressed.

"I think we're much too old for such foolishness, Doctor Blake," she told him, trying to sound flippant, trying to make him smile. She reached out and smoothed her free hand over his lapel, and when she caught his gaze she did not find his eyes full of rueful affection; if anything his expression appeared almost pained.

This isn't how it was supposed to go, Jean thought in despair. Where was her dashing, reckless Lucien? Why was he suddenly so fearful of her, treating her as if she were made of glass?

Without another word Lucien turned and unlocked the door, and Jean followed along behind him. With their feet planted on familiar ground they both breathed a sigh of relief, some of the tension easing from their shoulders. You can do this, Jean told herself. All it would take, she knew, was a little courage. A few well placed kisses, a few whispered endearments, and they would be well on their way to enjoying one another fully and without shame.

Lucien hung his coat and hat upon his usual hook by the door, and turned the lock into place with a casual flick of his wrist. The sound of the lock echoed loud as gunfire in Jean's mind; the door was closed, now, locked, now, the entire world shut out, no one left save for Jean and Lucien and the burning hunger they carried for one another. That hunger had been with her, simmering low in her belly almost from the moment he first arrived in Ballarat two years earlier. It had ignited, the night he proposed to her, had burned her to ashes and she had been reborn as this new defiant creature who stood toe to toe with Lucien now, her belly just a little bit rounder than it had been three months before, her heart aching and yet eager for him. Funny, how three months and a few words from a priest could turn an act from sacrilege to sanctity; though ostensibly they had now been blessed to do whatever they wished to and with one another Jean could not shake the sense that it was wrong, that time and prayers had not removed the stench of sin from her desires.

Still, he was her husband, now. He was handsome, and kind, and smiling at her softly in the darkness of the foyer. Be brave, she told herself. You have said the words and you have confessed your sins and all is well. You both just need a little confidence.

And so she took a deep breath, and slipped her arms around his neck. Jean lifted herself up onto her toes, intent on kissing him, on unleashing the desires they had both of them bottled up for so long now, but her lips collided with his chin, and not his mouth, as he lifted his head at the last moment. Cheeks burning, utterly mortified by her boldness and his apparent rejection Jean made to step away from him, but Lucien caught her with one strong arm around her waist, drew her in close to him.

"I want to show you something first," he told her, his lips against her temple and his gentle words taking some of the sting out of it.

He led her down the corridor, and she smiled to herself as she realized what was happening. He was leading her to the studio, of course, to show her what he and the other gentlemen had been working on for weeks now. Though Jean had long since come to a conclusion about his activities there she had allowed him his air of mystery, knowing he took an almost childlike delight in keeping this secret, only to be shared on the day they were wed. Well, they were married now, and Jean supposed
that tonight was as good a time as any for them to begin spending their time there. At the studio door Lucien took a deep breath, and then swung the doors open with a flourish, giving an exaggerated bow as he invited her to step inside.

Jean gasped; she couldn't help it. Nothing could have prepared her for what she saw now. The studio she recalled had been dusty and piled high with boxes, the detritus of Genevieve Blake's life and passion scattered from one end to the other. Oh Jean had straightened it up a bit when Lucien first reopened it, but for the most part it had remained a somewhat dark and drafty place, ghosts whispering softly from every corner. Now, though, now it was transformed.

The walls had been scrubbed and painted, the clutter removed, the floor polished, the windows washed; every inch of it gleamed, clean and bright and beautiful. A fire was crackling in the fireplace - though how Lucien had managed that, she wasn't entirely sure - and the large leather sofa had been reupholstered, no longer cracked and faded but soft and comforting, begging Jean to come and sit and prop her feet up and forget her worries before the fire. A little cart stood beside the sofa, stocked with champagne in an ice bucket and a pair of glasses. Jean turned slowly on her heel, her breath catching in her throat as she saw the vast bed stood against the far wall, the heavy, dark wooden headboard, the matching sidetables each with their own little lamp, the soft navy coverlet. There was a dressing table, and two wardrobes, each made of the same dark wood as the bed, and still Jean turned slowly, taking it all in.

The studio had been divided up, before, between the vast, high-ceilinged main space that Lucien had turned into their bedroom and a smaller, somewhat cozier nook that was almost - but not completely - walled off. That area, which had been full of tables and paints and all sorts of things, was now utterly bare, but Jean knew what Lucien intended for it. Their child would sleep there, when the time came, when they were ready, in their room and yet with his own space to occupy. A rush of tears choked her, and she turned away at once, not wanting to think about the baby or the future or how eager Lucien was for all of it when her own heart remained so reticent.

"Do you like it?" Lucien asked, somewhat apprehensively.

"It's perfect," she told him, reaching for his hand once more. And of course it was; the studio boasted its own private bathroom, and was more than spacious enough for she and Lucien and the little one who must soon follow. Best of all, the studio represented Lucien's devotion to her, the labor he had done just so that she might be happy, that they might have their own private sanctuary, cut off from the brutal world beyond those four walls.

In the flickering light of the fire Lucien smiled at her, lifting her hand to his lips so that he could place a gentle kiss against her skin. That air of heady expectation - and the latent threat of disappointment that came with it - returned at once, stifling, overwhelming. What if the beauty of the connection they had shared months before had been borne only of desperation, what if now that this thing between them was no longer forbidden it ceased to hold any appeal? What if-

"I wanted to have your things here, waiting for us," Lucien told her, "but I didn't want to intrude, and I didn't want to spoil the surprise. I will help you, tomorrow if you like. We can sort through everything and I will be your personal pack mule, my darling."

See? She told herself. That look on his face? That is love. That is all that matters.

"Well," she said. "Tomorrow, then."

Tomorrow she would sort through her few precious belongings, pile Lucien's arms with skirts and blouses and dresses and boxes of cosmetics, send him trooping up and down the stairs until at last everything was arranged to their liking. And then she would take up residence in this place, with
His respect for her privacy was a wonderful thing, but it also presented a challenge to Jean. He was treating her so gently, she knew he would not simply ravish her, would not initiate anything between them until she had given him some sign that she was ready, and when the thing was done she would have no choice but to sleep beside him naked, for her clothes were all upstairs. That in itself was not such an alarming prospect - to the contrary, it sent a shiver of anticipation racing down her spine - but come the morning she would have no robe, no comb for her hair. What was she to do then, slide back into her wedding dress for the trek upstairs, or go traipsing through the house naked? Of course there would be no one to see her save Lucien, and certainly as her husband she could not object to him watching her as she wandered around the house nude, but still. Arrangements would have to be made, to spare herself embarrassment come morning. And besides, she had not intended to go to her marriage bed still wearing her wedding dress.

"There's something I need to do," she told him, rising up on her tiptoes to plant a gentle kiss against his cheek. And before he could protest she slipped from his grip and left the studio - their bedroom, now - to make her way upstairs. There was a beautiful chiffon nightdress waiting for her upstairs, purchased for exactly this occasion, and she hoped that wearing it would give her some courage. She hoped without the distraction of her various and somewhat complicated undergarments things might go a little easier between them. She hoped that taking a few minutes for herself, to remove the pins from her hair, to remove - or perhaps reapply - her makeup, to take a deep breath and remind herself how she loved him, how she wanted him, how beautiful the love between them truly was, would be enough to quiet her fevered worries. She hoped for many things, on this night.

Somewhat aghast at his new wife's hasty departure Lucien plopped down on the end of the bed and reached for the knot of his tie. Though he had imagined this night more times than he could count so far things between them had been more awkward than passionate, and he did not know what to do. You should have kissed her, old man, he told himself as he dropped his tie on the floor and shucked off his jacket. You should have just taken the risk, and let it all unfold the way it did before.

For months he had been dreaming of her, the softness of her skin, the sound of her voice crying out for him. The room had been dark, his memories of her body hazy but delightful, and he had been very much looking forward to seeing her in the light, mapping every exquisite inch of her. But Jean had closed herself off from him, reminded him less of the wild thing she had been in his arms the night he proposed to her and more of the prim and slightly disapproving woman she had been when they first met. He rather got the sense that this - that he - frightened her somehow, and he had no idea how to overcome this particular obstacle.

And now she had left him, to what end he was not certain, and there was nothing for him to do save wait, and agonize over his next move. Should he just take her in his arms, overwhelm her with his ardor, or would such advances merely send her fleeing from the room? Why should she be so frightened of him now, when they had already fallen together once before? She was a complicated woman, his Jean, and he was beginning to suspect that a lifetime would not be sufficient for him to learn everything there was to know about her.

At long last she returned to him, slipping through the doorway quiet as a mouse, and his breath caught in his throat at the sight of her.

Between the light of the fire and the two little lamps beside the bed he could see her now as he never could before, and she was radiant. Gone was her stiff satin wedding dress and the rigid set of her hair. Instead her curls hung soft and loose around her angel's face, and she wore a night dress in a shade of pink so pale it was very nearly translucent. The lace around her neck revealed more of her
soft skin than any garment he had seen before, left her lean, perfect arms and shoulders bare for his inspection. Beneath the floating fabric he could almost make out the softness of her body without the support of her usual undergarments, and her face was fresh and clean, bare of any makeup at all. The pale pink of her lips, the gentle lines around her eyes, the natural blush that painted her cheeks; everything about her was heart-stoppingly lovely, and he could not so much as blink as he stared at her in all her glory.

"Jean," he croaked, his voice a ragged, needy thing.

She approached him slowly, hesitantly, as if she knew how her appearance inflamed him, and was frightened of that desire. Her feet were bare, and he noticed absently that her toes were painted the same fierce shade of red as her fingernails. How very Jean, with her meticulous attention to detail, he thought as still she drew closer to him.

Though he wanted, very much, to stand up, to go to her, to wrap her in his arms and feel the softness of her nightgown beneath his palms, to kiss her, to hold her, he found he could not move, stunned into near insensibility by the ethereal picture she painted. Guileless, utterly without artifice, she remained the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and she owned him, every piece of him. It fell to Jean to close the space between them, and so she did, until she was standing right in front of him, hesitant and yet not withdrawing from him.

"Do you like it?" she asked self consciously, her fingers catching in the fabric just below her hips, tugging it just a little as if she weren't quite comfortable, as if she had no idea the effect her appearance had on him. "I bought it for you. For this. Before I...I suppose I should be grateful it still fits. I can change, if you'd rather-"

"You are a vision," Lucien breathed, cutting across her at once. He reached for her, his hands curling around her hips, drawing her still closer to stand between his knees. Jean's hands fell to his shoulders, supporting herself as she stood above him, looked down on him in wonder. His heart sang, to know that she had purchased the nightgown for him, that following the proposal, even before they'd discovered her condition, she had gone out and done this thing with thoughts of their wedding night foremost in her mind. Even then she had wanted this, wanted him, and that was a beautiful thing. The fears that had manifested earlier in the evening slowly dissipated as he drank in the warmth of her beneath his hands. She was here, and they were together, and suddenly nothing else seemed to matter. They did not need a plan of attack, did not need to organize their approach to one another, did not need to think at all. All that mattered was that he loved her, that she loved him, and that in this place they could allow that love to run free between their two battered hearts.

With that thought in mind he drew her closer still, until he could rest his chest against her chest, just below her beating heart. Jean's hands glided over his shoulders until she could run her fingers through his hair, and a shiver ran through him at her gentle touch. She was his wife, now, and he adored her with everything he had.

Planting his feet more firmly upon the ground Lucien pulled her into his lap, delighting in the breathless sound of laughter that left her as she settled herself with her knees on either side of his hips. She looked down on him in wonder, this beautiful woman who was his wife, the mother of his child, and when he reached for her, tangled one hand in her soft hair and drew her towards him, she moved with him willingly, her lips slotting into place over his. Lucien groaned into her mouth, overwhelmed by the taste of her, the warmth of her pressed against him, and Jean just sighed, and opened her lips to his.

He loved her like this, above him, around him, holding him, a goddess come to light upon his lap. In this position she could control how much of herself she gave to him, how much heat, how much
friction they could generate between them, and yet his hands were free to wander, and so as he occupied her mouth with lips and tongue he began his gentle exploration. His hands ran the length of her back from the nape of her neck to the curve of her hips, fingertips pressing against muscle and bone, the heat of her seeping through the thin fabric that separated them still. She shifted on his lap and his hardness surged up towards her, eager to reach her even from the confines of his trousers. He set a course for her thighs, catching her nightdress in his hands, sliding beneath it, eager for the silk of her skin beneath his palms, and she shifted again, a soft sound of want escaping her as his hands found purchase against her. Gently he kneaded her, felt her trembling at his touch, and this time when she ground down against him and sighed in pleasure he knew that she had done it with intent, that she wanted to feel him, hard and straining for her, the she exulted in his desire for her even as he did.

Carefully, not wanting to startle her, Lucien turned them, lifted her slightly to settle more fully upon the bed. She was watching him through hooded eyes, his beautiful Jean, already panting and breathless from his attentions. There was nothing he wanted more in that moment than to strip her bare and sink himself inside her, but he resolved himself to patience, knowing how hesitant she had been, knowing how conflicted she was given the circumstances of their hasty wedding. He would take his time with her tonight, as he had not been able to do before, and he hoped that if he was gentle, if he moved slowly, if he showered her with every inch of the love he felt for her, she would accept him, that he might lay her fears to rest.

With that in mind he began his exploration of her, kneeling before he and lifting one of her delicate feet in his hands. He had touched her there before, of course, had pressed his thumbs against her heel and heard her moan in sweet relief, but always he been separated from her by the barrier of her stockings. Not tonight, and so he placed a tender kiss against her ankle. With hands and lips he charted a course up the length of her calf, smooth and soft to his touch, felt her shiver even at that most simple of ministrations. The nightdress retreated as he advanced, slowly revealing more and more of her to his hungry gaze. When his lips found their way to her inner thigh Jean sighed, softly, her legs parting as if of their own accord to allow him more room to work, her hands reaching for him, fingertips trailing over his hair, the shell of his ear, the line of his neck. He shivered at her touch, eager as a puppy to please her, but still he stayed the course. He did not allow himself the distraction of rising higher, throwing back her nightdress and burying his face in the same warm, wet place where he longed to bury his cock. Instead he moved his attentions to her other leg, lips soft against her inner thigh, teeth scraping lightly, and began the descent towards her other ankle. As he moved her hands could no longer reach him, and so she propped herself up on her elbows, watching him with sparkling eyes. This he wanted to do for her, to show her that every inch of her was precious to him, to build up her arousal second by second until she forgot all her worries and remembered only him.

As he reached her ankle he kissed it once more, and then wrapped his hands one around each of her calves, ghosted his palms along her skin and slid slowly up her body until his hands were clenched around her thighs and his face was hovering just above hers. He lingered there, close enough to bow his head and kiss her, and yet not closing that distance, her breath washing warm and sweet over his parted lips, her eyelashes fluttering closed at his proximity. There was so many things he wanted, in that moment, but most of all he wanted Jean, wanted her to accept her own desire for him, to push them both from this precipice.

And then she did; having grown impatient with him she lifted her chin, full lips parting, and he was on her in a moment, his tongue sliding against her own, his hands traveling the length of her thighs intent upon her hips. Their kiss began languidly enough, but as his hands rose higher so too did the tempo of their passions, Jean growing more insistent, shifting closer to him as if begging him for more. It was in his mind to remove her knickers, but when his hands found the curve of her hips he discovered - to his very great delight - that she wasn't wearing any at all.
"Clever girl," he breathed into her mouth.

"Girl," she chided him, nipping at his bottom lip with her teeth.

Lucien pulled back from her with a grin, and dove at once between her thighs. He pushed her nightgown out of the way, revealed the length of her legs in all their glory, the dark thatch of hair at her center, the softness of her belly. There was much left for him to do, so much of her as yet unexplored, his own shirt and trousers still firmly in place, but the only thought that registered in his mind was that he simply had to taste her.

And so he did.

He had not done this for her, before, had been too distracted by other pleasures, but now it became his priority, to shower her with such pleasure. Above him Jean made a soft sound of distress, perhaps at having been so suddenly, so wantonly revealed to him, but he pressed on. He slid one of her perfect legs over his shoulder, her heel coming to rest against his back, and reached for her, tracing the shape of her folds with his tongue and soaking in the sense of relief that filled him when he found her hot and wet for him already. He groaned against her and doubled down, using every weapon his arsenal to reduce her to a quivering mess above him. With lips and tongue he teased her, coaxed her higher and higher into ecstasy, sliding into her as far as he could reach, retreating only to wrap his lips around the bundle of nerves at her certain. With a cry Jean arched up off the bed, her heel drumming against his back, but Lucien held her in place with one hand on her hip, urged her to remain in this moment of abandon with him. Nothing he had ever experienced was as glorious as this rapturous Jean, and so determined to send her falling into bliss his hand joined his mouth, to fingers sliding into her slick heat as still he licked and sucked at her, searching out all the little ways he could make her whimper his name until at last it all became too much for her to bear. With no one there to hear she shattered for him, cried out as her head snapped back on the pillows, her fingers fisted in the sheets, her heat clenched tight around his fingers, her wetness coating his lips and beard. And in response Lucien only grinned and guided her through, still thrusting against her gently, drinking her in, his heart full to bursting with love of her.

At last she collapsed, boneless and spent, the last tremors of her release fading away, and Lucien stretched himself out over her, supporting himself with his forearm pressed to the mattress while with his free hand he wiped her sweaty hair back from her brow.

"Hello, my darling wife," he breathed when her eyes opened.

Jean smiled at him and made to kiss him, but stopped when she caught sight of his lips still wet with her. Shaking her head at him she shifted, and Lucien raised himself up, gave her room enough to remove her nightdress completely. She used it to wipe his face and then casually threw it aside, and he was left in awe of his beautiful wife, naked and confident beneath him. Immediately he made for her breasts, but Jean had other ideas, it seemed, for her gentle hands caught his shoulders, and pushed him to the side. He followed her unspoken command, flopping onto his back and flinging his arms out wide, grinning up at her.

"Let me see you," she murmured.

He wanted to make a joke, to say something clever about how he much preferred the view of her, but then she straddled his hips and the breath rushed from his lungs in a strangled moan, every thought drifting away until all that remained was Jean, transcendent and naked above him. His hands smoothed a path from her thighs up to her hips, and Jean shivered, running her fingers through her hair and smiling down at him beatifically. What did she see when she looked at him this way, he wondered, when her soft gray eyes found his face, his hair mussed from her attentions, his eyes focused on her, his whole being consumed with love of her?
With gentle hands she reached for his shirt buttons, a serious look upon her face, and Lucien let her do what she would, delighted as he was to watch the flicker of the firelight across her pale skin. She was lovely, this new wife of his, soft and perfect and real, comfortable, here, perched on top of him without a stitch of clothing to protect her from his hungry gaze. Unable to resist temptation he allowed his hands to wander, over her sides, his thumbs brushing against the swell of her breast, his cock twitching in eager response to the shiver of delight that passed through her at the sensation. But then his buttons were undone, and she was tugging at his shirt, so he regretfully released his hold on her just long enough to free himself from shirt and vest, collapsing back when his chest was bare and open for her perusal.

At once she fell upon him, palms pressed to his skin, ducking her head to drop a series of suckling kisses against his collarbone that had him thrusting up towards her mindlessly in a moment. It would seem she was as enamored with his body as he was with hers, as she took her time, touching, kissing, exploring him, his arms, his shoulders, his chest, his belly. As she bent over him he could do more than feather his fingers across her back, but he contented himself with this, delighted in the heady feeling of Jean lavishing her love upon him, this sure and certain sign that she was ready, that she was willing, that she loved him, as he loved her.

As much as he was enjoying, it however, it was not enough. Jean’s hands seemed content to remain restricted to his torso, and an ache was building low in his belly where he could feel her hot and wet, pressed against him. This was very nice, but he would need to speed things along between them before the night came to an unsatisfactory - and rather abrupt - conclusion.

With that thought in mind he caught her hips in his hands and turned them once more, rolled her beneath him, groaning softly when her soft thighs rose up on either side of his hips, cradling him close. The smile she bestowed on him then was like none he’d ever seen before, and filled him with a sense of wonder. He did not have the faintest idea what she was thinking, he realized, did not know yet what her preferences were, if she object to his handling of their circumstances thus far, but when he gazed upon her now he could see love, written in every line of her face, could see her desire, her need of him.

He kissed her once, softly, because he could, because he missed the taste of her lips, but then he began a slow, languorous descent, intent on mapping her chest just as she had done to him. Her racing pulse, the ridge of her collarbones, the soft slope of her breast; these places he explored with his lips, his tongue, the palm of his hand. As his mouth closed around one soft, pale pink nipple a sharp gasp escaped her, her back arching up off the bed and her hand reaching for him at once, though whether she meant to draw him closer or push him away he could not say.

"Careful," she told him, her voice a shuddering, breathy moan as his teeth scraped ever so gently against her nipple.

His heart gave a great leap in his chest; he had, somehow, inexplicably, forgotten that she was pregnant. Her belly was soft and gently rounded, but she was still impossibly slim, lithe and lovely. There was no sign on her body, as far as he could see, of the burden that she carried, and in his hunger for her he had let all thoughts of it slip from his mind. Her breasts would be sensitive, then, he reminded himself, and so he did not linger there over-long, did not suck his mark into her tender skin the way he longed to do, for above all he wanted Jean to be comfortable and happy, here with him. He continued on his journey, pausing to press a kiss to the rise of her stomach just above her belly button. Above him Jean gave another gasp, her hand coming to rest on the back of his head. He looked up at her, fear in his heart when he saw tears shimmering in the corners of her eyes, but still she smiled at him. She knew what he had done, why he had chosen to kiss her there, what he was trying to tell her though no words had passed his lips. Lucien loved this woman, with everything he had, and so too he loved the child she carried, this baby who had already changed the course of their
lives so irreversibly.

"Come here, Lucien," she whispered, and so he did. He rose above her, sliding the length of his body along her own, and when his face drew level with hers she cupped his cheeks in her hands, drew him down to her for a long, beautiful kiss, a kiss full of passion, of love, of need, of everything they felt for one another. When she seemed content that he was not going to stop kissing her anytime soon Jean pulled her hands away from his face and made instead for his belt buckle.

And so they were, at last, utterly without inhibition, their passion for one another unleashed in full. He kissed her ardent, desperately, hungrily, her fingernails scraped against his belly as she struggled with his trousers, but then, oh then he was kicking them off and they were sliding skin on skin and the sensation was so utterly intoxicating he could not help but sigh her name in bliss. He reached for her, his hands behind her knees, arranging her body beneath his own, and she reached for him, her hands wrapping around his cock and drawing forth a groan that seemed to come from the depths of his very soul.

"Now, Lucien," she told him.

He could deny her nothing, and so he did as ordered, his hips thrusting forward, following the steady guidance of her hands as she brought him to her, as slowly, ever so slowly he sank into her tender heat. She whimpered, just a little; three months was a long time, long enough for them both to forget just how utterly magnificent it was, to be bound together in this way. He did not push her, did not challenge her, only moved in time to the roiling of her hips, the sounds she made and the fluttering of her inner walls around him guiding him on, telling him what it was she needed from him. They understood one another so well, after all this time together, anticipated one another's needs, and they gave and took from one another in equal measure in that place.

His head hung low between his shoulders, his forehead almost touching her, her panting breaths washing over his skin. Her hands scrabbled across his back, stuttering against the scars she found there, but to her credit she did not ask questions he could not answer to, only pressed her palms against him as if to soothe those long-healed hurts. Point and counterpoint they swayed together, hard meeting soft everywhere they touched, everywhere they seemed to blend into one another. Deeper and deeper he drove within her, and the chorus of her moans became the most beautiful song he had ever heard.

She clung to him, and he drowned in her, and still they rocked together. The slick of sweat between them and the soft scent of her arousal spurred him on, and still he drove within her, casting aside all his promises to treat her gently in favor of doing whatever it took to make her moan his name. Recklessly he shifted above her until he could reach a hand between them to the place where they were joined, his fingertips finding purchase against the bundle of nerves at her center that made her thrash beneath him in rapture, and he set to with a will. Between the fevered thrusting of his length inside her and the relentless caress of his fingertips he sent her careening off into bliss; she cried out his name, once, arching up off the bed, her limbs wrapped around him, clinging to him, pulling him back down with her. The delirious heat of her sex fluttering around his cock left him no choice, and he drove into her release like a man possessed until at last his own salvation came for him, and he roared his pleasure as he spilled himself inside her before he collapsed atop her, sweaty and spent.

They were resting, now, delighted, stated, replete. Lucien lay beside her, his head pillowed on her breast, his palm tracing absent circles against her belly while her fingers carded gently through his hair, gone soft and curly beneath her ministrations. Somehow they had done it, had overcome her anxiety and his over-attentiveness to fall together, to shed their worries and simply be together, and her heart was lighter for it. Lucien loved her, and she loved him, and somehow, she knew they were
going to be all right.

"I love you, Jeannie," Lucien told her.

She smiled at him softly, thinking only how happy she was to hold him, to have him here beside her. The days ahead would be fraught with trouble, but the nights, oh she could already see the nights ahead would be full of wonder, of beauty, of tender affection, and she prayed that affection would sustain her, no matter what happened next.

"I love you, too," she whispered.

They stayed like that for quite some time, talking quietly amongst themselves, until the fire burned too low and the chill began to set in, until exhaustion claimed them. Lucien covered them both with the blanket and wrapped his arms around her, and cocooned in his warmth she fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.
Chapter 14

28 August 1960

"Do you want a son, Lucien?" she asked him a voice so low and so soft he barely heard it.

The sun's first rays had woken them both slowly, introduced them to this new world where they were husband wife, sharing the same bed, the same room, the same life. Beneath the duvet Lucien held his wife close, the curve of her spine pressed flush to the span of his chest, his nose buried in her hair, his arm draped over the perfect swell of her hip, his palm pressed flat to the soft skin of her stomach. Though he could not see her Jean was dragging the tips of her fingers against the hard muscle of his forearm, her legs tangled with his own, his every sense overwhelmed with her. Jean who teased him, chided him, challenged him, encouraged him, Jean who - for reasons passing understanding - seemed to love him, Jean who bore his name, now, and the two gold rings he had put up her finger.

Lucien hummed, to let her know that he had heard her, that he was formulating a response to her question, while his arm tightened around her reflexively as if he feared she might flee from his side upon hearing his response. They had not spoken of it much, this child who one day soon would come to be. Every time he broached the subject with her Jean's eyes grew dark and her chin lifted defiantly and he found himself faced with the brick wall of stubborn pride she used to mask the hurt he could not fully understand. For weeks now he had been asking himself why she had reacted with such despair upon learning the news; was it just that she felt she had failed her church? Was it only shame? Was it, as she'd told him once, only that she worried their lives were over before they'd even begun? Or was it all of those things, and something else besides, something more insidious he could not yet fathom? The thought that their child might bring her such misery, when it brought Lucien only joy, was an unpleasant one. He was utterly baffled by her, and terrified that at any moment he might say something to wound her further, to reinforce that sorrow instead of banishing it utterly, and so he had not pressed her for more.

This morning she had broached the subject herself, and Lucien keenly felt the importance of the moment. They were naked and happy, wrapped around one another in their marital bed on a bright Sunday morning with no one else underfoot and their whole lives stretching out ahead of them, and in this moment she had felt safe enough to ask him the question. It would fall to him to answer her gently, truthfully, to reassure her of the boundless depth of his love for both her and their child.

Do you want a son?

Mei Lin had asked him that once, just before Li was born. It worried her, the thought that she might not have a son, a boy to carry on Lucien's family name, but Lucien had laughed and held her close and told her the truth, that boy or girl he would love their baby with everything he had. Now, twenty-four years later, facing very different circumstances and with a very different wife in his arms, he found his answer had not changed in the slightest.

"Honestly, it makes no difference to me, my darling," he told her, his lips brushing against the back of her neck as he spoke. "Boy or girl, I will be delighted so long as they're healthy and here with us."

Jean shivered in his arms, though he could not fathom how she could possibly be cold, wrapped up in one another as they were.

"You already have a daughter, though," she pointed out. There was a question there, one he could not quite decipher. Yes, he had a daughter, a daughter he loved, a daughter who had broken his heart
and mended it again a thousand times over. Her face flashed across his mind, his beautiful Li, all the moments he treasured and all the memories he would never have. Fate had torn her from his side; even now, decades later, he could still see her, the child she had been, cradled in her mother's arms as Mei Lin made her way to the boat that was meant to take them to safety but only delivered them into horror. Li had been reaching for him, crying out for him so desperately, and the sound of her cries echoed down through the years to manifest as a physical ache in his chest. And then, oh then, there was the day he found her again, in Shanghai, the day he saw not a child but a woman grown, a woman with a daughter of her own, her back ramrod straight, her eyes flinty and untrusting. Slowly, ever so slowly, he had won her round, had poured out his heart to her in letter after letter, and she was beginning to warm to him. In the last letter he'd received she'd included a photo of her daughter, and his heart had swelled to bursting with love as he traced the face of his grandchild with reverent fingertips. Yes, he already had a daughter, but another one would not diminish his love of the first, nor in any way lessen the miracle of the second.

"You already have two sons," he pointed out. "Would you like to have a daughter?"

Were it not for the drag of her fingertips against his skin he would have been certain she'd fallen back to sleep, so complete was her silence. As he waited for her to answer he thought of her sons, wondered what they had been like as children. Had Jack always been so wild and rambunctious, he asked himself, had Christopher always been so solemn and severe? He imagined them for a moment, climbing trees, kicking a ball between themselves, tearing holes in the knees of their trousers and apologizing contritely while their mother mended every tear with a gentle smile upon her face. Jean loved her boys, he knew, as different as they both were, but he could not help but wonder how she might enjoy having a daughter. He had seen her with Mattie, passing on her skills in the kitchen and with the sewing needle, encouraging her, showing her in word and deed such a fine example of feminine strength and grace, and the thought of her with a daughter of her own, to nurture and adore, had him grinning like a fool.

"I think it's a boy," Jean said firmly. That was hardly an answer to his question, and he frowned against her skin, both at her evasion and the utter lack of whimsy or hope in her tone.

"And if it's a girl?" he asked, somewhat fearful of the answer, now. He thought it sweet, to imagine them with a daughter, and Jean's rather practical dismissal of the very idea left him feeling vaguely anxious.

"A girl would be lovely," Jean admitted after a moment with a sad little sigh he understood not at all. "But it will be a boy, you'll see."

Though she knew she should, though she knew she would never be safer or happier than she was in this moment, Jean could not bring herself to shatter this warm little bubble with the truth that so burdened her heart. She was certain that the child she carried must be a boy, prayed that it would be a boy, for long ago she had come to the conclusion that she would never have a daughter of her own. Her girl had been taken from her, as payment for her sins, and if this child were a girl as well, it seemed to her that history must surely repeat itself. Let it be a boy, she wished, fervently, desperately, let him be safe and healthy, let him grow big and strong as his brothers.

"How about a friendly little wager, then?" Lucien suggested. "If it's a girl, I win, and if it's a boy, you win."

As he spoke his hand drifted slowly from her belly up towards her breast, his tone light, teasing, his touch designed to inflame her desire, and succeeding masterfully. Damn him, she thought affectionately, a little gasp escaping her as he palmed her breast, as his interest began to slowly make itself apparent where it pressed against her buttocks. It was so easy for him to distract her, to
overwhelm her, to shower her with his gentle affection and make her forget, however briefly, the worries that plagued her. His love dispelled her gloom, and left her full of only him instead.

"What do we win?" she asked breathlessly while his finger ran circles around her already aching nipple and her lips found the curve of his bicep where it rested beneath her neck.

"Names," he suggested, his voice low and ragged, giving evidence to the fact that his attentions were having much the same effect on him as they were on her. "If it's a boy, you can name him, and if it's a girl, I can name her."

Jean smiled, and shifted back against him with more intent, delighting in the groan that left his lips. Yes, she was certain that their child must be a boy, and therefore certain that she must surely win this wager, and so she had no qualms about accepting his terms.

"Deal," she told him.

"Deal," he answered, catching her earlobe between his teeth.

Jean shivered, and turned round to face him at once. He was smiling down at her, this beautiful man who was hers, now, irreversibly. His blonde hair was soft and curling wildly, his blue eyes bright and focused on her face, every inch of him on glorious display for her. What it be like, she wondered, to see his features on the face of their own son? She remembered with fondness every moment of her children's youth, the tender feeling in her heart as she cradled a little boy close and sang softly to him. Her boys had both had curly hair when they were small, curly like Lucien's, though dark like Christopher's. She tried to imagine it, a little boy with blue eyes and soft blonde curls, and a sense of calm washed over her. They would have their son, the next little Blake, and they would be happy, and all would be well.

With a smile tugging at the corners of her lips Jean slipped her arms around Lucien's waist, shivered as their hips slotted into place against one another. She lifted her chin and he met her at once, soft lips and reverent tongue and burning, boiling passion just waiting for her to unleash it, and so she sighed, and gave herself over to him, to this moment of love, to the joy of their new marriage.
Chapter 15

3 September 1960

One week, Jean thought as she stood alone on the balcony of their honeymoon suite, watching the sun slowly rising over Melbourne. One week, they’d been married now. One blissful - if occasionally politely fumbling - week. The previous Sunday they had spent at home, Lucien carrying Jean’s things down the stairs and into their new bedroom under her watchful eye, the pair of them brushing against one another and laughing softly together as they packed their things for their week away. Charlie returned home that evening, and they enjoyed a strange, somewhat brief, and yet still rather nice supper together before he disappeared up the stairs as quickly as decorum would allow and Lucien and Jean walked hand-in-hand back to their bed, grinning like fools. Monday morning they boarded train, and for every day since they had been comfortable in this place. Shopping, dining out in fine restaurants, walking through Queen Victoria’s Gardens; they passed every moment in a haze of indolent splendor. On Friday evening Lucien insisted she don one of the new evening gowns he had likewise been insistent that they purchase, and took hold of her hand and carted her off to the New Princess Theater to see a production of an American musical called *The Sound of Music*, which Jean had watched with avid fascination. It remained, to Jean, one of the single most enjoyable experiences of her entire life.

In everything they did, every activity they undertook, Lucien showed his regard for her. Flowers and theater and good food and even a trip to a rather fine fabric shop; all of these gifts he lavished upon her, knowing exactly how she liked to spend her time, where her interests lay. He had planned this all quite without her knowing, for in fact she had not even been certain they would take a honeymoon at all until Lucien had mentioned it rather breezily over their tea the morning after their wedding. *I did have some help from Matthew, of course,* he had added somewhat sheepishly. Of course Matthew, who had spent several years as a copper in St Kilda, had known his way around the city, and the thought that he had willingly used his expertise to assist Lucien in this endeavor had warmed Jean’s heart. *I’ll have to remember to thank him,* she’d told her husband, and in response he had offered her that infectious, boyish grin she loved so well, and she had been helpless to do anything more than kiss that smile right off his face.

Everywhere they went, Lucien was smiling, and in the face of his relentless joy Jean found that she could not help but share in his delighted optimism. They were happy, in this place, alone and unsupervised, free from the watchful stares of judgmental neighbors, able to be as affectionate and silly with one another as they wished. Every evening - and some afternoons - they fell into bed tangled up in one another and hopeless in the face of the boundless desire they harbored in their hearts. They had met people, here and there, struck up conversations with strangers while out to dinner or at the theater, and each time Lucien introduced her as *my wife,* Jean felt her doubts recede that little bit further. They were *married,* now, free to choose any sort of life they wanted for themselves. *So long as that life has room enough in it for this little one,* she thought, smiling to herself, just a little, her palm pressed flat to the slight curve of her belly. She was wrapped up in Lucien’s heavy robe, having been awoken some time before by a sudden and pressing nausea that sent her running to the loo. Lucien remained oblivious, lying naked and happy as a cat in the sun, facedown in the fluffy pillows of the bed they shared. Jean could not bear to wake him, though her indisposition had passed nearly as quickly as it had come on, and so she had made her way outside, to stand and watch the sunrise as she had done so often in the past. Jean and the sun were rather old friends, and she greeted his coming with a delighted sort of recognition.
Though the moment itself felt familiar, there was no denying that change was in the air. She felt it every moment, as she and Lucien drew closer to one another, became more comfortable sharing their space, their time, their thoughts. She felt it in the heaving of her stomach and the unexpected resistance of a skirt that used to fit her like a glove. She felt it in her heart, most of all, where she was making room for husband and child both.

The scrape of the door behind her heralded the arrival of her husband, and so she stayed right where she was, looking out across the city, until he walked up and wrapped himself around her, strong arms bound tight across her waist, his chin resting against her shoulder.

"Good morning, my beautiful wife," he said, his voice low and gruff from sleep, the caress of his full lips against her neck sending a shiver racing down her spine.

"Good morning, Lucien," she answered him. She wrapped her hands around his much bigger ones where they lay clasped together against her belly and relaxed against him, feeling a wave of contentment washing over her. They had two more days to enjoy in this place; though Jean had no idea what Lucien intended for today he had promised to take her to mass at St Francis' Church on Sunday, and the thought that he would willingly endure the service so that Jean might sit in the oldest Catholic church in Victoria filled her heart full to bursting with love of him. Yes, he could be reckless, impulsive, brash, but he was a thoughtful man, when it came right down to it, and he showed his love for her in a hundred different ways.

"I hope our little one isn't making too much trouble in there," he said. He was concerned for her, she knew, worried that a pregnancy at her age might bring with it all sorts of complications, but there was laughter in his voice when he spoke to her now.

"No more than can be expected, coming from a Blake," she answered, grinning. Yes, she imagined that any son of Lucien's would get into more than his fair share of trouble, but she was strangely looking forward to it, to seeing whether Lucien's fondness for learning and her own love of the written word would combine to give them a thoughtful, bookish child, or if her stubborn pride and Lucien's penchant for drama would result in a whirlwind of mischief. In her heart, she rather suspected they might be in for both.

**Don't get ahead of yourself,** she told herself sternly. **Enjoy each moment as it comes.**

That was the only way, she knew, to navigate the trials ahead. She could not allow herself to be lost in the endless swirling tide of questions and doubts and what ifs and if thens. Day by day, moment by moment, she would have to face each challenge as it came, and not go borrowing trouble.

"Where will we go today?" she asked her husband, lacing their fingers together and basking in the warmth of him, the way he seemed to invade her every sense.

"Back to bed," he answered.

Before she could protest he spun her smoothly round to face him, and the last thing she saw before the passion of his kiss had her closing her eyes and melting into him was the brilliant flash of his beautiful smile.

"I'm not your housekeeper any more," Jean mused quietly.

Lucien hummed, only vaguely aware that she had spoken at all. His plan to keep his wife in bed all day had gone spectacularly well; they ordered room service and lounged around in just their undergarments, passed the time lying together and reading their books while Jean leaned against his
shoulder, napping here and there between furious and rather unexpected bouts of love making precipitated by nothing more than the gentle brush of skin on skin. The sun had sunk low on the horizon and they had retreated from the chill of the night to the warmth of the almost comically large bathtub where they now lay, Jean in his arms and Lucien's head cast back, his eyes closed in bliss. He could think of no finer way to pass a day, and could not recall having ever been quite so content as he was in that moment.

"We can hire someone, if you like," he murmured, though in truth he had not given the prospect any thought at all.

Clearly Jean had already made up her mind, for his words earned him a playful slap on the thigh.

"Don't you dare," she told him primly. "I won't have people saying I can't keep my own house."

Lucien grinned; of course she would never have gone in for such an idea, his practical Jean. He could not even imagine it, hiring someone else to wash their linens and cook their meals and keep his appointments in the surgery. Jean had done those things with such grace and determination that in truth Lucien had forgotten some time before that she was his employee at all. Their relationship had never really seemed to exist within such a hierarchy, to his mind. He often felt as if he had inherited a wife along with his father's house, the way she tended to him and yet refused to cater to his whims. From the day they met, it had been abundantly clear to Lucien that he was not the one giving orders in his house. She simply understood the way the house worked, what was needed at any given moment, and she did it without question or hesitation. Over time she had learned the brand of whiskey he favored, which meals he liked best, and she had without prompting begun to stock up on those things, and he had been carried along in the wake of her industriousness, bemused and enthralled all at once.

His thoughts drifted, and stumbled across a rather unexpected and decidedly unpleasant obstacle. Though he had never thought of Jean as a servant, the truth was he had always paid her a weekly wage in the past. Should the ring upon her finger draw an end to that line of funds? She had an account at the bank in her own name; though he believed firmly that now that she was his wife anything that belonged to him belonged to her as well he could not help but wonder if she might bristle at the thought of not having money of her own. Did she have a little savings she'd been slowly gathering, thinking of some grand future for herself? What went on in that head of hers, anyway? He had no idea at all, he realized, what Jean had dreamed of before their marriage and their unborn child so drastically changed the course of their lives.

"Jean, my darling, I've been thinking," he began. He'd been thinking about it for all of two minutes, but she didn't need to know that. "I don't want you to feel as if you ever have to ask me for anything. You've always been smarter than me, you know what's needed better than I do."

"Lucien-" perhaps she sensed what he was about to suggest and meant to protest, or perhaps not. Either way he could not stop before he'd spoken his piece.

"If you're going to continue to do the same work around the house, I think you ought to continue to receive compensation every week. Don't think of it as a salary," he added quickly, for he could feel in the tensing of her muscles her displeasure at the very idea of being paid to be his wife, "think of it as...your share. I would not function without you, my darling, and everything I have I owe to you. I want you to have money, your own money, to spend however you choose, on whatever you want, and I don't want you to feel even for a moment as if you're taking something from me."

She sighed, and relaxed just a little, and the relief Lucien felt was almost overwhelming. It was a delicate subject, he knew, for Jean had always been a traditionalist at heart, and he did not wish to give offense. He wanted to provide for her, in every way, but he did not want her to be dependent on
him; if anything, he rather depended on her, and he wanted her to know it. Jean was stronger than anyone ever gave her credit for, he knew, had been standing on her own two feet for so long now that for her to take a step back and cede control to him was unthinkable. He had no desire for such power; he only wanted to see her blossom, happy and well and comfortable with him.

"I suppose that would be all right," she said at last, and his rejoiced to know that he had no unduly wounded her pride.

"Good," he answered.

Tell me your dreams, he wanted to ask her. Tell me every thought you've ever had, every wish you've ever made, and let me help you bring them to life. The words did not pass his lips for he did not wish to scare her; his Jean was private by nature, he knew, and he wanted to earn her trust, wanted her to come to him of her own choosing, and not only buckle beneath the pressure of his need to know every last inch of her. We have time, he told himself. We have all the time in the world, and one day soon I will know her as well as she knows me.

"Is it terrible of me to say I don't want to leave?" Jean asked him in a small voice then, her delicate red nails trailing lightly against the skin of his forearm.

Lucien smiled and kissed her temple, for the very same thought had occurred to him, more than once. This life of leisure, falling into bed with his beautiful wife whenever he chose, unconcerned with work or obligations, surrounded by music and art and gardens and good food someone else had prepared, was deeply intoxicating. And yet some piece of him longed for the house on Mycroft, for sitting at their table and sipping tea from his mother's china cups, for Matthew and Alice and Agnes bloody Clasby. He longed for home, for the bed they would share every night, for the comfort and familiarity of the place where he'd first fallen in love with her.

"Everyone who goes on holiday wants to stay forever," he told her, not unkindly. "But it will be lovely to be home. We have to start thinking about a nursery, you know."

He braced himself, waiting for the sudden wave of melancholy that overtook his wife each time he mentioned their child, but blessedly this time it seemed that no such disaster was in the offing.

"Oh, I think we have a little time yet," she told him, but her voice was light, and his heart was glad of it.

"Shall we keep her with us?" he asked. He stubbornly persisted in referring to their child as she, not wanting to call the baby it and not wanting to concede an inch of ground as their wager still stood. Jean likewise remained steadfast in her position that the child would be a boy, and so they stood at an impasse with one another.

"Yes," Jean said firmly. "I know that formula is all the fashion with those lovely modern girls but I fed my boys myself, and this one will be no different."

She seemed a little grumpy about the whole thing, and Lucien loved her for it. Yes, the women's magazines in the surgery were full of advice about birth and child rearing, but his Jean would have none of it, he knew. Though decades had passed since Jean had an infant to care for she was quite intimately experienced with every facet of motherhood, and it was her position that there was nothing anyone could tell her she had not already learned for herself. For his part Lucien trusted Jean's instincts in that department far more than the advice of any of those lovely modern girls, and he would defer to her in this as in all things.

"Whatever you say, my darling," he told her whimsically. "Whatever you say."
Chapter 16

6 September 1960

For once it was the phone, and not morning sickness, that woke Jean in the early hours just before dawn. A death on the army base, and Lucien's skills were needed at once. Nevermind that they had only come home from their honeymoon the day before; death would wait for no one, not even a doctor still enjoying the delights of his new wife. She'd sent him out the door with a kiss on the cheek and an apple tucked in his pocket, knowing she would not see him again until lunchtime, and then only if she was very lucky. Though it stung, just a bit, to see him leave her so quickly, donning his hat and smiling at her brightly as if nothing were amiss, she knew what she had been getting into when she'd agreed to marry him in the first place, and she knew that this was part of it. His passion, his dedication, his deep-seated sense of justice; these traits she loved in him, and she could hardly be cross with him when those same qualities took him from her side. Much as she might have liked to spend a little more time alone with him, sequestered from the world in the warmth of their bed, she knew that this was the life she had chosen, and she would be glad of it.

The house needed tending to - though Charlie had done his best to keep things neat and tidy in their absence - and she knew those tasks would have been nigh on impossible with Lucien underfoot anyway. She enjoyed a quiet breakfast alone, and then began the work of the day. First order of business was the laundry; before his final illness old Doctor Blake had splashed out on an automatic washing machine, and Jean was grateful for it today. Once that task was begun she returned to the kitchen, and so she spent her morning, dusting and vacuuming and wandering from room to room in between trips to the washing machine and the clothesline outside. It was a fine warm day for September, and Jean enjoyed the play of the sunshine on her face, and the familiarity of her old routine. The work was not particularly hard or pressing, and she was in no particular hurry; any task not accomplished in the morning could be seen to in the afternoon, and anything not done by suppertime could be done the next day. She was free to set her own schedule and follow it or ignore it as she chose, to pause for a cup of tea, to lose herself in the meandering trail of her own thoughts as and when she wanted.

And what a path her thoughts wove as the minutes ticked slowly by; she thought about the prospect of making a trip into town, and what goods must be purchased there. She thought about Lucien, smiling, just a little, as she recalled some clever thing he'd told her while they were in Melbourne, a shiver running the length of her spine as she recalled the warmth of his hands. She thought about the baby, little Blake, as she called him in her mind, wondered what he would look like now, if only she could see him - though, being somewhat more superstitious than she would like to admit, she quickly amended that thought, clarifying to god or anyone else who might catch wind of her wandering thoughts that she was quite content to wait six more months to see his face. Let him be well, let me keep him safe. It was a familiar prayer she whispered in the vaults of her own mind now, one she would repeat every day until at last she could hold her son in her arms and hear his ragged cries.

What shall we call him? She asked herself. It was getting on towards lunchtime, now, and though Charlie had rung from the station to say he would not be home until much later she had had no word from Lucien, and so resolved herself to make something up for him, just in case. Names for little Blake provided a welcome distraction, as Jean remained steadfast in her conviction that the child must surely be a boy, and therefore she must surely win their little wager. It would fall to her, then, to give their boy his name, and she took this task quite seriously indeed.

Andrew? She wondered as she opened the breadbox; that morning when she'd sat down for tea and toast she had been delighted to see that Charlie must have purchased a fresh loaf in anticipation of
their return, and thus saved her having to rush into town on her very first day home. *Such a thoughtful boy, that Charlie,* she thought with a smile, continuing on her way.

*No, I don’t think we should call him Andrew. Everyone would call him Andy, and I don’t care for that.*

A tomato was next, fat and round, and she smiled softly to herself as she sliced it.

*Thomas, perhaps.* Not Gordon, for Jean's father; he had been a hard man, cruel, at times, and he had reacted unkindly to the news of her marriage to Christopher. In her heart Jean knew that Gordon Randall would have liked her second husband no better than the first, and she did not fancy having a constant reminder of those unpleasant times.

*Samuel, maybe.* Jean retrieved a small jar of chutney, knowing how Lucien favored it.

*Samuel Thomas Blake. Oh, I quite like that.*

And so it was that when Lucien came trooping into the kitchen with a worried expression on his face, he found his wife smiling at him softly and laying a plate by his seat at the head of the table, his favorite sandwich ready and waiting for him.

The morning had been a long one, and the sight of Jean was a balm to his weary soul. The death of the young man on the base was strange, to Lucien's mind, had inspired in him a thousand questions, and the grief of his mother had been a difficult thing to bear as Lucien reflected on his own circumstances. How awful, how unthinkable it must be, to lose a child, particularly under such gruesome circumstances. *I just want to know why this happened to my son,* she'd told him in such a broken voice, and Lucien had made a solemn vow, in that moment, to deliver to her all the answers she thought. It would hardly be consolation, he knew, but it was the only solace he could provide for that poor grieving mother.

That is, of course, if Derek Alderton didn't stand in his way.

"Hello, my darling," he said, making his way to Jean at once. In a moment he had her folded in his arms, her head tucked against his chest just below his chin. He breathed her in, the faint scent of bread and flowers and laundry soap that clung to her, the sense of home, of peace that he felt whenever she was near lightening his burdens, somewhat. The world beyond this house was strange and chaotic and terrible, at times, but here in this place, with Jean by his side, such worries began to recede.

"Is everything all right, Lucien?" she asked when he neither spoke nor let her go, simply clung to her there by the table. In his arms she leaned back, trying to see his face, and so he bowed his head and kissed her once, softly, before releasing her at last.

"Oh, it's just...been a difficult morning. This looks lovely, though."

And it did; of course Jean knew exactly what he liked, what would best bolster his spirits in this moment, and she provided it without prompting, a gentle smile and her tender concern and a tasty meal - but one that could be eaten quickly, for she knew as well as did he that he could not stay for very long.

"What happened at the base?" she asked as she retrieved her own lunch, which turned out to be no more than a few bites of toast and a cup of tea. Lucien frowned; she ought to eat more than that, and he rather felt that as a doctor he ought to tell her so. He had once, somewhat flippantly, remarked about giving her an exam, but the truth was she was three months gone, now, and he would like to
have her seen by a doctor. Who better to do it than Lucien himself? It might take some wheedling to convince his wife on that score, he knew, but he was determined to do it, if only to assure himself that his wife and child were well.

He turned his thoughts to her question, a question that gave evidence of just how very well she knew him. With one look she had determined that he was distracted, and rather than sigh or chide him for his detachment while he ate lunch with his wife she sought to help him, the way she always did. Clever and insightful Jean had been instrumental in unraveling so many of these little mysteries, and he knew that without her guidance he would be lost, as police surgeon and as a man. Some people might balk at discussing murder over lunch - and, truth be told, Jean disapproved of his more descriptive language when there was food on the table - but for the most part Jean was usually more than willing to provide a listening ear.

"Oh, some poor chap walked right into the middle of a live exercise. His parents live on the base, as well, it's just awful."

"His poor mother," Jean said softly, echoing Lucien's own thoughts. As he looked at her he saw her hand drift discreetly from her lap to the slight curve of her belly, and his heart clenched, just for a moment, as he sent up a silent prayer to no one in particular that Jean might be saved from ever experiencing such grief herself.

"I'll tell you, though," he added quickly, "that isn't what has me worried. Derek Alderton is here."

Jean looked up at him sharply, and he found he regretted mentioning the name at once.

"Do you think he's involved?" she asked shrewdly.

It was a fair question, and one that had been on Lucien's mind since he'd seen the man earlier in the day. What had brought Derek back, and could it really be a coincidence that he had returned to Ballarat and a murder had followed soon after? After their last meeting, he wasn't willing to rule anything out just yet.

"I have absolutely no idea," Lucien answered. "It's troubling…" his voice trailed off, for it hadn't been his intention to worry Jean with the same thoughts, the same memories that plagued him, but he was so accustomed to sharing his concerns with her that the words had spilled out of him quite before he could stop them. Jean had a particular talent for untangling the disparate threads of his thoughts, and though for her sake he wanted to protect her, one rueful look at the expression on her face told him it was foolish indeed to think he could shield her from those fears.

"I know things didn't end well between you, the last time he was here," she said slowly, her eyes narrowed as she watched him closely, looking for some hint of what was on his mind.

"No," he agreed. "It's troubling," he picked up where he left off with some trepidation, "how we could know one another so well, and for so long, and yet now he's almost a stranger to me. He was my closest friend, once. We survived hell together, he and I. Twenty years ago, if you'd told me he'd be trying to cover up the deaths of those young men, that he'd be willing to lie and sanction murder to protect our arms program, I would have said you were mad. But now he's done it."

Jean reached out and laid a gentle hand on his forearm, and he covered her hand with his own at once. "It's always hard, when you think you know a person and they turn out to be someone else entirely. But whoever he is now, whatever he's done, that doesn't erase the good memories you have of him, Lucien. Maybe he isn't now, but he was a good friend to you, once."

Lucien wanted to smile at her, to thank her for her thoughtfulness, her understanding, her gentle
touch, but in truth her words unnerved him. He thought he knew her, this beautiful woman who wore his ring, who carried his child, but there were parts of herself she had kept hidden, even from him. Oh, he knew her secrets likely could not be as devastating as those Derek had revealed, but still. You think you know a person, and they turn out to be someone else entirely.

"I do love you, Jean," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

"I do," she answered. "And I love you, too," she added, somewhat shyly, as if she could hardly believe she'd spoken the words aloud. "You'll find your way through this, Lucien. You always do." She rose gracefully from the table and pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead before taking hold of his empty plate, carrying it off to the sink with her own.

Lucien knew he needed to leave, needed to return to work, to Frank and Charlie and Alice and their poor murdered Lance Corporal, but in that moment the last thing he wanted to do was leave Jean behind. He wanted to tell her to sit, to let him wash the dishes, wanted to feed her a proper lunch and take her back to the surgery, wanted to assess her condition and assure himself that she was well, and then he wanted to take her to bed and trail his fingertips across her skin and coax from her hesitant lips every secret she harbored. He wanted to know her, inside and out, wanted the comfort of her presence, the security that would come when he held the truth of her cradled in his hands. He wanted many things, but his duty was waiting for him, and Jean would still be here when the work was through. For now, that would have to be enough.
Chapter 17

9 September 1960

"So, they were all stepping out together," Jean said slowly, glancing from the dominoes to Lucien's face and back again. "How do they keep it from each other?"

Her mind was spinning, slightly, as Lucien neatly laid out the various intimate connections between the couples on the base, using her dominoes to illustrate his point so plainly. Three men and four women, all tangled up together, willfully ignoring the vows they'd made to their spouses in favor of keeping company with one another. Oh, Jean was not naive, she knew all sorts of stories about neighbors and old acquaintances and a friendly cup of tea turning into something more, but she had never heard of anything quite like this, something this broad, encompassing so many different people.

"Maybe they don't," Lucien suggested.

Jean raised a single, somewhat accusatory eyebrow at him. The very idea! "You think these men and women have all agreed to...share their partners with one another?"

"Well, it would hardly be the first time a little community like this one decided to...bend the rules, just a bit. There are all sorts of people in all sorts of marriages, Jean."

He seemed somewhat proud of himself, for having worked it all out, for having come to the conclusion that these seven people all shared this secret, all had something to hide. And it did make a certain amount of sense, Jean supposed, might explain why Gladys Cook had been murdered. People had killed to protect secrets less incendiary than this, she knew. Still, Lucien's delight at having solved the riddle rubbed her the wrong way; feeling somewhat petulant about the whole business she leaned back against the sofa, one of her hands coming to rest against the curve of her belly, the way it so often did these days. Oh, she was hardly showing, yet, but she had always been rather slightly built, and with every week she found the change in her own body more noticeable.

She could hardly judge these people, she knew, for she and Lucien had enjoyed one another quite thoroughly before they were wed, had in their own way flouted the sacrament of marriage, but still, she could not silence the little voice inside her head that protested most vehemently at the very idea of such an arrangement.

"Why would they agree to this? The women, I mean. They must know they can't keep it a secret forever, and when the truth comes out...well, it's always the women who are most affected by the gossip."

"Perhaps they wanted to do it," he suggested. "I mean, we have no idea how it started, who's to say one of the ladies didn't come up with the idea in the first place?"

She tried to imagine it, for a moment, agreeing to go to another man's bed, allowing another woman to lie in Lucien's arms, and she very nearly vaulted from the sofa in disgust. Perhaps she was old fashioned, perhaps she was a bit close-minded, not nearly as much fun as those lovely modern girls, but Jean had been alone for seventeen long years before Lucien came barreling into her life, and having experienced all the love, the joy, the passion he brought to her, she could not bear the thought of sharing him with anyone else. And if she were being entirely honest with herself, she had hardly spared a glance for another man since Lucien's arrival. Oh, she had entertained the notion of settling down, had given serious thought to Robert's proposal, had enjoyed Richard Taylor's
company, but in the end neither of them had inspired such desire, such reckless, wanton need in her as Lucien did. Of one thing she was certain; Lucien Blake was more than enough for her.

"You know, these people have been married for fifteen, twenty years," Lucien mused. "Perhaps they found themselves in need of a bit of...excitement."

Jean scowled at him; she couldn't help it. She tried to imagine the pair of them twenty years in the future; Lucien would be seventy, and Jean not far behind, their boy would be grown and maybe off on his own somewhere out in the world. Their granddaughters might even be married by then, Christopher's little Amelia and Li's little Sun. No, at seventy she wasn't entirely sure she and Lucien would have the energy for those sorts of antics. But would he be bored of her, by then? Would he look at her sometimes, and wonder how much different his life would have been, without her in it? Somehow Jean didn't think she would ever tire of him, this wild man she called her own, impulsive and reckless as he was. Perhaps by seventy he might slow down, just a bit. She was rather looking forward to finding out.

"Excitement," she repeated quietly. Was their marriage exciting enough for him now? She wondered. They had gone from engaged to expectant parents over the course of a few weeks, their relationship and their entire marriage now defined by this addition that was to come. Did he regret it, the momentary indiscretion that had resulted in such far-flung consequences? Oh, he seemed eager enough, where the baby was concerned, had assured her again and again that he was happy, that their child would be a blessing. And perhaps he felt that way now, but would he change his mind when the sound of a baby's cries woke them in the dead of night, when his wife was too exhausted to do more than sleep when they sought their bed at the end of a long day?

"Too much excitement, if you ask me," Lucien said, and there was something knowing in his expression that called to Jean at once, as if he had with a single glance determined the course of her thoughts, and sought to reassure her.

"Is that so?" she challenged him. Her tone was cool, but her heart was eager for his reassurances, made uncertain by the questions this new possibility raised.

Lucien laughed and folded himself onto the sofa beside her, drawing her into his arms at once.

"You, my darling, are excitement enough." He kissed her temple and Jean hummed in acknowledgement, thinking hard.

Not quite two weeks, they'd been married now, and she had been enjoying every moment of it, and every time she looked at him Lucien was smiling, beaming, glorious in his happiness. There lay a long road ahead for them, she knew, days upon days for them to discover more about one another, to ferret out the secrets hidden in one another's hearts, to continue to build the trust and the love that formed the very foundation of their lives. Though Jean knew there were things he had not told her, scars of which he was loath to speak, she likewise knew that there was far more he did not know about her. Lucien did not know what life had been like for her, as a child, her father's heavy hand, her mother's long illness, the bite of hunger, the brother she'd lost the same year her husband died. He had not met her sister, before the wedding, had never met any of her nieces and nephews save for Danny. He did not know about the girl she'd lost, the way she'd wept every night for a year after she lost her Christopher, did not know the truth of why Jack had been sent off to Melbourne, not really. He did not know that in the years after the war she'd refused three separate marriage proposals, and had more than once gone walking through the park with Matthew Lawson. There was so much about her he did not know, she hardly knew where to begin.

*Here,* she told herself. *We begin here.*
"Is that so?" she repeated, and before he could say another word she rose up and settled herself upon his lap, her knees on either side of his hips and her arms snaking around his neck. To straddle him so boldly in the sitting room was not ordinarily in her nature, but Charlie had already gone up to bed, and if tonight were like any of the nights that had come before, she knew they would not see him again until morning. If they kept their voices low they could do anything they pleased in any room downstairs, and their poor boarder would be none the wiser. If it was excitement Lucien needed, then by God she was going to give it to him, was going to show him just how very exciting she could be.

Beneath her his eyes had gone wide and his hands had gravitated at once to her thighs, slipping beneath her skirt, fingertips gliding across the smooth skin just above her stocking tops. It was funny, really, how easily she could read him, how she could see in the parting of his lips and the darkening of his eyes and the rise and fall of his Adam's apple as he swallowed the desire beginning to rise up within him. Almost two weeks they'd been married now, and not nearly enough time for them to sate their longing for one another. She leaned in close to him, breathing deeply of the soft scent of whiskey and cologne that clung to him, teasing him just a little as her lips drew nearer to his and yet she did not close the distance between them. Let him linger here, on the precipice, wondering what she might do next, she told herself.

Gently she trailed her fingertips against his neck, nails scraping lightly here and there, tracing the tendons she had mapped with her tongue, more than once. They were close, so unbelievably close, his breath washing warm and sweet across her lips, his desire for her beginning to make its presence known where it pressed up against the sudden ache at her center, his hands growing more insistent in the exploration of her thighs. She ducked her head and Lucien moved to meet her, no doubt thinking she meant to kiss him, but she bypassed his lips entirely, settling instead on a soft spot just beneath his jaw. Gently she kissed him, tongue darting out to flick against his skin, and she reveled in the way his whole body tensed beneath her.

"Jean," he growled, his voice low and carrying with it the faintest hint of danger. Oh, he would never hurt her, she knew, would never presume to take from her that which she had not freely given, but there was a wildness in him, as well, and with each passing second his restraint was weakening. Quite suddenly she found that she wanted to unleash that side of him, wanted no delicate caresses or whispered endearments but instead the heat, the possessive sort of blaze that only he could ignite.

"You are mine, Lucien Blake," she whispered, tracing the straining muscles of his neck with her tongue.

Perhaps it was her words, or the heat of her mouth, or the combination of the two, but in that moment Lucien broke free from his own tenuous self-control. Without warning he rose to his feet, strong arms holding her tight, anchoring her to him as her legs wrapped around his waist and her hands fisted in his jacket. An undignified little squeak escaped her, but then his tongue surged between her lips as he kissed her, hard, all lips and teeth and tongue and desperate want. Jean's head was spinning beneath the onslaught, her hips grinding shamelessly against him where he cradled her close, and without a word, without breaking their kiss or even taking a moment to breathe Lucien turned away and carried her to their bedroom.

They lay together, after, gasping and sweaty, tangled up together and gloriously happy. There was a darkening bruise against the curve of Jean's breast left by Lucien's lips and teeth, and a matching mark on his chest just above his beating heart that Jean had made herself. His head was pillowed on her chest, one of his broad, strong hands sweeping gently back and forth across her belly.

"You are the only one for me, my darling," Lucien told her softly. "You know that, don't you?"

Jean smiled and ran her fingers through his hair, gone soft and curly at the end of a long day. "I
know," she answered. "And you for me."

Lucien turned his head to press a gentle kiss against her skin, and Jean sighed and closed her eyes, still trailing her fingers through his hair. Yes, there were questions still to answer. Lucien had two deaths to solve and the mystery of Derek Alderton to untangle, and Jean had the riddles of her own heart to struggle with. But they had made a place for themselves here, in this big, grand bed, had stripped away the layers of worry and grief that used to cloud their steps and found joy in their connection to one another.

*Here,* Jean reminded herself. *We begin here.*

"Lucien," she said softly, and beneath her he hummed in response.

"Have I ever told you about my mother?"
"I really don't think this is necessary," Jean grumbled, but despite her protests she dutifully followed along as her husband led the way to the surgery.

"Humor me, Jean," he answered, not turning around or slowing his progress even for a moment.

It had taken him weeks to convince her that she really ought to be examined by a physician - by him. His Jean was nothing if not stubborn, and she continued to insist that I do know what I'm doing, Lucien, it's not as if I've never been through this before. He had encountered such attitudes in several of his patients, mothers on their second or third or fourth babies who were less interested in the latest research and newest approaches to antenatal care and content that the knowledge of their previous experiences trumped anything an upjumped doctor in a flash suit might have to say. Given the leaps and bounds the medical field had made since the last time Jean had carried a child he had known going in that she would likely prove to be his most difficult patient, but she was also the most important one, and he remained steadfast in his conviction. He would do whatever he could to assure himself that his wife and child were well, and safe, and in the end Jean had given in, though it seemed to him she had acquiesced more to get him to stop talking about it than out of any real belief in the necessity of the examination.

It was a Saturday, warm despite the threat of rain that hung in the air. Spring had arrived, and with it came the new bloom of fresh life, everything around them bursting green and bright and cheerful; the perfect time, Lucien thought, for them to turn their thoughts towards this little one who was to come. Jean remained firm in her belief that the child must surely be a boy, and though Lucien had teased her about their wager a time or two he had learned, quite quickly, that his wife was not amused by such antics, though the reason for her displeasure was not immediately clear to him. As unshakeable as her faith was, he had faith of his own, and entertained himself in idle moments thinking of Jean with a daughter of her very own, wondering what he might decide to call her when she came screaming into the world and he won the wager at last.

"This will only take a few minutes, my darling," he assured her. "Now, if you'll take a seat just there," he gestured towards the examination table, "we can get started."

There was a faintly mutinous expression on Jean's face, but she settled herself primly on the table without any further word of complaint.

"Right," he said, frozen for a moment at the sight of Jean on the table. He had only ever given Jean any sort of medical treatment once, when Jack was in town and those no good louts had come to cause trouble at his home, cast her down into the dirt and injured her delicate hand. She had taken ill, once or twice, in the time that they had known one another, but it was never anything more than a common cold, cured with bedrest and strong tea that Jean prescribed herself, knowing better than he the treatments that would best cure what ailed her. Seeing her on the table now, even knowing that there wasn't exactly anything wrong with her, led him to consider how devastating it would be should some disaster befall her someday, should she actually be in ill health, in danger. She was everything to him, and he could not bear the thought of carrying on without her.

"I have to ask you a few questions." He settled himself behind the desk with a fresh piece of paper and pen at the ready, Jean's patient file - for, while she had never needed Lucien's services as a doctor, she had apparently prevailed upon his father in the past, and the file was full of his father's somewhat slapdash notes - open in front of him. "I know you've been experiencing some morning
Jean did not roll her eyes, but she came very close. "Lucien," she grumbled, "we've been living in the same house for the last four months, haven't we? You mean to tell me you don't know?"

"I'm not asking as your husband," he said, trying to sound patient and not teasing, though it was very hard not to tease her, when she pouted at him so adorably. "I'm asking as your doctor. How many times would you say?"

"Every day, in the beginning. Now, I'd say, oh, three or four times a week. Mostly if I wait too long between meals. And I can't drink sherry, any more."

Lucien had taken note of the very same aversion to her usual tipple, but it was good to have the confirmation from Jean herself, and so he dutifully scribbled her answer, and made a mental note to encourage her to eat more often.

"And how much weight would you say you've gained?"

His question was met with a stony silence, and when he raised his head he found his wife glaring at him from beneath one arched eyebrow. Though she was cross, he found himself fighting the sudden, wild urge to grin.

"Right," he said. "We'll just weigh you today, and measure your progress from there."

"Really, Lucien, is that necessary?" She was smoothing her skirt across her thighs, a skirt that Lucien knew still fit, if a bit more tightly than it had before. Which in itself was an achievement, given how perfectly tailored her skirts were to begin with; the sight of Jean's lithe frame in those close-fitting skirts had tortured Lucien almost from the moment they first met. She took pride in that, he knew, the fact that at nearly four months gone - *four months tomorrow*, he thought with some pride - she was hardly showing at all. That would change, and soon, he knew, but for now the truth of their child remained a secret they could share, just the two of them. And Alice, of course.

"I'll take your blood pressure now," he said, rising ponderously from his chair.

To her credit, Jean submitted to his attentions with all the good grace she could muster, though Lucien himself was somewhat distracted from the task at hand by the elegant curve of his wife's lovely neck, the gentle scent of her perfume dancing all around him, the soft, lean line of her bicep and the warmth of her skin beneath his fingertips. Every inch of her was lovely, enchanting, mesmerizing in her beauty, but this examination was not some tawdry game to be played between lovers; Lucien was a doctor, and he took his duty to his patients - and this one in particular - very seriously.

With her blood pressure determined he pressed a gentle kiss to the rise of her cheek, murmuring softly thank you, my darling, before crossing back to his desk to jot down the figures he'd collected.

"Right, now, I'm just going to draw some blood-"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Lucien!" Jean's patience was wearing thin, and she was not shy about letting him know it. She had never been shy about letting him know when he displeased her, though of late she had been growing more proficient in also making it clear when the reverse was true, when he had pleased her immensely. It pleased him to please her, and the thought brought a winsome smile to his face despite his wife's ire.

"We're nearly finished," he assured her as he gathered what he would need to take a blood sample. "It's important that we make sure you're well, Jean. There's all sorts of tests-"
Though he could not be certain, he thought he heard her mutter something along the lines of *bugger your tests.* And he felt that was a lovely thing, for before their engagement she would never have uttered such a word in his presence, but over the last few weeks as they came together as a married couple he had coaxed all sorts of uncouth exclamations from her lips, and delighted in every one.

"I know this is uncomfortable for you," he said as he returned to her, as she rolled up her sleeve to allow him better access. And he *did* know; Jean had delivered both young Christopher and Jack at home, had not seen a doctor for any sort of ailment until she came to live with the elder Blake, who it would seem had coaxed her into accepting the help he offered - though how he had managed such a feat, Lucien still wasn't sure. For all that she seemed to enjoy helping him with his patients and listened with rapt attention when he remarked on some new piece of information from his medical journals - or read them herself, in quiet moments when she thought he wouldn't notice - it seemed that Jean found she did not need, or perhaps did not qualify, for such care herself. She was a complex sort of woman, his Jean, fierce and strong, proud and stubborn, but full of a wariness, a hesitation to draw attention to herself or put her own needs before others that spoke to a sort of self-doubt that seemed out of place in a woman as accomplished as she. Whatever doubts or insecurities she harbored she did not share with her husband, but she had of late seemed more willing to let him catch a glimpse of her own unfathomable inner world, and he was grateful for each new piece of information she bestowed on him.

"I just don't see why you have to make such a fuss," she sighed as he finished drawing her blood.

"Because I love you," he answered simply.

She flashed him a smile, her expression somewhat surprised, as if she had been caught off guard by his tender regard for her. Any fondness he might have inspired in her was quickly quashed, however, by his next words.

"Right then," he said, "if you'll just step onto the scales, we'll take your weight and your measurements."

"Why don't we take note of your weight, while we're at it?" Jean suggested archly as she slipped to her feet and stepped up to the scales. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that married life agrees with you, Doctor Blake."

Lucien grinned ruefully, taking note of her weight before reaching for a bit of measuring tape. He could not deny it; though he took pains to keep himself fit, walked often and undertook heavy jobs around the house and such, he knew that in the years since he'd returned to Ballarat his belly had gone a bit soft, and he knew that was all down to Jean, to the fine food she made for him, the way she looked after him, the happiness and contentment she inspired in him.

"If that would make you happy, my darling," he said, his arms wrapping around her waist as he sought to take her measurements, his focus slipping, just a bit, as her face came close to his, their chests almost touching, his heart rate increasing at her proximity the way it always did, even now, when they had memorized every inch of one another.

"Perhaps we should take your blood pressure, too," she said knowingly, her voice soft and warm.

Before he could allow himself to give in to the distraction of his lovely wife Lucien scribbled down the measurements he had taken. But then he let pen and measuring tape fall uselessly to the desk and gathered her into his arms at once.

"Thank you," he said softly, his lips brushing the shell of her ear as he spoke.
In his embrace Jean shivered and pressed herself still closer to him. "It wasn't as bad as all that," she conceded, somewhat breathlessly. "My doctor has a tolerable manner."

Lucien just laughed, and kissed her soundly.

That same evening they sat down to supper with Charlie, who had been absent for most of the day, and who seemed to have something weighing on his mind.

"Is everything all right, Charlie?" Jean asked him as she settled into her seat across from him. She did not like to see him looking so troubled; Charlie was a thoughtful young man, not given much to smiles, and he reminded her rather strongly of young Christopher in that regard. Though it was at times somewhat uncomfortable to have him underfoot, dancing around their lodger and his sensibilities while still enjoying the delights of their new marriage - delights they had sampled quite thoroughly, following Lucien's examination - they had all grown rather accustomed to one another, and Jean had never once begrudged his presence in their home. If she couldn't have her own sons close to hand, she was quite happy to have Charlie in their stead.

"They've just finished building those new apartments in town, and I've decided I'm going to rent one."

His voice was soft, as always, not carrying with it any accusation or guilt, but rather a sort of resignation, betraying the fact that he'd given rather a lot of thought to the prospect, and was certain of the path he'd chosen. Briefly Jean's gaze shifted to her husband's face; she could see the conflict there, even as he struggled to give voice to his thoughts. It would be quite nice, she supposed, to have the house to themselves, and she could understand Charlie not wanting to stay with them, especially once the baby arrived. They would not miss the income when he was no longer paying for room and board, and they could perhaps relax, just a bit, without anyone there to witness their interactions with one another. On the other hand, however, Jean hated the thought that her relationship with Lucien might have forced Charlie's hand on the matter, that he had been made to feel uncomfortable in the place that was supposed to be his home, and she knew Lucien would hate the thought of Charlie moving into those apartments, considering the fact that Patrick Tyneman owned the building.

"I am grateful to you both, for letting me stay here," he said quickly, "but I think it's time I had a place of my own."

"Quite right, Charlie," Lucien said at last, reaching out to clap him on the shoulder. "There comes a time in every young man's life when he must strike out on his own."

Jean frowned at his somewhat patronizing turn of phrase, and sought to put what she saw as Lucien's misstep to rights at once.

"You're always welcome here, Charlie, you know that," she said kindly as she could.

"I know, Mrs. Beaz- Mrs. Blake. You've both been very kind to me. I just think it's time."

"Well," Jean said, somewhat surprised at the sudden rush of emotion that constricted her throat at the very idea of Charlie leaving them. "You will have to pop round for dinner, as often as you can."

"I'd like that," Charlie said, offering a somewhat relieved little smile.

The rest of the meal they spent speaking quietly of Charlie's plans, Lucien gallantly offering to help the lad gather his things and offering the use of his car to transport them across town. Jean, who had begun this meal with a light heart after spending the afternoon in Lucien's arms, shirking her
responsibilities and sighing with bliss beneath the touch of his hand, found she had very little to add to the conversation as her thoughts took a somewhat morose turn. Likely Charlie had the right of it, and this was the best course for all of them, but she could not help but be reminded of how her heart had grieved when her sons left her, each in his own time, and she could not help but wonder if someday this new little Blake might break her heart in much the same fashion. A mother's greatest triumph, she knew, was raising a child who would one day leave her to start their own life, but that success brought with it its own bittersweet sort of sorrow.
Chapter 19

11 October 1960

"So that's Terry Reynolds, is it?" Jean asked, shuddering as her gaze skidded across the shrouded body on the table in the center of the room. Though she had become rather well acquainted with the morgue over the course of the last few weeks she was still not entirely comfortable with the notion of the work that was done there, and she looked away quickly, focusing instead upon the person she had come to visit.

"In the flesh," Alice said dryly. There was very little that phased Alice, of course, and she had no qualms about spending time in this room, keeping company with a corpse. She was a bit of an odd duck, was Alice, but she was genuine and kind, and Jean adored her.

"I've brought a bit of lunch," Jean announced, lifting the little basket she carried. If she were meeting Lucien, or anyone else for that matter, Jean might have insisted that they take their meal to the park or perhaps the lake, escape this place and take in the sunshine, but Alice did not have much time to spare and did not seem to balk at eating in the morgue, and so for her sake Jean swallowed her protests and marched across the room with her chin held high. They could eat at the long counter that ran the length of the back wall with their backs turned towards Mr. Reynolds, and if Jean closed her eyes she could almost pretend they were enjoying lunch in a cafe. A cafe that reeked of antiseptic, perhaps, but still, it was close enough.

Alice made some show of gratitude as Jean passed her a sandwich and Jean smiled, content with the ritual of feeding someone she cared about, if not with her surroundings. When Lucien was gallivanting off after a murderer she often took lunch by herself, but she liked to make time for her friends, to seize the opportunity to get out of the house and socialize with other people. Alice was one of those friends, and so Jean did not mind meeting her on her own ground, especially given the fact that Jean was fairly certain that the number of her friends was bound to dwindle, in the coming days.

She had finally, reluctantly, admitted defeat and changed her mode of dress. Her fitted skirts and blouses simply wouldn't do, any more; though by no means large the curve of her belly was now decidedly pronounced, and though she could have let out some of her favorite outfits to make room for this new addition the style of her usual clothes would have only emphasized the change in her body. With that in mind she had gone digging around in the back of her closet and seized several dresses that could be cleverly altered, high-waists and full skirts shielding her somewhat from curious gazes. One at a time she was slowly rebuilding her wardrobe, but those minor alterations were only a stop-gap, she knew. Soon, very soon, she would need entirely new pieces, and when that day came there would be no more hiding her condition. Though blessedly comfortable the standard outfits of the day for expectant mothers were billowy, roomy affairs that made the wearer seem somehow even larger than she was to begin with, that did not so much suggest the idea of pregnancy as bellow it. Even thinking about such clothes made Jean shudder, made her think longingly of the days when she'd carried her first two sons, hidden away on a farm far outside town, poor enough that no one really seemed to mind that she did not dress in the latest fashions. Her circumstances had changed, but still, she could not quite resolve herself to dressing in what were hardly more than delicately embroidered potato sacks for months on end; no, Jean was very seriously considering making all her clothes herself, despite her elevated station, just to avoid such an unappealing fate.

That was, however, a topic to visit at another time, as she was fairly certain that fashion was not high on the list of topics in which Alice was conversant. It was a fine warm day, and Jean was wearing a
soft navy dress in a bright floral pattern, gathered just below her bust and swirling out into a long, flowy skirt. Her stomach was artfully concealed, she was comfortable, and she was sharing lunch with a friend; there was precious little for her to worry about, in that moment.

"Do you have any idea who did it?" Jean asked as they ate, gesturing vaguely towards Terry Reynolds.

Alice shrugged. "That's more Lucien's purview than mine," she said. "It's my job to find out how they died, and it's up to the police to find out why. And Lucien, well, he does what he likes, as you well know."

"He does, doesn't he?" Jean said with an easy smile, a smile that Alice returned at once.

"How are you getting on with...everything?" Alice asked as delicately as she could. Jean's smile faltered, a bit, but she tried her best to fix it back in place. Alice was a dear soul, somewhat uncertain in social situations but determined to be kind and to try her best to get things right, and Jean was grateful for her friendship.

"It's been really lovely, these last few weeks," Jean answered truthfully, a little blush rising in her cheeks at the very thought. It was completely, utterly lovely being Lucien's wife, sharing his bed and his life, learning how to live even more closely with one another than they had before. Lucien was strong and gentle, delighted in making her laugh, making her moan in pleasure, making her happy, and Jean was thoroughly enjoying his efforts. It was not Lucien, or their marriage, that gave Jean pause now.

"I just feel as if I'm running out of time," she confessed in a small voice.

Jean had always known, from the moment she discovered her condition, that a ticking clock loomed over her head, counting down the days until her secret would be revealed and her reputation would be in tatters. As she adjusted to her new marriage she had been so blissfully happy with Lucien that she had very nearly forgotten it, but now the moment of her shame seemed to be staring her square in the face, and she had no idea how to stop it.

"You're worried about what people will say." It wasn't a question, and Jean flashed a grateful smile at Alice's thoughtful understanding, glad that she would not be forced to explain herself further.

"You know," Alice said slowly, "I have never been in your position, but I do know a thing or two about secrets."

Jean's thoughts drifted momentarily to the debacle with Doctor Orton, and she felt a surge of affection for Alice welling up inside her. Yes, Alice knew all about how people might whisper, how one person's bad opinion could infect so many others, how difficult a burden a secret like that could be.

"And I have often wished that instead of fighting so hard to hide it that I had simply come right out with it. If I had gotten ahead of the story, to borrow a phrase from our journalist friends. If you control when the news comes out, you can have an impact on how it's received."

For a moment Jean focused her attention on her lunch, turning Alice's words over and over in her mind. It seemed that she had reached a fork in the road, that she had to choose a way forward, and soon. She could do her best to hide this secret, knowing that one day soon the whispers would begin, as people looked at her and drew their own conclusions. Or she could simply come out with it herself, begin to tell the people who were closest to her, find contentment in the path her life had taken and carry this burden with pride. Before this moment the second path had not really seemed
like an option to her, but Alice's wise words spoke to something deep within her heart. She could take control of the situation, however briefly, could forge ahead on her own terms, and suddenly she found that prospect incredibly appealing.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Alice," Jean said, reaching out impulsively to give her friend an affectionate little pat. Alice appeared quite startled by this sudden display of fondness, but she smiled just the same, and they continued to eat their lunch and chat to one another in a companionable sort of way.

With supper roasting merrily away and a few minutes to herself Jean made her way to the surgery and closed the door firmly behind her, staring at the telephone as if it were a snake poised to strike. After her conversation with Alice Jean had resolved herself to begin telling her friends and family the news of little Blake's impending arrival sooner rather than later. Charlie would be popping round for supper which would provide Jean with the perfect opportunity to share her news, and there was a scheduled meeting of the sewing circle at Nancy's home on Saturday afternoon. Lucien could ring Matthew in the interim, and perhaps begin a letter to Li, and they would be off and running. Any future conversations could be allowed to unfold naturally, but those were the most important. Those conversations, and the one Jean needed to have with her oldest son.

He deserved to know before anyone else, and Jean knew it. Though she did not doubt the wisdom of her course she quailed at the very thought of it, having no idea how Christopher might feel about welcoming a little brother who would be younger than his own child. Somehow she could not imagine that he would be pleased, but she did hope that however this revelation might disappoint him he might find it in his heart to be happy for her. Always Christopher had been the one of her sons most like herself, observant and not driven to attention seeking like Jack, thoughtful and not impulsive like his father. His father; Jean dropped into the chair behind Lucien's desk with a sigh, covering her eyes with one hand as Christopher's face swam across her vision. It had taken her seventeen long years to come to peace with his passing, to accept the loss of him, to focus not on grief but on the hope of a new beginning. Still, though she loved Lucien, though she delighted in the life they had made together, some small piece of her first husband remained lodged firmly in her heart. Jean had been a girl when they met, still a girl when they first wed, and she had changed so much over the intervening years that she was certain he would not recognize her now. He belonged to a different life, but still he was with her, and in this moment she could not help but wonder what he would think of her, if he knew the choices she had made, the path her life had taken.

That's my girl, she could almost hear him saying, with laughter in his voice. You never did anything halfway, did you, Jeannie?

Always Christopher had called her Jeannie; the diminutive had dripped from Lucien's lips a time or two, had made her smile at him sadly, for though he had meant to be affectionate each time he called her that she could only think that he had never met Jeannie, not truly. Jeannie was someone else, someone brasher, braver, far less refined, a girl with dirt under her nails, racing laughing through a cornfield, falling into the sweet-smelling summer hay piled deep in the loft of a barn, weeping in the dark of the night as she fled from her father's heavy hand and her mother's wracking cough. That girl had been meant for Christopher and Christopher alone, but time had changed her, molded her, shaped her into Mrs. Blake. Jean had almost forgotten her, that girl with the flyaway hair and the gnawing bite of hunger in her belly, but in this moment she felt more connected to her past than she had for quite some time. History was repeating itself, as she proved that she had learned nothing from her previous mistakes, and the thought of facing her son, that fine young man with her Christopher's blood in his veins, brought it all rushing back with a vengeance.

You can do this, she told herself. Christopher had been dead for seventeen long years, and her son
needed her honesty, now, needed her to confide in him, to include him in this latest expansion of her family. She would have to find some way to merge those two pieces of her heart, the girl who had brought young Christopher screaming into the world from the safety of her own kitchen and the woman who now sat in a finely appointed doctor's surgery with a brand new child sheltered in her belly, would have to remind her son that her life carried on while not downplaying the importance of everything that had become before this sudden change in her circumstances.

She took a very deep breath then, and reached for the phone.

He picked up after two rings. "Lieutenant Beazley," he said, somewhat sharply.

"Christopher," Jean breathed. "It's mum."

"Everything all right?" he asked at once. Jean did not often ring her son, nor did he ring her; they were not particularly demonstrative people, either one of them, and they did not need constant contact to reassure them of their love of one another.

"Everything is fine," she reassured him. "It's just, there's something I need to tell you."

"All right."

There was a brief pause, then, as Jean gathered her thoughts and her courage. There was nothing for it, she knew. She would have to simply tell him outright, and wait for his response.

"Christopher, I'm...I'm expecting."

"Expecting what?"

If the moment hadn't been so important Jean might well have laughed at the utter lack of comprehension he displayed. She was fairly certain that one day she would look back and find the whole thing rather funny, but as it was she could not spare a thought for the humor of it.

"I'm going to have a baby, Christopher."

"Jesus Christ."

It was soft, only faintly audible, but Jean heard it just the same, heard the way her boy swore at the news, shocked and maybe just a little bit appalled by the very idea of her having another child. Though she wanted, very much, to rush to her own defense, she could think of nothing at all to say to soften the blow. Yes, it was unexpected, shocking, something Jean never would have believed possible had she not experienced it for herself, and yet the truth remained. She was not too old, just yet, and nature had taken its course.

Jack had always required attention, praise or discipline as necessary, but Christopher had always required space, time to sort through his thoughts on his own, and so for a moment or two Jean did not speak, simply let him process this news and try to come to grips with it. The silence was killing her, however, and so eventually she broke it, for the sake of her own aching heart.

"I know it's unexpected," she said slowly.

"Unexpected?" Christopher fired back. "You're a grandmother!"

There was no anger in him, for which Jean was very grateful; he seemed only confused, and perhaps a bit hurt.
"Yes, well, I don't think I need to remind you, Christopher, that I was younger than you are now when you were born. I'm not as old as all that."

"No, I guess you aren't," he said, somewhat sadly.

"I know this is hard, sweetheart. It will take some time to...adjust. But I love you, so much, and I wanted you to be the first person I told. After Lucien, of course."

Christopher just grunted, and the uncomfortable silence returned, for a moment, as anxiety gnawed at Jean's heart. There was no taking it back, now; the truth had been brought to light, and she would have to face it, whatever happened next.

"Jack is going to be completely furious," Christopher observed softly.

"I know."

And she did, of course; Jack did not care much for Lucien or the life his mother had made for herself, had lashed out at both of them the last time he was home, and she had not spoken to him in months, had not been able to share the news of her marriage or learn for herself if he was all right. When the moment finally came, she dreaded his response, but she had learned, to her sorrow, that Jack was his own man, and she could not change him now.

"Are you happy, mum?"

For all that her heart was aching, it was in that moment that Jean knew everything would be all right.

"I am," she answered simply.

"And you're looking after yourself?"

"I am." She smiled, just a little, to think how proud she was of him, this thoughtful young man who despite his own inner turmoil still took time to make sure that she was all right.

"Well-" he started to speak, but then Jean could hear the - somewhat shrill - sound of Ruby's voice in the background.

"I've got to go, mum," he said. "You let me know if you need anything, all right?"

"Come for Christmas," Jean suggested impulsively. "It's been too long since I've seen you. We've got plenty of room for all of you here."

"I'll think about it," he promised. It wasn't really up to him anyway, and Jean knew it, but still she was glad to have at least that small bit of hope to cling to.

"I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you, too, mum."

And that was that. Jean hung up the phone and leaned back against the chair, one hand brushing absently over the swell of her belly. The phone call had gone better than she could have expected, and the chains of doubt and fear that bound her heart began to loosen now that she knew Christopher was not cross.

You're going to love your big brother, she thought absently, though whether she was trying to reassure herself or little Blake she wasn't quite sure. He's a good man, and I hope one day you grow up to be as brave and kind as he is.
Soon she would have to rise, to go and see to dinner, to kiss her husband on the cheek and let Charlie in on their little secret, but for a moment she lingered, thinking about the past and the future, all the many differences between them, and all the threads of hope and love that made them very much the same.
Chapter 20

16 October 1960

Lucien smiled, his heart full to bursting with love as he took in the sight of his darling Jean, sitting in the soft cushioned rocking chair in the corner of their bedroom, their baby cradled in her arms and a beatific smile upon her face. From the doorway Lucien could not see his daughter's face, but he could see the wispy tuft of her soft blonde hair, could make out the soft sound of Jean's voice humming as she held their little girl close, rocking, rocking, rocking in a steady, gentle motion that soothed his heart even as it soothed the baby.

"Come and see her, Lucien," Jean called to him in a voice full of warmth and affection, and Lucien moved to answer her at once, beckoned closer by the siren sound of his wife's voice, the beauty of the tableau before him.

But as he stepped further into the room the sharp report of gunfire echoed beyond the window. Alert and anxious as a hunting dog Lucien turned toward the sound, but then Jean began to scream, and his heart seized in his chest.

A ring of flame had surrounded her, cut her off from him utterly, offered her no escape, afforded him no means to reach her. Jean screamed again, and knowing it was folly Lucien raced towards her anyway, desperate to save her, to save their little girl. Beyond the studio he could hear the echoing explosions of bombs, as the windows burst and sprayed glass throughout the room, as the door was blown off its hinges. He threw himself at the flames, and though his body burned he could not pass through them, could not reach Jean, whose anguished face he saw dancing just out of reach. But no, it was not Jean; her skin was paler, her hair longer, darker, stick-straight and shining in the light of the flames. It was not Jean and their new baby; Mei Lin was trapped within that ring of fire, little Li cradled in her arms, calling out to him in desperation, but still he could not reach her, though his body ached, sweat pouring from him as the heat of the flames engulfed him. It was useless, useless...

"Please," Lucien begged, calling out to a god who had forgotten him long ago. "Please god, not again."

Over the roar of the flames and the explosions the peal of gunfire Lucien heard his wife speak, one final time.

"Oh, xīngān," she said. "You have failed. Again."

He was dying, he knew he was dying, could feel it in every fiber of his being, and his wife, and his darling little girl, were perishing, too, and all the world was ablaze, burning, and agony, and Lucien threw his head back, with his final breath let forth a howl of such unbearable grief that it seemed to echo up to the very heavens.

Lucien came back to himself with a violent start, his forehead bathed in sweat, his whole body trembling, tears flowing down his cheeks like rivers of loss. He could not breathe, could not think, only barely registered Jean beside him, her arm thrown round his shoulders, her soft voice whispering in his ear it was only a dream, my love. Only a dream.

It didn't feel like a dream, but he could not find his voice to speak to her, could only gasp and pant and shiver. He was sitting upright now, his head cradled in his hands and his eyes squeezed shut as if somehow he might by sheer force of will banish the terror that had haunted him in the still of the night. Jean was sitting beside him, her delicate hand tracing soothing circles over the bare skin of his
back, the soft curve of her belly reminding him that the horrible vision that taunted him could not possibly be real, that their little girl was still safe and sound, sheltered within her mother's body.

"Tell me, Lucien," she whispered.

How could he possibly explain this to her? Jean, his dear, sweet Jean, Jean who had saved him, revived him, given him a family, made this house his home? Jean who had felt the sting of grief but never experienced the true horror of war? For years now he had danced around this truth, had tried to hide the extent of the havoc wrought on his soul by the violence and desolation he had seen, and he could hardly bear the thought of exposing her to that darkness now. She had seen the scars upon his back, was even now tracing them with her fingertips, but she did not know, not truly, the manner of their making, the deeper scars that lay hidden beneath the surface of his skin.

"I can't," he answered, his voice a choked and ragged thing.

Jean kissed his temple, ran her fingers through his hair, and then heaved a very great sigh.

"Years ago," she said softly, "I used to have bad dreams, too. I used to…" her voice trailed off and his heart constricted at the thought of his Jean, brave and strong and utterly unbreakable, beset by such terrors. "I used to see my Christopher," she said, and Lucien sucked in a sharp breath, feeling as if he were trying to swallow his own tongue. My Christopher, she called him still, and though Lucien felt no jealousy for a man long dead, not now when he shared his bed with Jean every night and she carried his child, he had felt it once, to know that a ghost still held such sway over the woman he loved. "Only it was...it was awful. His face was bloody and bruised, and he was crying, and there was nothing I could do to help him."

Lucien turned to look at her sharply, stunned that their terrors could have run such a similar course, shocked once again by the thought that they had both endured such loss, understood one another's broken hearts so well. They had never discussed it, truly, this burden they both carried; oh, he had addressed it obliquely, once or twice, had listened when she told him how her heart ached to think that her husband was buried so far from home, had told her softly I know I'm not the only one who lost someone, but this was perhaps the very first time Jean had ever spoken to him so openly of her grief. He realized then that he knew nothing at all about her Christopher, what sort of man he had been, what sort of marriage they had; he knew only that she had loved him, truly, deeply, completely, and until now that had seemed like enough.

"When did they stop?" he asked her.

Jean smiled softly, her fingers still trailing gently through his hair. "When I moved into this house," she told him. "When I sold the farm to Ben Dempster, and the boys left home, it was as if that chapter of my life had ended. Christopher could rest, and so could I."

Somehow, Jean had made peace with her losses, had found a way to move forward. Lucien could only hope that one day he too might find such comfort.

"I had a letter from Li," he told her. She had asked for the truth, had offered him a truth of her own, and he felt she deserved to know exactly what plagued him, how his thoughts had turned down this path.

"She sent her regards, and wished us every happiness."

His wife smiled then, her expression somewhat relieved, but Lucien could not share her joy. He leaned into her embrace and she wrapped her arms around him at once, her chin resting against his shoulder, his broad hand trailing against the soft smooth skin of her thigh.
"I know you've told Christopher, about the baby, so I have started writing a letter to Li. But I was thinking about her, about what happened, when we were...separated. We knew the Japanese were coming, so I put them on a boat to China. Mei Lin had family there, she thought they would be safe. But Li, she couldn't understand. She was only three. The day they left, Mei Lin was holding her, and she started to walk away from me, and Li began to scream. She didn't understand why I couldn't go with them. I've often wondered if somehow she sensed that they were in danger, if perhaps…"

"She was only a child, Lucien," Jean said when his voice failed him. "She loved her father and she didn't want to leave him."

The tears were returning; Lucien reached up to scrub them from his cheeks and his wife planted gentle kisses against his shoulder, blessing him with her love and affection, reminding him that he was safe, that if there was one person in all the world he could speak to about such matters, it was her, his darling Jean.

"They couldn't have stayed in Singapore," Lucien said, with some conviction. He had reminded himself of that fact a thousand times, a hundred thousand times, in all the years since that terrible day. "The Japanese came, and...oh, Jean. You cannot even imagine such horror. Our beautiful house was completely destroyed. Bodies in the streets..." Jean's arms tightened around him and he leaned into her embrace, grateful for the comfort she offered him.

For a time he was silent, brooding, lost in memories of atrocities, but Jean brought him back to the moment, reminded him that those horrors were long since passed.

"I think this is the first time you've ever said her name. Your wife."

_You are my wife_, Lucien wanted to say, but the words stuck in his throat. In her diamond-bright eyes he could see her understanding, knew that she did not need his reassurances, did not need him to cater to her pride or vanity. Lucien had no need to be jealous of a ghost, but nor did Jean, and he could see from her expression that she understood.

"Her name was Mei Lin. Her father was a local diplomat. _More British than the British_, that's how he used to describe his family. And they were. _She_ was. They were a very...elegant family. Refined. More so than me. I was too wild for his taste."

"Some things never change," Jean murmured, and he smiled at her weak attempt at easing the tension of the moment.

When he offered no further explanation, Jean pressed him again. "Is that what you saw, in your dream?"

He knew what she was doing. Just as he lamented the way his wife sometimes hid her emotions from him Jean must surely have felt that he was walling himself off from her, and in this moment that was the very last thing he wanted. Though it grieved him, he wanted to share this with her, wanted them to confide in one another and draw closer together.

"I saw you," he confessed. "And our daughter."

Jean frowned but did not protest as she so often did when he insisted that the baby must surely be a girl; likely she felt the weight of this moment as keenly as did he, and knew it was not the time for such wrangling.

"And then...it was as if I was back in Singapore. I could hear the gunfire. And I couldn't save you."

_Surely that's enough_, he told himself. He did not want to continue with the tale, did not want to linger
on the figments of the dream that seemed with every second to slip further from his grasp. He wanted to let them go, and lose himself in the love he felt for Jean, in the warmth of their bed, in the beauty of their new life together.

"Oh, Lucien," she sighed, her voice soft and sad. He knew then that she understood, that she had heard every word he spoke and put together all the disparate threads of his tale, all the stepping stones that had led to this moment. How the letter from Li and the thought of this new baby had reminded him of his family, reminded him how he lost them, how he worried that he would fail his new wife and daughter as he had failed the first, how he despaired for it seemed at times that everything he touched turned to ruin.

"Things are different now, I know you know that," she whispered to him. "We are safe here. Our baby is safe, and I love you. Everything is going to be all right."

"I don't want to fail you, Jean." The way I failed them. "I don't want to let you down."

"You never have," she told him fiercely. It wasn't exactly true, and Lucien knew it, but he was grateful for her reassurance, just the same.

It was on the tip of her tongue. In that moment Jean wanted, so badly, to tell him so just how well she understood his grief, how she feared, just as he did, that the mistakes of the past would soon repeat themselves. She wanted, so badly, to tell him how she feared for their child, for his safety, how she worried deep in her heart that she would be the one to fail him. If any moment were ripe for such a confession it was this one, when Lucien had bared his heart to her, placed his trust and his very soul in her hands, and yet, the words would not come. This isn't about me, she told herself. This is about Lucien. She wanted to comfort him, not add to his burdens. Her confession could keep for another night, a warmer night, a night when Lucien's scars did not burn like fire beneath her fingertips, when his face was not so anguished, when there were no tears upon his cheeks.

And so she did not tell him, choosing instead to turn in his arms, to lift herself up on her knees and settle down across his lap. Her thighs cradled him close, the swell of her belly brushing against the smooth plane of his stomach, her hands reaching out to cradle his face.

"I love you," she told him, looking deep into those soft blue eyes she loved so well. "And we are going to be all right."

With a kiss she sealed her vow to him, and he held her close, and the ghosts that haunted them both receded into the shadows.
Chapter 21

17 October 1960

After the tumult of emotions that had filled them the night before, after wrapping herself around him and losing herself utterly in her love for him Jean was loath to let Lucien go, but the next morning dawned bright and clear and he kissed her cheek and set off for the police station, and she was left alone with her chaotic thoughts. Lucien's confession weighed heavily upon her; she had always known he carried this grief, this secret part of his life that she was not privy to, that she had not experienced, might not ever fully understand, but his grief had a name now; Mei Lin.

Jean knew what she looked like, of course, had seen the photographs Lucien kept locked in his trunk, though he had never shared them with her. She could not fault him for that, for Lucien had never seen a photo of her Christopher, either, had no idea what he looked like, this man who had so shaped her life. It did not seem necessary, somehow; they both knew what it was to lose someone, knew what it was to struggle and weep, to finally find some piece of happiness, and so Jean was not much interested in dredging up the distant past, reopening those old wounds. Still, though, she wondered about it, sometimes, wondered what sort of man Lucien had been before the war, before the scars that laced his back. She wondered sometimes how those scars had come to be there, what exactly he had suffered, but she could not bring herself to voice those questions, to face the awful truth that another human being had inflicted such pain upon her beloved. Lucien was here, now, and she wanted, very much, to focus on their present, and not lose herself to the grief of the past.

It was a Monday morning, and Jean intended to spend it the way she did most Mondays, looking over Lucien's accounts from the previous week, taking stock of who had been seen for what. Mondays were days set aside for the surgery, for bookkeeping and, if things were slow, for poking through some of Lucien's medical journals, if there was anything there that might keep her interest for more than a moment or two. He had promised to be home in time for lunch, and had three appointments for the afternoon, and so Jean was more than content to spend a few hours alone in the peace and quiet of the surgery.

She smiled as her gaze flickered to the exam table, thinking of the day she had first sat there, Lucien's tender regard for her shining in every line of his face, in every gentle touch of his hand. He had asked that she allow him another examination at the end of the month, and she had consented because she knew it made him happy, helped to put his fears to rest. If that was all Lucien needed in order to reassure himself that he was taking care of his family, she was more than willing to give it to him. She was showing properly, now, the little curve of her stomach just visible beneath the loose dress she wore, and the news was slowly filtering out to their friends and family. Charlie had blushed like a schoolboy and refused to look her in the eye when he offered his congratulations, and Matthew Lawson had laughed so loudly that Jean heard it clean on the other side of the room the day Lucien rang him to deliver the news. The ladies from the sewing circle had twittered delightedly, and Lucien was composing his letter to Li, and Christopher had been as understanding as she could have hoped; all in all, she rather felt that things were going quite well. No whisper of impropriety had reached her ears - yet - and she supposed she rather ought to be grateful for small mercies.

As she settled herself behind the little desk she often used for administrative work in the surgery her thoughts lingered less on receipts and more on little Blake, and all the changes his impending arrival would have upon her life. Though so far everyone had been very kind the truth remained that they had been married less than two months, and anyone who had any sense at all would know that it was far too early for Jean to be showing, even if she had fallen pregnant on her wedding night. They were lingering in a grace period, at present, when a dress cut on a forgiving line could hide all
manner of sins, but that would change, and rather soon. Would her friends abandon her, when the truth came out? Alice wouldn't, she knew, for Alice had known all along, and never judged her for it. Matthew and Charlie and Danny, they wouldn't think twice about it, and though Jean had not yet received an answer to the letter she'd sent to Mattie she was certain that Mattie would not fault them for their over-eager affections, either. But the ladies from Sacred Heart, all her old friends in town, her sons; there so many people, each with their own ideas of how a woman of Jean's standing in the community ought to comport herself, and she dreaded to think what might happen when they discovered she was unworthy of the esteem they'd placed in her.

It was in the midst of those rather morose thoughts that there came a loud knock upon the surgery door. Jean was out of her chair in a moment, all thoughts of her predicament vanished, a professional, welcoming smile in place and a pleasant greeting ready and waiting to be delivered. At least until she opened the door, at which point all her good graces left her for she was quite surprised to find herself face to face with Emily Cooper, one of the very same ladies from the sewing circle who had so occupied her thoughts moments earlier.

"Emily!" she said, not even trying to hide her surprise.

"Sorry to just drop in unannounced," Emily said with a genuine smile. "I was hoping you might have time for a chat."

"Of course," Jean answered at once, stepping aside and gesturing for her to come in. "Come into the kitchen, and we'll have a cup of tea."

"That's wonderful news, Lucien," Frank told him earnestly, reaching out to offer him a hearty handshake.

"Thank you," Lucien answered, grinning. "It's rather unexpected, but we're pleased."

"You don't waste any time, do you?" Frank asked with a knowing, cheeky sort of grin. Lucien grimaced; he had no idea how to respond to those ribald sorts of comments. No, he and Jean had wasted exactly no time at all, falling into the bed together the very same night he proposed, conceiving a child before they'd even announced their engagement. Engaged for three months and announcing a baby six weeks later; he knew exactly how that must look. It must look, he thought, exactly like what it was.

"Yes, well," he grumbled, but before he could explain himself further they were interrupted by the arrival of Bill Hobart.

"Oh, good, doc, you're here," he said. "Someone to see you."

From the expression on Bill's face it was clear that he didn't appreciate having the role of Lucien's butler foisted upon him, but to his credit he remained civil. Since the wedding, Bill had been very nearly friendly towards Lucien, and secretly Lucien suspected that might have something to do with the lady friend Bill had brought to assist with the cleaning of the studio, who he had danced with at the reception. Whatever the cause for the sudden improvement of his manners, Lucien was grateful.

"Of course," he said, straightening his jacket absently. "Who?"


"I do appreciate you taking the time to speak with me, Jean," Emily was saying as Jean handed her a teacup before settling into her chair.
"Really, it's no trouble," Jean insisted. "Lucien isn't seeing any patients this morning, so I was at a bit of a loose end, if I'm honest. What can I help you with?"

"Actually, Jean," Emily said, taking a sip of her tea. "I want to help you."

Jean's heart sank; there was no malice in Emily's voice, and in fact her expression seemed rather sincere, but Jean liked the sound of those words not at all. Their friendship was tenuous at best; Emily had not been in town for very long, had moved to Ballarat with her family perhaps two years before, and she had not really established herself in any one social circle. She was a clever, observant sort of woman, a few years younger than Jean though her children were still young and living at home. She kept her blonde hair in a neat, rigid set, and her dark brown eyes never missed a trick. When Jean had first invited her to the sewing circle, seeking to reestablish that sense of community she'd lost when her previous friendships had fallen apart, Emily had agreed with some enthusiasm, and she often made Jean and the other ladies laugh. Still, though, they had not spoken to one another very earnestly of their lives, their situations, choosing instead to focus on lighter topics, husbands and home and mass. Whatever her intentions were now Jean could not fathom them, and that made her uneasy.

"Oh?" she said, as delicately as she could, bracing herself for the worst.

"I just wanted to say, I think it's wonderful news about the baby. And you can say whatever you want to Evelyn and all the rest, but I think you and I both know this wasn't a wedding night surprise."

Jean almost choked on her tea. She had never, not once, not even for a moment, not even for a moment, considered that someone might approach the subject of her sudden pregnancy with her. Gossip and rumors and whispers she was prepared for; she had heard them all before, after all. This direct, utterly crass sort of searching was far beyond her experience, and she wasn't entirely sure was prepared to deal with it. For a moment she sputtered, trying to think of something to say, but then Emily was speaking again, reaching out to place a comforting hand upon her forearm.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, Jean," she said quickly. "I don't think there's anything wrong with it and I don't give a damn - pardon my language - when it happened, and I certainly would never dream of talking to anyone else about it. If you ask me it isn't anyone's business what you do in your own home."

"Oh," Jean said, having swung from fear to anger to bemusement in the span of sixty seconds, and feeling a little dizzy as a result. "Thank you." It sounded more like a question, for in truth it was. She wasn't entirely sure she could trust that Emily's motives were as kind as she'd made them out to be, and she wasn't entirely sure why, exactly, this conversation was happening. At least, not yet.

"I was pregnant with my oldest when I married Harry," Emily said, somewhat shyly, and then it all began to come together. "And some people were oh...just awful, about it. My mother cried all the way through the ceremony. She thought I could do better. Which was absolute nonsense, if you ask me, especially considering she'd been harping on me for years about not finding a husband."

"Oh, Emily, I'm so sorry," Jean said earnestly. And she was; though she had no intention of telling Emily how eerily similar their stories were, she did know a thing or two about mothers who disapproved of the men their daughters had chosen, knew what it was to carry that burden. And she knew, too, what it was to rush into a marriage, uncertain but facing no other option. Jean had been quite happy with her Christopher, and she rather hoped in that moment that Emily had found her happiness, too.

"Oh, it was sixteen years ago, she's gotten used to him by now," Emily said with a laugh and a
dismissive wave of her hand. *Sixteen years*, Jean thought sadly; sixteen years before she'd been all alone on the farm with two young sons to look after. Christopher had been dead for a year, when Emily first wed. Strange, she thought, how they could have so much in common when their lives had charted such different courses. "I just wanted you to know, no matter what anyone else might say, you have at least one friend. I'd like to be here for you, Jean, if you need someone to talk to. And I won't hear a single negative word spoken about you in my presence. You've always been so kind to me, and I want to be able to do the same for you."

It was the sincerity of her voice, more than anything, that convinced Jean that Emily was being quite genuine in this offer of support. Emily was looking at her expectantly now, and she knew she had to be careful in how she responded, would have to be kind and grateful without offering up too much of her own story, lest this tenuous connection turn sour. It was strange to be so caught between the hopefulness of a newly deepened friendship and the fear of consequences, but Jean would do her best to muddle through.

"Thank you," she said again. "Really. Lucien and I are...quite pleased, about the baby. He had already proposed, before it...happened." *Half an hour before*, she added in her mind. "We never expected this, of course, but..."

"No one ever does," Emily said, and the sound of her laughter was so infectious that Jean found herself smiling despite her uncertain heart.

"Would you like a biscuit?" she asked then. She could do this, she told herself, could talk quietly to a friend about her hesitant joy, about how she loved her husband, could open her heart, just that little bit more, and make room for one more person who seemed to genuinely care about her. Perhaps this was a sign, she thought, that all her worrying would be for naught, that perhaps the response of her friends to her news would be more positive than she had ever dreamed. It was a hopeful thought.

"Derek," Lucien said, reaching out to shake his old friend's hand somewhat warily. They had not parted on good terms, after the incident with the poor dead soldier on the base. Derek hadn't left Ballarat, Lucien knew, but he likewise had not sought Lucien out, and they had not seen one another since. The sudden change in the state of affairs between them, from blood brothers to tenuous enemies, had been difficult enough for Lucien to bear in solitude, but now that he was face to face with the man he found his emotions in a riot. He wanted to punch him, to shake him, to damn him for a betrayer, to ask him when he had turned into exactly the sort of officer they used to curse when they were young soldiers fighting an impossible war, but the corridor of the police station was hardly the place for such a confrontation, and besides, Lucien wasn't entirely sure Derek would hear him, anyway.

"I wanted to offer my congratulations," Derek said, and Lucien paled. "I heard you got married."

Inwardly Lucien breathed a sigh of relief, grateful to know that news of the baby had not yet reached Derek. For some reason, that thought did not sit easily with him.

"Thank you."

"I was hoping you might have a moment to talk."

It seemed that Derek was through with pleasantries, and Lucien found himself caught between loathing and curiosity. What could possibly have brought Derek off the base and into the police station this morning?

*Nothing good*, he thought grimly.
"Of course," he said aloud. "If you'll follow me, there's an empty room down this way."

And so he led Derek along the corridor towards one of the rooms they used for interrogation, his mind spinning, dread swirling in his gut. It seemed an ill omen, coming on the heels of his terrible dream. His past had sunk its teeth into him once more, and he could only pray that he would survive whatever trial was to come, for Jean's sake if nothing else.
24 October 1960

She was so lovely, his Jean. So incredibly, unbelievably lovely.

At that very moment Lucien was lounging on their bed, a book in his hands though he made no effort to maintain the pretense of reading it, all of his attention focused instead on his beloved. She was on the other side of the room, sitting on the little bench in front of her dressing table, brushing her hair and humming softly to herself. Darkness had fallen beyond the walls of their house, and Jean had slipped free from her clothes, wearing only a soft, pale pink nightdress, the pins removed from her hair, the makeup carefully washed from her face. Nothing Lucien had ever seen in his life quite matched the loveliness of her in this moment, her full lips, her secretive smile, the slight swell of her stomach beneath the flowing fabric that covered her, the smattering of freckles across her chest and shoulders he had traced with his tongue more times than he could count. She was a vision, his Jean, and he was the only one who got to see her like this, completely without artifice and beautiful beyond his ability to comprehend.

It would be a shame, Derek had told him the week before, if something tragic were to happen to your family.

Even now, safe in his own bed, the front door locked, Jean sitting in front of him, her sparkling eyes catching his in the mirror, he felt his heart sink heavy as lead in his chest. The implications of his old friend's words had been all too clear; Lucien had snapped, his forearm finding its way across Derek's neck in a moment as they went careening back against the wall, Lucien's voice low and dangerous as he hissed if you so much as look at her, Derek, I swear I'll-

You'll what, Lucien? Derek had answered, all sneering, self-assured pomposity. You're just a country doctor, now. I could change that. We could do great things together, you and I.

That was the moment when Lucien realized his old friend had gone quite mad, and that his family was in grave danger. Derek had big plans for the pair of them, for Korea, for the shifting balance of power in Asia, and he wanted to bring Lucien on side, whatever it took. You're an invaluable asset, Lucien, Derek had told him, and it's time you put your nation's needs above your own. You and I could save the world. And if you think I'm going to let one woman - even a pregnant one - stand in my way...

Lucien had all but hurled him from the room then, shouting, warning him in full view of a dozen witnesses if you ever, ever, come near me or my family again, so help me God I will end you.

As if you could, Derek had answered him. You and I are blood brothers, Lucien, remember? Where you go, I go. You'll never be rid of me.

Those words echoed loud in the vault of his mind now. You'll never be rid of me. Even now, when he was alone with his wife, his darling Jean, the one person in all the world he most adored, most treasured, who most understood him, the ghastly specter of Derek Alderton lingered just on the edge of his consciousness, painting even this gentle moment with the darkness that seemed to trail in his wake. How Derek had come to learn of Jean's condition he could not say, and nor could he comprehend what sort of plan Derek had in mind in order to guarantee Lucien's obedience, and that thought terrified him.

"Lucien?" Jean called his name softly. She was watching him in the mirror, her hand paused in the
very act of brushing her hair, her brow furrowed with worry. "Is everything all right?"

He knew it was foolish to try to lie to her, his beautiful Jean, for she could with a single glance read the truth of him, no matter how hard he might try to hide it. Lucien knew this, and yet still he chose obfuscation rather than honesty. He did not want to frighten her with half-formed worries and ominous threats from unexpected quarters. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, to protect her and their little girl, to keep his family safe, as he had so spectacularly failed to do before.

"Marvelous," he lied. "You are the most beautiful woman in the whole world, Jean, did you know that?"

She frowned at him, though he could not say whether it was disagreement with his words or disapproval of his blatant lie that so soured her visage. Gracefully she rose to her feet, floated over to the bed, one hand pressed to the small of her back while her nightdress swished and swirled around her, his eyes drawn once more to the curve of her belly. Their child, still safe, for now, so long as she remained with her mother, so long as Lucien could protect his darling Jean.

She settled on the bed beside him, reaching out to cradle his cheek in her hand, the way she so often did, and the warmth of her palm against his skin soothed his battered heart somewhat. She's safe, he told himself. She is.

"What aren't you telling me?" Jean asked him in a quiet voice.

So many things, he thought. He had not told her of the conversation with Derek, the threats his old friend had made, the fears he carried. It was not only Jean and the baby in danger, Lucien knew; Li and her family were vulnerable, too, poor and struggling - though she had firmly rejected her father's offer to resettle them in Australia, to keep them safe - the government in her country a terrifying behemoth that would not protect her. It would not be so very hard for a man with Derek's connections to get to her, to make her life a misery, and Lucien was too far away to stop it, to save her should Major Alderton go forward with whatever madcap plan he had in mind.

"Oh," he huffed, floundering for some way to answer her, "there's just rather a lot on, at the moment. I'll sort it out."

Then, seeking to distract her, he reached out and traced his hand over the swell of her belly, smiling softly as he did so. She was luminous, his Jean, the color high in her cheeks, everything about her soft and lush and inviting, the knowledge that she carried his child only binding him more closely to her. They were everything to him, his darling girls, and he would give his very life to protect them.

"How are you feeling?" he asked pointedly. "This little one isn't giving you too much trouble, is she?"

Jean's frown deepened, and her back straightened, her whole posture at once stubborn and proud.

"Little Blake and I are just fine, Lucien," she said tartly. "You don't have to worry about us."

"Oh, but I do, my darling." he answered. Lucien leaned forward and pressed a reverent kiss to her belly, and then lifted his head and captured Jean's lips with his own. She sighed and softened against him, letting go of her concern and her doubts as she tangled her fingers in his hair and drew him closer. Grinning, now, thoughts of Derek Alderton fading fast beneath the gentle touch of his wife's hand Lucien rolled them both over, Jeans thighs rising up to cradle his hips while he kissed her still more ardently, until all that remained was the brush of her skin and the soft sound of her happy sighs and the overwhelming love he felt for her, this woman who had saved his very life.
When Lucien arrived at the police station, it was to find Sergeant Hannam standing in quiet conversation with Frank Carlyle, and the sight of the man brought the taste of bile to his mouth. The last time Lucien had seen the Sergeant he'd borne the bruises of that man's hand in a ring around his neck, had watched as he was loaded into a car and driven off to face the judgement of the Army, which, given his appearance in the police station and the crisp state of his uniform, had clearly not been strong enough for Lucien's liking. Frank had no way of knowing, of course, that he stood talking to a murderer, that the man who had just made him laugh had once tried, quite sincerely, to kill Lucien. Jean's timely arrival and fearless actions had saved his life, then, and as he approached the two men he could only pray that she would not be put in such a position again.

"Sergeant Hannam," Lucien said as he approached, trying to keep the malice out of his voice. "I didn't think we'd be seeing you again."

"Doctor Blake," Hannam answered, inclining his head politely, his tone as cool and detached as ever. "Message from the Major for you, sir."

Lucien wanted to rip up the paper Hannam handed to him, wanted to tell him exactly where he could shove his message and his Major, but Frank was watching him curiously, and he knew that whatever he said now would be reported back to Derek in alarming detail. He had no plan, as such, for how to avert disaster, and he did not want to enrage Derek before he was properly prepared for a confrontation. Jean was at home, alone, and he had to be careful, for her sake, not to force the Major's hand until he was in a position to respond.

So he took the note, and read it in a brooding silence.

_We need to meet_, it said. _In private._

Lucien's hands began to shake.

"Frank, might I borrow your pen, please?"

The Superintendent handed it over, watching him like a hawk, but Lucien paid him no mind. He simply scribbled down his answer.
It seemed the best possible option. To meet in public, in a crowd of people, might keep Lucien safe, but that crowd would be so distracted by the eclipse he was certain they would pay him and Derek no mind. The room would be dark, and they could talk quietly in the corner, but Derek would not be able to strike him, shoot him, toss him in the back of a car and drive away with him. It all came down to this, he knew; whatever he said to Derek tomorrow morning would seal both their fates. Yes, he would come alone, but he would come with a pistol tucked in his trousers, for while he was a hopeful man he was not a foolish one.

"If you would be so kind, Sergeant," Lucien said, handing him the note. "Please deliver that to the Major along with my regards."

"I will, sir." Ever the good subordinate Hannam did not check the note to see what he had written, simply tucked it in his pocket, offered Lucien a thin smile, and departed at once.

"Everything all right, Lucien?" Frank asked him.

"Marvelous," Lucien answered through gritted teeth.

_Tomorrow,_ he told himself, turning away from Frank's thoughtful stare and going in search of Charlie. _We will settle this tomorrow, for good._
"I can only give you a few minutes," Charlie was saying, though Jean was hardly listening as she swept down the corridor of the police station. "You really aren't supposed to go down there."

*I'd like to see them try and stop me,* Jean thought bleakly. Derek Alderton murdered, Lucien in a jail cell, Sergeant Hannam skulking about and delivering threats; the world was spinning madly all around her, her stomach in a riot as little Blake insisted on making his presence known, reminding her at every turn that no matter how she worried for Lucien, for herself, they were not the only ones in danger. The last twenty-four hours had been a whirlwind of chaos, of fear, and Jean knew that she could not find her way out of it without Lucien's help. Charlie was risking everything to let her down into the cells; this wasn't like it was with Mattie, locked up for a few hours for having the gall to talk sharply to Charlie. Lucien stood accused of murder, and allowing her to speak to him was likely criminal. Still, though, Charlie had agreed to help her. *He's a good boy,* she thought.

"Five minutes," Charlie said, and then he stopped, loitered at the end of the corridor and left Jean to make her way to Lucien's cell on her own.

Her hands were shaking; though she had maintained her composure in the moment she had begun to tremble the moment Sergeant Hannam left, and she had not stopped. She could still feel the strength of his hand around her throat, could recall all too well how he had nearly killed Lucien in much the same way years before, and she knew how damnably close she had come to disaster. All alone in that house, with no one to call for aid while Lucien languished in a cell; the situation was too tenuous, her position there too vulnerable. Jean could look after herself, most of the time, but it wasn't just herself she had to worry about now.

The sight of Lucien standing forlorn and ashen-faced behind the bars of that dingy cell nearly brought tears to her eyes, but for his sake she did her best to beat them back, to keep herself together, to offer him comfort rather than seeking it in this moment when she knew he must be consumed with anguish. They had not spoken much of what he had endured during his time as a prisoner of war, but Jean knew he could not abide confined spaces, new how his pulse would race and his hands would tremble and his eyes would go wild around the edges, and now he was trapped once more, for how long they could not say. She knew he must have found it unbearable, and she ached to think of how he had suffered, was suffering still.

In a moment she was by his side; her hands slipped through the bars even as his own reached for her, desperate, hungry for some contact. Strange, to think that only that morning she had woken with his arms wrapped around her, concerned about the search for Derek's killer but safe with her husband beside her. It seemed as if a lifetime had passed since then; now all was turned to madness.

"Oh, my darling," Lucien said, his voice aching and yet sounding somehow relieved, now that he could see her, touch her, find some piece of his life to cling to. "You shouldn't be here." He had to say it, and they both knew it, but the fierce way he clutched her hand held more truth than his words; she shouldn't have been there, but they were both desperately grateful that she was.

"I only have a few minutes," Jean told him breathlessly. "But you need to know, Lucien. Sergeant Hannam came to the house."

"What did he do?" Lucien demanded at once. His tie was discarded, his collar open at the throat, his hair messier than it normally would have been at this time of day, everything about his appearance in
this moment communicating his distress, and Jean's heart ached for she longed for nothing so much as to draw him into her arms, to sit down with his head pillowed on her lap, to run her fingers through his hair and tell him softly that everything would be all right. The bite of fear and the ticking of the clock helped her to press through her dejection, to keep going no matter how she wanted to break down and weep.

"He grabbed me-" Lucien's expression grew outraged, horrified, but she barreled on before he could stop her. "He wants to meet with you. Urgently. About this business."

"Did he hurt you?" Lucien demanded, and though it touched her heart to know that his first thought was of her safety, Jean rather felt that there were more pressing matters at hand.

"No," she said, but he took one look at her face and determined the lie, for he knew her so very well, this husband of hers.

"Show me your hands," Lucien said, turning over the one he still held and reaching for the other, gentle fingertips brushing over her wrists, taking note of the darkened, tender skin, his gaze intent and focused, the gentleness in even this small action causing Jean's breath to catch in her throat.

"They're only bruises," Jean assured him.

"I'll kill him myself," she heard Lucien whisper, but given their predicament she chose to ignore him.

"Here," she said, reaching into her pocket and producing a piece of chalk. "At least this will keep you occupied."

He needed to map it all out, she knew, needed to connect the dots, to work through the puzzle, and she could not bring him pen nor paper, but this much she could do, had done willingly, for she knew her husband, knew the way his mind worked, and she trusted him above all others. The only person who could ever hope to solve this mystery was Lucien, and she would do whatever she could to help him.

"The house isn't safe, you know," Lucien told her. He pocketed the chalk, but still he clutched her left hand tight, fingers interlaced, keeping her locked in this moment with him, and damn the bars between them.

"Yes, I've already thought of that," Jean told him, a weak little smile playing at the corners of her lips. Oh, my Lucien, she thought sadly; he was stuck in the most hellish of nightmares, and yet still her safety remained of paramount concern to him. She rather knew how he felt, for she loved him more than her own life.

"Do you know where to go?"

"Yes," she said firmly. They had not discussed this, had made no plans between them, but Jean had her own sort of cunning, and she knew how to look after herself. She had driven Lucien's car to the police station, with a little bag of essentials tucked in the boot. From the station she had rung Cec Drury, and the arrangements were now set. She would have a safe place to sleep with people they trusted to watch over her, would not spend another moment alone in their fine house no matter how it galled her to give in to Sergeant Hannam's attempts to terrify her. Pride might have kept her in place at home, but she had little Blake to worry about, after all.

"Oh, my darling," Lucien sighed. He rested his forehead against the bars, and Jean met him, their noses brushing through the gap in the bars, their fingers still twined together.

"It will be all right, Lucien," she said with as much conviction as she could muster. He did not
answer her, but then he did not need to; he was her husband, her very heart, and she knew his mind almost as well as she knew her own.

Jean had her mouth open to speak, to offer him some further reassurances, but then the strangest thing happened.

It was the sort of feeling that, once experienced, could never be forgotten, that became so intimately familiar that it could be recalled years later as sharply and as fondly as if it had only just happened, a tiny, miraculous joy for which Jean had been waiting most expectancy these last few weeks. It came quite without warning, and she could not help but gasp as the sensation soft as a butterfly's wing came rippling through her belly. Their child, safe and warm, making his presence known with the gentlest, most tremulous of kicks.

"Jean?" Lucien asked, his voice sharp with concern, but Jean could only lift her head, let her gaze catch on those blue eyes she loved so well and smile at him through a sudden veil of tears. She took his hand, the hand she still held, and pulled it through the bars, pressed his palm flat to the curve of her belly, and his eyes went wide with wonder.

"I don't know if you can feel him move," she breathed, "but hold onto this moment, Lucien. That's our boy. That's our son. You keep your head, and you find your way through this mess, and you come home to us. Promise me you will come home to us." She was choking on the words as they came spilling out of her, fear and longing constricting her throat, making it hard to breathe, but she spoke them for she needed to, needed to give them voice, needed Lucien to acknowledge just how very much was at stake. His life, their family, everything they held dear, hanging in the balance in a moment that felt precarious as a knife's edge.

His eyes went round with wonder as he realized just what she was telling him, just what was happening beneath his palm.

"She moved?" he said, and Jean let a loose a startled, distinctly damp sort of laugh as she recognized that even in this moment of uncertain terror Lucien remained stubbornly convinced that it was a girl she carried, and not a boy.

"He did," she said.

From down the corridor there came the sound of Charlie clearing his throat, and so Jean leaned forward and kissed her husband once, softly.

"Come home to us, my love," she said.

And then, though it broke her heart, though every nerve in her body shrieked in protest, she gave his hand one final squeeze and turned away. There was something coming, something terrible, something she could not even hope to understand, but she had done all that she could. All that was left now was to take herself off to the club, to keep little Blake safe, and pray that Lucien could find his way through the mess. He had to. She could not bear the thought of what would become of her if he didn't.

28 October 1960

It was very late, when Lucien came stumbling home. His bones were weary, his clothes dirty, his heart heavy though they had at last found their man. The plan, such it was, had worked brilliantly; Frank and Lucien between them had staged his transfer to Melbourne, intending to lure Sergeant Hannam out into the open. It had worked, albeit not in the way they had anticipated;
Hannam had turned up, but things had rather quickly gone sour, as it became apparent that the very helpful Detective Inspector Sullivan from Special Branch was in fact the true culprit. His head was spinning, slightly, as he passed through his front door. Sullivan had killed Derek, to silence him, to put an end to his plans, and then done everything he could to pin the crime on Lucien. It was almost impossible to believe, that Derek - Derek bloody Alderton - had become such a liability to his country that his own people would willingly kill him, and yet Sullivan had confessed the whole thing, and Sergeant Hannam's story had proved the truth of it as well. After all these years, after everything they had endured, Derek Alderton's life had ended in a bloody mess in the Ballarat Observatory, his legacy in ruins, another battered, broken soldier used up and spit out by the endlessly churning wheels of that great military machine.

I need a drink, he thought. And then I need my wife.

"Jean!" he called out as he closed the door behind him, his feet carrying him towards the kitchen. His back was aching; he and Sullivan had tussled, during that charade of a transfer, when the truth had come spilling out and Sullivan himself had snapped, a wild beast trapped in a corner, looking for some way - any way - to save himself. Lucien's hands had been cuffed behind his back and he had been unable to break his own fall, unable to do much of anything while blows rained down on him and Frank and Charlie leapt into the melee, saved him from some unpleasant end there on the pavement.

He shook his head as if to banish those thoughts, and smiled wanly as he stepped into the kitchen and found his wife waiting for him there. She was radiant, this love of his, in her pale pink pajamas, wrapped up in his favorite navy silk robe. It was much too big for her of course, even with the sleeves rolled back, but the sight of her in it, knowing that she had chosen to wrap herself in something that belonged to him, that she drew comfort from having this small piece of him to cling to, soothed his weary soul. The world outside their door was mad, terrible, dangerous, but here in this kitchen all was it should be. His wife, and his child, safe and well and whole.

"I'm so-" he started to say, wanting to tell her how he relieved he was to see her, to be home at last, to have made good on his promise to her and little Blake, but before he could finish his sentence she had crossed the space between them in two long strides, her eyes flashing with a warning he could not recognize.

"Don't you ever," she hissed, drawing herself up to her full height - which, no matter how imposing she tried to look, was really not that impressive - her whole body trembling with a barely controlled fury, "ever, do anything like that to me again, Lucien."

He stared at her, open-mouthed, quite confused. I really, really need that drink, he thought.

"Have you lost your mind?" she continued in that same fierce, hushed tone of voice. "Using yourself as bait? That man could have killed you, he could have…” her emotions got the better of her and she lost the power of speech, and Lucien tentatively took a step towards her, recognizing now the cause of her distress. "He could have killed you," she repeated, hands rising up so that she could press her palms flat against his chest. "I have already raised two sons on my own," she whispered, and his heart sank in his chest, a sudden wave of grief washing over him at her words. "Don't make me go through that again."

"Oh, my darling," Lucien breathed, drawing her into his arms. She went with him at once, collapsing against his chest as she began to weep, and he could only hold her, and whisper over and over how sorry he was.

And he was sorry, for he realized in that moment that she was right. Their plan had been a reckless one, gambling with his life that way, and he had not stopped for a moment to think that it was not
only his only life that hung in the balance. They had not spoken of it often, the way that Jean's life had already been ruined once by loss, how she had struggled to raise her sons on her own, how she might have wished for things to be different, and to hear her confess to her fears and her sorrow now, driven to this point by his own rash behavior, stabbed at his conscience like steely knives. He wanted to protect her, to comfort her, to love her, with everything he had, and this day he had instead only brought her sorrow. In the future, he knew, he must do better, for her sake and that of their child.

Things had changed; years ago, when he had first come to her door, believing his wife and daughter to be dead, his father mute and yet watching him with accusing eyes, his whole world a shambles, Lucien had not felt that his life was worth all that much. Jean had changed all that, changed him, given him a reason to live, and he knew that for her sake he would have to try to be better, stronger, than he had ever been before.
3 November 1960

There was, mercifully, something of a lull in murders following Derek Alderton's death. For the last five days there had been no scuffles at the pub, no coincidental collisions between Bill Hobart's fist and some unlucky sod's face, no bloated bodies fished from the lake, no calamities in the lane behind the Rex. Everything was calm, and quiet, and still. Lucien especially was calm and quiet and still; though he did his best to smile each time Jean caught his eye there was a certain guardedness to his movements, a heaviness to his steps, a weary cast to his face that spoke so eloquently of his loss. At the end Derek Alderton had been an enemy to him, truly, had threatened his life, his family, his very existence, and yet at the beginning the man had been a brother to him. It would take time, Jean knew, for Lucien to come to terms with this grief, to find some way to reconcile the two halves of his complicated, erstwhile friend, the relief he felt at no longer having to worry about Derek's machinations and the staggering sorrow he felt at the thought that the one person in all the world who best understood the misery he'd endured was now dead and buried, and a thousand dreadful secrets with him.

Jean knew this, knew what he must be suffering, and so she did not push or prod or nag him. She held him during the long dark hours of the night, and offered him her smiles when she poured his tea, and waited for the moment when at last he would find the words he needed to communicate his feelings to her.

And find them he did, though not at the time or in the manner Jean expected.

It was a Thursday morning, and seeing as Lucien had no patients scheduled at all for the day - a rare feat, in truth - he and Jean were loitering over lukewarm cups of tea and picking at the ends of their toast while the spring sunshine came filtering in through the curtains on the windows. It was a lovely morning, and Jean was thinking rather longingly of the sofa in the sunroom, long, languid hours spent beneath her husband's arm while she read her book and he looked over his patient notes and they spoke softly to one another of matters without consequence. Jean did not often indulge in such deliberate laxity, but with only she and Lucien in the house she found she did not have to work quite as hard as she did when they had boarders under foot, and with money enough to spare, no farm to manage and no other little ones running about, this new life of hers did not require quite as much toil as the one she'd lived while she was Jean Beazley. It was a strange thought, how her circumstances had changed, how the girl she'd been would hardly recognize the woman she'd become, but she'd grown comfortable in this world. Comfortable with her new name, her new role, her new husband. Yes, life as Jean Blake was comfortable indeed.

"Jean, my darling," Lucien said quite suddenly, and she turned to him, smiling softly at the way the sunlight shone on his as yet un-polished hair, turning those soft curls golden and brilliant. Jean longed to reach out, to run her fingers through them, and so she did; she was learning, day by day, to give into these little affections, to enjoy them and not discourage her own hopeful heart. Lucien smiled as she touched him, fingertips grazing against his scalp, everything about this moment bright and cheerful and full of a quiet, familiar sort of happiness.

"I've asked Charlie to come round at lunchtime to help me with something," he continued after a moment.

"That sounds ominous," Jean teased him, the laughter in her voice taking some of the sting out of her words.
"I was just thinking, you're five months gone, now. More than halfway there. Perhaps it's time we started sorting things out, for when the baby comes."

"Oh." Jean pulled back from him, clasping her hands together in her lap and thinking very quickly, knowing how important it was that she measure her words, not give in to the sudden bite of fear. He was right, of course; this baby was coming, and the sooner they made arrangements for him, the better. It was just that for all her practicality Jean was still possessed of a superstitious heart, and she had learned long ago that to hope too desperately for something was the surest way to guarantee heartbreak. Better not to dwell too long on the desires of her heart, she'd told herself so many times, for a dream never imagined could not result in disappointment. With each passing day, as her belly grew and her feet began to swell and Lucien's ring grew that little bit tighter on her finger she drew closer to accepting that this was really happening, that there really was a little one on the way. To set up a nursery, however, seemed to her to be a step too far, a display of eagerness that would surely result in ruin.

She could not tell her husband this, however, for even she could acknowledge that her fears seemed slightly hysterical and blown out of proportion. And besides, Lucien's own heart was aching, and he was trying, so very hard, to make her comfortable, to encourage her, to remind her, again and again, how thrilled he was about little Blake. She did not want to hurt him, did not want to let him down, particularly not now, and so she took a deep breath, and tried to speak in a very gentle voice.

"If you'd like to, Lucien, I think it might be nice to make a start on it."

His smile was broader, brighter now than it had been since Derek Alderton's arrival, and Jean knew then that she had made the right choice.

"Right," he said. "Here's what I'm thinking."

They managed between them, Charlie and Lucien, though for a moment Jean had been most concerned that they must surely break either the cradle or themselves in the process. It was a massive, solid piece of oak, ornately carved at head and foot, and must have weighed rather a lot, based on the way Charlie and Lucien were heaving and grunting, arms bulging as they struggled to carry the thing down the stairs from the attic. Jean had watched from a safe distance, one hand covering her mouth to disguise the mixed feelings of concern and - though she was loath to admit it - arousal she felt at the show of strength her husband was putting on. She had known before they'd ever tumbled into bed that he was solidly built, but she had not known until she'd stripped the shirt from his back just how defined were the muscles of his arms and chest, just how powerful he truly was. She saw it now, and she was enjoying every moment, even as she worried about him breaking his neck or his back as he struggled with the cradle.

At last, however, they had lugged the thing into the corner of the studio that Lucien and Jean between them had decided to dedicate to the baby. There were other pieces Jean wanted for this room; a little dresser for his clothes and things - perhaps the one from her old bedroom, she thought - and a rocking chair almost certainly, though that would have to be purchased new. A little rug would tie the lot of it together, she decided, more clearly mark the distinction between little Blake's space and that of his parents. Perhaps a small table with a lamp; the list was growing by the moment.

"Here?" Lucien asked, panting just a little as he and Charlie stepped back to survey their handiwork.

"That will do nicely," Jean said, and then she turned to Charlie. "Do you have enough time for one more trip up the stairs?"

They had already hauled down several moldering boxes of Lucien's baby things, which were at this
moment piled in the opposite corner; though Jean was very much looking forward to going through them she did not hold out much hope that they would be very useful. Whatever was in those boxes had remained untouched in the attic for nearly fifty years, and her desire to rummage through them stemmed less from practically and more from the somewhat whimsical notion that these things had belonged to Lucien when he was small, and she desperately wanted to take a glimpse into this previously unexplored part of his life.

"I think I can manage," Charlie answered, panting just as hard as Lucien. "What do you need?"

"The dresser from the pink room, please," she told him sweetly. Lucien groaned and Jean laughed, stepping over to press a kiss to her husband's sweaty cheek. "It'll be best just to get over with, you'll see."

"Anything for you, my darling," Lucien told her, though he was pouting as he made his way up the stairs just the same.

The dresser - which was mercifully empty, as all of Jean's things were already situated in the studio - took significantly less time than the cradle, and soon enough it was situated just where Jean wanted it. Everything was coming together, as she surveyed the little nook and took stock of all the things she still needed to gather before little Blake arrived; this was an important first step, and one Jean was suddenly quite glad she'd taken. Charlie left them as soon as the dresser was settled, though Jean extracted from him a promise to return for dinner, so that she might feed him in exchange for his labor. The minute he was gone Lucien peeled shirt and vest from his back and collapsed face down on the bed, sweating profusely and groaning dramatically.

"My poor love," Jean teased him, crossing to the bedside intent on joining him, but the breath caught in her throat at the sight of her husband's back.

She had seen it before, of course, run her fingers over the ridges of his scars more times than she could count, but it had never been quite like this, her husband so unguarded, her view of him so unrestricted. Lucien was quite practiced at hiding the horror that marred his skin from view; when he dressed in the mornings he never turned his back to her, never slept with his back to her, the twisting ropes on his back only visible in flashes as he rolled and turned in her arms while they made love, never still and on display for so very long.

Though she could not say quite why Jean felt herself overcome, in that moment, with the need to touch him, to comfort him though these hurts were long since healed, to hear the story of his grief in full, if he would tell it. And so, with that thought in mind she did not roll into bed beside him, choosing instead to clamber - somewhat awkwardly as she now had to accommodate her growing belly - right on top of him, settling herself down on his bum and reaching out to press her palms flat against the breadth of his shoulders.

Beneath her she felt him tense, his whole body tightening as he raised his head to look at her sharply. "Jean-" he started to protest, but she shushed him gently, running her hands over his shoulders, across his neck, trying to communicate to him that he was safe, that this moment was not cause for distress.

"I can't imagine what you must be feeling," she said softly. "I know things went bad between you, but you shared so much."

She did not have to tell him who she meant, or where her thoughts had gone, for as ever he understood her, completely. Ever so slowly Lucien began to relax; perhaps it was a case of mind over matter, him willing himself to accept the touch of her hand, or perhaps it was the cadence of her
voice, or just the familiarity of her fingertips against his skin. Whatever the cause she took some pride in this display of trust between them.

"We shared a certain kind of madness," Lucien told her after a time, drawing in a sharp breath as at last her fingers began to dance over his scars. This was it, Jean realized, the moment when Lucien had decided to place the truth of his past in her hands, and she would not squander this opportunity, would not give him cause to think that he had placed his trust in her unwisely.

"There's no way to explain it," he said then. His head was turned to the side but his eyes were closed, as if he could not bear to face her while he bared the truth of his heart. "There are not words. You cannot understand it without having seen it, and I thank God every day that you did not see it, my darling."

Jean braced her hands on the mattress and leaned forward, letting her lips brush against the back of his neck. She remembered the newsreels, the pictures in the paper of the gaunt-faced soldiers liberated from the camps, saw the horrified look that lingered in the eyes of those men who'd come back to their wives as hollowed-out shells of their former selves. At the time she had found some solace in knowing that her Christopher had been spared such a fate, that his death at least had been quick, that he had not had to witness such atrocities with his own eyes, but now her heart ached to think of Lucien, her Lucien, in such dire circumstances.

"We kept each other alive in that place," Lucien said in a voice thick with grief. "Derek was the one who looked after me, when they whipped me."

That explained some of the scars, at least, the long lashes that fell in nonsense patterns from the line of his shoulders to the ridge of his buttocks. For a moment she tried to picture it, how those wounds had looked when they were fresh, but bile rose in the back of her throat and she had to close her eyes to banish the very thought.

"And I'm the one who sewed him up after he took a bayonet to the belly."

Oh, my love, Jean thought sadly. Starving and abused these two men had done everything they could for one another, and the thought of all they had shared only made the truth of Derek's treachery that much more heinous to her mind.

"He never forgave me for that," Lucien said sadly. "He wanted to die. He was in such pain, and we had no news of the world, no reason to hope that we would ever be freed. And after a while, in a place like that, you stopping hoping for freedom. It hurts too much to hope, and time loses all meaning. Your existence becomes nothing more than survival, trying to make it through each day. And Derek had nothing to live for. No family, no friends who weren't in the camp or dead already. He couldn't bear the thought of going on, carrying all those memories and all that grief inside him forever. But I couldn't let him die. Maybe I was selfish."

"You are a doctor, Lucien," Jean said fiercely. "You protect people, you heal them, you save them. It's what you do. It's who you are. You couldn't do that to him."

Though his eyes were still closed Lucien offered her a sad little smile. "Maybe not. But I had a reason to carry on. I had a wife and a child. I had a reason to think that there was a life worth living, if only we could get out of that place. I didn't know how wrong I was."

Still Jean's hands smoothed over his back, over and over again, as she bit her lip to keep from crying. For so long Lucien had held out hope of finding his family, year after year after bloody year, until the day that fateful letter came, telling him his wife had been dead all along. He'd found his Li, of course, but he had come too late to save her from a childhood of poverty and loss and pain, and Jean knew
he still blamed himself.

"You did all you could," she whispered.

"I know," he said. And then he sighed, quite heavily. "Will you get up, my darling? Just for a moment?"

Jean did as he asked, rising onto her knees, but before she could move away he rolled smoothly beneath her, settled onto his back. Her hands fell to his chest and at last he opened his eyes, offering her a weak smile as he reached out and caught her wrists in his hands. He did not pull her closer or push her away, only held her, smoothing his palms up and down her forearms.

"It was a long time ago," he said. "If there's anything you want to know, Jean, all you have to do is ask. I will keep no secrets from you. But that is the past, and for the first time in a very long time I find I'm looking forward to the future."

"So am I," Jean confessed, somewhat shyly. Yes, they had both suffered loss, had endured their own trials, and while Jean would give anything to free Lucien from this pain she was so bloody grateful to have him here, with her, sharing his heart with her in every possible way. He was beautiful, this love of hers, and he adored her without reservation, and they had between them created this new little life nestled in her belly. In that moment Jean had no more questions to ask him; he had already given her more than enough.

"I love you," she told him.

Lucien shifted carefully, holding her against him, arms and legs bumping and brushing until he was sitting upright and she was cradled on his lap, her thighs against his hips and her belly flush to his, his kind blue eyes staring straight into hers.

"And I love you," he answered.

And then he kissed her, and they did not speak again for quite some time.
Chapter 25

5 November 1960

"This was a lovely suggestion, Jean. Thank you for inviting me," Alice said as they lingered over cups of tea and the crumbs of their meal.

"Thank you for indulging me," Jean answered with a smile.

The idea had come to her on a whim, to invite Alice out for lunch. Though they shared meals now and again during the week, usually it was either a sandwich eaten in a hurry in the morgue, or a meal at home, with Lucien and Charlie underfoot. Jean treasured the opportunity to spend time with a friend; oh, she loved Lucien, and Charlie was nearly as dear to her as her own sons, but sometimes she just wanted the company of another woman, even one as strange and occasionally awkward as Alice. The restaurant Jean had chosen was a new cafe, one she'd been meaning to try, and the food and the company had been very much to her liking.

"I'm afraid I don't do this sort of thing very often," Alice said without a trace of shame or self-deprecation. It was a statement of fact, from a woman who was well aware that she lived her life on the very outskirts of propriety, and could not have cared less. Alice did what she pleased, as and when she wanted, and the knowledge that she had chosen to do something so out of character simply because Jean had asked made their time together that much more precious to Jean.

"I imagine that you don't get much of an opportunity to make friends at the hospital."

It was an observation Jean had made privately months before, as she spent more and more time with Alice at her place of work; there was hardly ever anyone else in the morgue save for Lucien, and when they roamed the upper levels of the hospital the doctors and the nurses all gave Alice a very wide berth.

"People can be very superstitious," Alice said with a shrug. "The very idea of the work I do is upsetting to a lot of them." She offered Jean a gentle smile. "But not to you."

Jean laughed. "Oh, I got used to talking about murder at the dinner table years ago."

Which was not to say that she always enjoyed it; sometimes helping Lucien with his work could be fun, a bit of role play, a bit of riddle-solving, piecing together a puzzle, but sometimes the truth of what they were discussing would hit home, and Jean would be left with an aching heart, thinking of all the families that had been broken in half by violence and grief. She knew what that was like, to lose a loved one too soon, and she did not wish such pain on anyone else. Perhaps that was why she did not balk at her husband's chosen profession, or Alice's; the two of them brought justice to the dead and solace to the living, and there was honor in that work.

"This was a very nice way to pass the time," Alice said after a moment. "I don't suppose you'll have much opportunity, once this little one gets here."

Again, there was no hidden agenda behind Alice's words; she was not fishing for information about Jean's plans or her emotions as regarded the impending arrival of little Blake, was only making an observation. That was what Alice did, after all, make observations, draw connections; her inquisitive mind was a vital tool to aid in her work. Jean smiled a soft, fond sort of smile, laying one hand flat on the curve of her belly beneath the generous fabric of her green dress.

"Maybe not, for the first few months. But once he's a little bit bigger I think I'll be able to take him
out with me sometimes. I will have to introduce him to his Auntie Alice."

Alice's eyes went wide, as if she had never considered before this moment that Jean might regard her so fondly or wish for such closeness between Doctor Harvey and her family, but before she could say another word the sound of voices drifted over from a nearby table.

"Honestly, if I were her I wouldn't be able to show my face in public." The speaker was a woman, and Jean's face went white as a sheet as she realized just who was talking. It was Mary Ann Douglas, a fine, somewhat snobbish lady Jean had known most of her life. They'd grown up together, attending the same school and the same church from the time they were children, though Mary Ann had been born into a rich family and married into a richer one, and had always looked down on Jean and her handmade dresses. In point of fact, Mary Ann had made Jean's life miserable, when she had first fallen pregnant as a teenager, had taken glee in telling anyone who would listen about Jean's transgression, the way she'd trapped Christopher into marriage. For the last few weeks Jean had felt Mary Ann's judgmental gaze heavy on her back as they sat for Mass each Sunday, and though Jean had only heard a snippet of the conversation she had no doubt who Mary Ann was talking about now.

"She's done this twice now, can you believe it? I suppose some people never change. She's as coarse and common as ever," Mary Ann continued.

Alice had been watching Jean, and listening just as hard, and her eyes narrowed as her gaze flicked from Jean's anguished face to the table behind them where Mary Ann was entertaining her friends with this little diatribe. It was clear that Alice, too, had drawn her own conclusions about the topic of conversation, and Jean's heart sank, wishing she could simply disappear. Still she sat, silent and straight-backed, one hand still pressed to her belly as if to protect little Blake from the awful things Mrs. Douglas was saying about his mother.

"Though I daresay she's done much better for herself this time. All that money and that house and the Blake name, and all she had to do to get it was spread her legs. I just hope for her sake things go better for her this time."

Tears sprung to Jean's eyes, the pounding of her heart so loud she could not make out the words as one of Mary Ann's companions asked her a question. Jean wanted to scream, to turn around and throw her tea right in Mary Ann Douglas's smug face, wanted to be cool and calm, to clear her throat and raise an accusatory eyebrow, wanted to stand up and run from the cafe, wanted to march out the door with her back straight and as much dignity as she could muster, wanted so many things she could hardly fathom which course to take, and so she remained frozen to the spot, the old guilt washing over her, dragging her under a tide she could not swim against.

"Oh, didn't you know?" Mary Ann answered her friend. "She lost the baby, the first time around. Too bad, really, because she was stuck with Christopher by then. Maybe she'll be luckier this time, but at her age, I mean, really-""}

"Right, that's enough of that," Alice said darkly, drowning out the rest of Mary Ann's invective. "Jean, get your things."

Somewhat numbly Jean rose to her feet and gathered her handbag, smoothing out the front of her dress over the undeniable swell of her stomach. She wanted to turn to the ladies at the table behind her and be clever or cutting, but the truth was that Mary Ann had touched on the very thing Jean feared more than any other, and she was so overwhelmed in that moment she could do no more than follow Alice's orders in silence.

With a hand at the small of Jean's back Alice began to guide her towards the door, but she slowed for
a moment as they neared the table where Jean's nemesis sat primly sipping a cup of tea. To her horror Jean realized that Alice meant to say something to Mary Ann, and as she spared a quick glance at the table she also saw that one of the ladies sitting there listening was her friend Nancy from the sewing circle. Nancy had been rather cool to her the last time they'd met, though Emily and Evelyn had remained as kind and lovely as ever, and now Jean knew the reason why. Sorrow struck her then, as she realized she had lost another friend.

"So much for Christian charity," Alice said in a dangerous sort of voice. "Some people would do better to look after their own affairs instead of meddling into others. Or have you forgotten, Mrs. Douglas, about the very discreet man I recommended to you in Melbourne? The one who took care of your little problem?" Now it was Mary Ann who turned pale and frightened looking, but Alice just lifted her chin. "Good afternoon, ladies," she said coolly, and then she was urging Jean forward again.

They did not speak again until they reached the pavement, walking quickly towards Jean's home while her hands trembled and her thoughts ran riot. Before this moment Jean had hoped that enough time had passed, that perhaps no one remembered the circumstances of her first marriage, but now she saw just how very wrong she had been. Mary Ann had been right; how could she possibly show her face in public, walk around with everyone knowing that she was too far gone to have fallen pregnant on her wedding night, that this baby she carried was not a source of joy but of shame? How could she have dared to sit there smiling with her hand on her belly as if nothing were amiss?

_I've brought this on myself_, she thought bleakly.

"Honestly, the nerve of that woman," Alice huffed. "Are you all right, Jean?"

Jean could not speak; it took every ounce of strength she possessed to keep from bursting into tears right there on the pavement. She only walked, catching her bottom lip between her teeth and lifting her chin, trying with all her might to hold herself together, just for the time it would take to walk back home.

"You mustn't listen to her," Alice told her sternly as they walked along. "It's none of her business. Lucien loves you, Jean, you know he does. That's a wonderful gift and you shouldn't let a miserable old harpy like her ruin this for you."

"She's right," Jean said, the words escaping her in a single gasping breath. "I should have known better, and now…"

_Now I am going to reap what I have sewn. God help me._

"You're going to be fine," Alice said. "The baby is going to be fine. Whatever happened before...it wasn't your fault, Jean."

Jean froze midstep, turning to look at Alice in horror as she realized just what Alice meant, the importance of what she'd overheard. Alice knew, now, that Jean had fallen pregnant before her first marriage, that she had lost that baby, and Alice knew, now, the single biggest fear Jean carried in her heart. There was nothing but compassion in Doctor Harvey's face, however.

"What if it was?" Jean asked in a small, miserable voice.

"It wasn't," Alice said firmly, and then they were moving again.

They came through the house in silence, but the sharp sound of his wife's footsteps bypassing the sitting room where he perched on the sofa and the slamming of their bedroom sounded loud as
thunder through the house. Lucien was on his feet in a moment; it wasn't like Jean to ignore him so completely, or take to their bedroom in the middle of the day. In the corridor he found Alice wringing her hands with a worried expression on her face.

"Lucien," she said as he approached. "I'm afraid there was a bit of an incident at lunch. Not me," she added quickly, and he berated himself for letting his suspicions show on his face. He should have known better than to suspect, even for a moment, that it could have been Alice who put Jean in such a foul mood. "There were some other ladies there, and they said some rather hateful things about Jean. She's taken it quite hard, I think."

Lucien's shoulders sagged, and he reached up to run a weary hand across his face. In a way he supposed it was a miracle that it had taken this long for someone to say something offensive about Jean's condition, but the very idea that anyone could think such uncharitable thoughts about Jean, of all people, Jean who was the kindest, gentlest, best woman he had ever known, turned his stomach.

"Thank you, Alice," he said heavily. "I'll just-" he gestured vaguely towards the bedroom door, and Alice smiled, somewhat sadly.

"I'll show myself out," she said, and then she was gone, and Lucien was squaring his shoulders, preparing himself to go and face his wife.

He opened the door with some trepidation, approaching her slowly, somewhat uncertain as to how best to deal with the situation, wondering what he could possibly say to set her mind at rest. She was sitting on the little bench in front of her dressing table; her shoes were discarded in an uncharacteristically untidy heap by the front door, her dress in a pile at the end of the bed, and she was at that very moment in the process of plucking the pins from her hair. There were tears coursing silently down her cheeks, and he followed their progress in the clear reflection of the mirror, his heart aching to think of his beloved Jean in such turmoil.

"I'm fine," Jean said defensively as she caught sight of him in the mirror, but the tremor in her voice gave evidence of the lie. Still Lucien continued, until he could rest his hands on her shoulders, could feel the warmth of her skin and the cool silk of her chemise beneath his palms.

"You can talk to me about it, darling," he said in a soft voice, trying very hard to comfort her, not to upset her even more. "Alice said there were some women at the cafe-"

"Did she tell you what they said?" Jean whirled around to face him at once, though she was somewhat slower rising to her feet than she ordinarily would have been. Her eyes were a bit wild round the edges, and Lucien wished more than anything in that moment that he could take this burden from her, shoulder all her cares so that she would never have to feel so lost.

"No," he answered quickly, and some of the tension left her. She remained on her feet, plucking the last of the pins of her hair so that her curls fell in a gentle wave all around her face. For a moment he simply looked at her, wondering how it was possible that she could still be so beautiful, when her face was ravaged by weeping, when she stood before him in nothing but her undergarments, the curve of her breast and the swell of her belly pulling the fabric taut in all the places where he longed to touch her.

"What did they say, my darling?"

It was apparent Jean wasn't going to tell him of her own accord, and though he knew she did not respond well to such prodding Lucien felt it was very important for them to face this together, as they had faced his own troubles earlier in the week. But still she did not answer him, only stood there with her lips in a tight line and her hands trembling, and so Lucien reached out and drew her into his
embrace. She went with him willingly, her hands fisting in his shirt, her head coming to rest just under his chin. For a moment he simply held her, tried to show her by the gentle touch of his hands against her back, the strength of his arms, the steadiness of his presence that he would be there for her, no matter what came next. When still she did not speak, however, he turned them both, and led her toward the bed.

"Here," he said. With one hand on her hip he held her close to him and with the other he pulled back the duvet, and then they were sliding into bed together, despite the bright afternoon sunshine streaming in through the open curtains on the windows. They rolled together, lying on their sides with Jean's head pillowed on his bicep, her belly and the child she carried within it nestled in between them.

"She said I'd done it on purpose," Jean said in a small voice. "She thinks I trapped you, that I'm just after your money."

Lucien laughed; he couldn't help it. He'd never heard a more preposterous thing in all his life. In his arms Jean tensed, however, and so he kissed her forehead, and sought to correct his error at once.

"She's a fool," he told her firmly. "I love you, Jean. You have saved my life. And I love this little one, too, already."

He reached down to stroke his hand across her belly, while Jean's breath caught in her throat and she buried her face in the crook of his arm, hiding herself from view.

"I do love you, Lucien," she whispered against his skin. "I couldn't bear it, if you thought…"

"Never," he answered fiercely.

She sighed, and so Lucien deftly rolled her beneath him, catching her lips in a gentle kiss. "I love you," he breathed. "And you love me. And that is all that matters."

He knelt above her, kissing her softly, lightly, teasing her, trying to draw her into this moment with him as his hands glided along her legs. Though he could feel the tears still damp on her cheeks she kissed him back, and he heard her gasp as his hands slipped beneath her chemise and curled around her thighs. For a moment he simply held her, stroked his fingertips along the sensitive skin at her inner thighs, but then her breathing grew ragged and he continued his progress. With deft hands he drew her chemise up and off, tossed it to the side so that she was left in knickers and a bra, her soft skin pale and glowing as he looked down on her adoringly.

"I know that we've gone about things in an unconventional way," he said as he brought his palm to rest against the curve of her belly. "But I wouldn't change it, not for anything. You have made me happier than I ever been in all my life, and I love you, and nothing anyone says will ever change that."

He sealed his promise with a kiss to her skin just above her belly button, and lingered there, thinking about their child, this wondrous gift that one day soon would come screaming into the world. Though he had his doubts about his own suitability as a father he knew that Jean was already the best mother he could have ever wished for his child, was strong and fiercely protective of those she loved, was gentle and kind and brave, possessed of so many sterling qualities he could hardly list them all. At night when the ghosts of his past haunted him and kept him awake he turned his thoughts toward his wife as she slept in his arms, picturing her holding their daughter, singing songs and playing gentle games, imagined a little girl with hair the color of her mother's, with Jean's bright, sparkling eyes, her brilliant smile. He thought of their daughter, thought of them raising her together, growing old together and spending every night in this bed with his arms full of Jean, and the grief
that had tormented him for so very long began to recede. There was no dream more beautiful than
the life he led.

Jean had been rather quiet, while his thoughts wandered, but after a time she tangled her fingers in
his hair and urged him to raise his head, to look into her eyes. There was grief in her still, the wounds
caused by the words she'd heard that afternoon still cracked and bleeding, but there was such trust,
such affection in her gaze that he had no choice but to slide back up her body, to answer her silent
plea and capture her lips with his own.

And so they remained until supper time, curled up together in their bed, talking quietly to one another
and leaving the darkness of the world beyond their door to keep for another day.
"It seems strange, drinking in public after hours" Jean remarked, casting about for something to say, some way to ease the burden of anxiety that had settled heavy in her stomach the moment she and Lucien took their seats at the table. It was all his idea, their going out for a nice meal at Henry's new restaurant. Of course Henry had always been a friend to Jean, from the time she was just a girl, and it was nice to have somewhere new, somewhere a little fancier, somewhere a little different to go for dinner on a Saturday evening, but Jean knew Lucien's impromptu decision to go out for the evening hadn't been inspired by his love of French cuisine. Though he hadn't said it in so many words, she knew that he was worried about her, after the incident at the cafe a fortnight before, and he was trying, in his own way, to lay her fears to rest. She thought his attempt rather sweet, if terribly misguided; there was nothing she wanted less than to show her face in society once again, and she feared that their appearance tonight would only add fodder to the flames of gossip, rather than stifle them as she dearly wished to do. Still though, he was her husband, and she adored him, and she was trying, very hard, to make him happy.

"Oh, Ballarat's catching up with the rest of the world," he said with an easy smile. That was her Lucien, relaxed, comfortable in almost any environment with almost any sort of company, a man of the world, a man who delighted in the world. He was, slowly but surely, opening that world up to Jean, showing her all the possibilities that until now had been denied her, and she was doing her very best to catch up, to be the sort of woman who deserved to stand beside him. But there were some old prejudices she could not quite shake, some remnants of the farmgirl she had once been still lurking in her heart, and they made their presence known now.

"Maybe a little too quickly," she told him, her eyes sparkling as she flicked her gaze towards the painting of the nude woman on the wall.

It took him a moment to understanding her meaning, but then he caught sight of the painting and grinned at her, and her heart melted to see him so content. Fifty-one years old, and yet he was still so boyish in so many ways, eager to please, eager to help, eager to laugh, despite the demons that haunted him in the still of the night. Slowly but surely he and Jean were learning how to banish those bad memories together, and with each passing day she fell that little bit more in love with him.

"Oh, isn't she wonderful? I think it's good to shake things up a little, sometimes."

Quite suddenly Jean was reminded of the painting he'd tried to have installed in the Colonists', the one she'd arranged to be displayed at the gallery. Oh, how times had changed; they were only just getting to know one another, then, Lucien still chafing at the restraints of small town life, trying his best to alienate every single resident he came into contact with. And now he was grown satisfied and settled, and Jean's heart soared, just a little, to think that she had played some small role in helping him to heal, helping him to find his home here.

"Well, it may have a fancy name," she told him conspiratorially, "but I know a good rabbit stew when I see one."

"Yes," he laughed, and the sound of it, the sight of him, the way his eyes shone at her in the low light, the soft sound of his voice, all served to quiet her fears, to help her forget, if only for a moment, the judgmental stares of her neighbors.

"Oh, well, it all looks perfectly delicious, doesn't it?" he said, perusing the menu once more. "But I
can't go past the lamb."

A twitter of laughter from behind them caught Jean's attention, and at once the hopelessness came rushing back. She chanced a glance over her shoulder, and saw a gaggle of ladies, Emily from the sewing circle among them, staring straight at her and making no attempt to hide their interest. At once her heart began to pound, her thoughts racing. Had Emily told them, then, about the terrible things Mary Ann had said? How long would it take for word of her youthful indiscretion to reach Lucien's ears? Oh, she had to tell him, she knew she had to tell him, but she had not yet found the right moment, the right words, the courage to reveal this piece of herself so long kept secret. The longer she waited the more it would wound him, she knew, to think that she had kept this back from him while he had been so forthright with her, and she could not bear the thought of him hearing the story secondhand, but still, she had not told him. Her brow furrowed, and she ducked her gaze down to where her hands rested against the tabletop, worrying her wedding band with her fingertips.

And Lucien, damn him, noticed at once.

"Everything alright?" he asked her, worry etched on every line of his face. He had seen them, she knew, the ladies twittering in the corner, and realized at once the cause of her distress. What a dear man he was, so kind to her, so gentle, so obviously concerned with her wellbeing; yes she would tell him, and soon, but now was hardly the moment for it.

"Yes, it's fine."

It was a feeble attempt, and Jean knew it. For his part Lucien saw through her at once, and reached out to cover her hand with his own.

"Let them look, Jean," he said seriously. "All they will see is a man very much in love with his wife." He lifted her hand to his lips and placed a kiss on the back of it, and she offered him a feeble smile. There was so much more she wanted to give him; she wanted to rise from her chair and fling her arms around his neck, to tell him how she adored him, how grateful she was to him for his understanding, but this was not the place for such displays, and she knew it. Jean opened her mouth, intent on saying something, anything to reassure him, but then Henry was there, and the moment passed, though Lucien kept his hold of her hand.

And then there came the sound of shouting from the kitchen, and their pleasant meal was ruined by something a great deal more nefarious than some local gossips.

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They solved it in the end, Lucien and Matthew and the rest. A tangled plot, a frightened girl, a father's grief, one woman's desperation. The case had unsettled Jean, he knew, the thought of poor Tilly, taking such desperate measures to try to end her pregnancy. They had not spoken about it, but Lucien had seen her face, when they discovered the girl on the floor of her father's shop, the way her hands trembled as she rang for an ambulance, the way one of her hands lingered against the swell of her belly as Tilly was loaded up and taken away. It was strange; they, like Tilly and Phillipe, had found themselves in strife, but Jean would never have considered such a thing, not even for a moment, and neither would he. Of course they were older, wiser, more eager for their child than Tilly was. Or at least, he was eager for their child; after their initial work on the nursery Jean had once more become rather reticent to discuss the baby, but Lucien chose to believe that to be no more than nerves, caused by the ruthless gossip of her erstwhile friends.

His own thoughts had lingered rather longer on Tilly's father; oh the man had not killed Phillipe, had only bashed him, but he had been so devastated by the news of his daughter's circumstances. Lucien
knew a thing or two about a father's love for his daughter, that most unshakable bond; he felt it for Li, and he felt it now too for the child Jean carried. Oh, at first it had just been a bit of fun, teasing her that the baby might be a girl while Jean remained so certain it was a boy, but now it had almost become real to him. He \textit{wanted} that, a daughter to love, to cherish, to raise with Jean by his side. Their girl, safe and well.

But her arrival was still months away, and Lucien had rather more immediate concerns. Matthew Lawson was back on the force, but with his leg in ruins he was finding it hard to navigate his rented flat. Since Lucien's old bedroom on the first floor of the house was now unoccupied it seemed to him the best course of action for Matthew to move in there. Perhaps in a few months, when he was more settled, Matthew could find a place of his own, a place where he could live without such trouble - and he would almost certainly \textit{want} to find one, once the baby was born and screaming the house down all hours of the day and night - but in the interim Lucien had not thought twice about offering his friend a place to stay. And nor it would seem had Jean, for she welcomed him with open arms.

At this particular moment Matthew was in his room, changing before dinner. Everything was set, bubbling merrily away, and Jean and Lucien were enjoying a few private moments on the sofa in their bedroom. Jean had invited Alice round, and she would be arriving soon, and all in all Lucien felt quite happy with the state of his life. He had a beautiful wife he loved more than life itself, their child was healthy, their friends were close to hand, a good meal soon to be enjoyed by all. He could not have been more content.

Thinking about the rather delighted state of his own heart he tossed aside the book he'd been attempting to read and cast his arm round Jean's shoulders, turning his attention towards her instead, this wonderful, incredible woman who brought him so much joy.

"What are you working on, my darling?" he asked her, peering down at the incomprehensible pile of yarn she was slowly knitting into something miraculous. He did not know what it would be, but he knew that it would be wonderful, because Jean had made it.

"It's a blanket," she said, "for little Blake."

Lucien beamed at her; he couldn't help it. He was always looking, now, for some sign that Jean was pleased about the arrival of their child, and this seemed to him to be a fine one. Perhaps she still felt somewhat ashamed, perhaps she was still somewhat nervous about the whole prospect, but she had at least admitted that it was happening, and begun taking steps to prepare herself for their child's arrival.

"This will be the first thing he ever owns, the first thing that's truly his, and I want it to be special," she explained.

Her tone might have been practical but her eyes were somewhat misty, and Lucien tightened his hold on her slightly, leaning over to press a kiss against her cheek.

"That's marvelous," he said, his voice choked with emotion. They could have purchased a blanket for the baby, of course, could have purchased a whole store full of them, and yet here Jean sat, slowly but surely making one herself. Not out of need, or thrift, but out of love. No matter the end result, Lucien knew it would be the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "May I see it?"

It was hard from this angle to make out any sort of pattern, but Jean had accomplished a fair bit already, and Lucien was eager to praise her efforts. At his question, however, his wife grew strangely cagey, and drew the blanket into her lap, obscuring it further from his view.

"No," she said. Were it not for the gentle smile tugging at the corner of her lips Lucien might have
been worried, but he could see in her face that nothing was amiss.

"Please?" he asked in his most charming voice, dropping a teasing kiss against the corner of her mouth.

"No," she repeated, just as firmly. "If you must know, it will have his initials on it, and I don't want you to see them until he's here."

Lucien laughed, delighted at the very prospect. She was making a blanket and she'd chosen a name for their child; all of his concerns about her feelings towards the baby seemed to disappear in a moment.

"So you've chosen a name but you won't tell me what it is, is that the way of it?"

Jean's gaze remained focused firmly on her work. "That was the deal, wasn't it? If it's a boy I get to name him, and if it's a girl you get to name her. I know it will be a boy, so yes, I've chosen a name." She grinned, though still she did not raise her eyes to his face. "Haven't you?"

He couldn't seem to stop kissing her, the rise of her cheek, the little wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, the curve of her smile.

"Of course I have," he told her, for in truth he had settled on a name months before. "I'll tell you mine, if you tell me yours."

Jean laughed, turning her head so that this time his kiss caught her full on the mouth. She abandoned her knitting and reached up to cradle his cheek in her hand, her thumb ruffling the line of her beard as she kissed him slowly, gently, without care.

"No," she whispered against his lips.

"But what if it is a girl, and you've gone and put the wrong initials on her blanket?"

Jean's hand slipped around to cup the back of his head, her fingers tangling in his hair.

"It'll be a boy," she told him, for the hundredth time. "You'll see."

And then she caught sight of the clock and scrambled away from him, muttering about dinner. Lucien just sat and watched her go, her knitting abandoned beside him. It would be no difficult thing for him to pick it up and see if he could discern the letters there, some indication of the name she'd chosen for their son, but he resisted the temptation. Jean wanted to keep her decision a secret, and whether she was motivated by a delightful urge to tease him or some deeper superstition he could not say. Over the last few months he had learned rather a lot about his darling Jean, and he knew it would not serve him well to try to ferret out the truth against her will. She would tell him, in her own time, when she was ready, and he would delight in the trust she placed in him.
"To my beautiful wife," Lucien said, raising his glass in toast as the others followed suit, "and another beautiful meal."

"To Jean," Alice said solemnly, while Matthew murmured, "to dinner," with a cheeky grin, and all the while Jean just blushed from the far side of the table. She was not the sort of woman who readily accepted compliments, and she often found fault in her efforts no matter how Lucien praised her, but in this moment she accepted his toast with good cheer, and sipped daintily from her wine glass before instructing their guests to dig in.

They did so with relish; Jean really was a marvel in the kitchen. Over the years Lucien had learned that despite all appearances it was not magic that made every morsel of food she prepared so wonderfully delicious, but rather a mix of intuition, long years of practice, and a degree of organization that would have made his old drill sergeant proud. At any given moment Jean could rattle off the complete inventory of the entire contents of the pantry and refrigerator, had a schedule of which meals would be made on which day, could combine even the most mundane of ingredients into the most extraordinary creation, could prepare three different dishes and make sure they all finished at the same moment, so that their supper was always hot and ready, every bit. Sometimes it seemed as if she were doing three things at once, and sometimes it seemed as if the meals simply cooked themselves while she sipped her tea. Equal parts art and pragmatism her approach to caring for her family and friends left Lucien in awe of her, as did most everything about her.

On this particular evening she had invited Alice round to join them, and Lucien smiled fondly as he watched the two ladies chatting together. They had grown quite close over the last few months, as Alice remained one of the very few ladies in town who did not look down on Jean for the sudden swell of her belly so soon after her marriage. Alice had never gone in for that sort of thing, meddling in other people's affairs, judging them for not behaving according to expectations, but then, Alice had always been a strange sort herself, operating quite outside the bounds of a conventional life. In some ways she was like a sister to him, someone who could tease him, someone who could understand him, someone he enjoyed spending time with and wanted to look after. It pleased him no end, to see her becoming friends with Jean.

Alice was seated to his left, and Matthew to his right. The Superintendent wasn't speaking much just yet, not when he had a mouthful of Jean's delicious roast, but his gaze kept flickering from his plate to Doctor Harvey's face and back again, and as Lucien watched him a strange, delightful sort of idea began to take shape in his mind. Why not, he asked himself, trying not to grin.

"Do you know, Matthew," he said in a conspiratorial whisper designed to be heard by everyone at the table. "Alice has never been to the cinema."

"Lucien!" she chided him, aghast at his sudden revelation. She had told him that soon after they met, that she'd never once been to the cinema, and though they had never spoken of it again he had never quite forgotten it. What sort of person, he asked himself, has never been to the cinema? The answer, he had learned, was the sort of person who had never been invited to go by anyone else. Oh, Jean had been known to go on her own from time to time before they were wed, but she lived a very different sort of life than Alice. Jean's life had been so full of people, running after Lucien and Mattie and Danny and later Charlie and Matthew, that a quiet evening to herself must have seemed like a bit of a novelty. Alice, on the other hand, well, as far as Lucien was aware she spent most every evening alone, and would have no need to make an a special occasion out of it. Perhaps, he thought, it was
time to go about changing that.

"Is that right?" Matthew asked. Though he was directing his question to Lucien his attention was entirely focused on Alice. She did not blush prettily or duck her head or deflect his inquiry with a clever remark the way Jean might have done; she simply sat, almost frozen it seemed by the way everyone's eyes had turned to her. It was not often that Alice Harvey found herself the center of attention, Lucien knew, and she appeared to be utterly at a loss as to what she ought to say.

"I quite like the cinema," Jean volunteered, shooting her husband a reproachful glance. Alice was staring hard at her plate and Matthew was staring hard at Alice, so Lucien simply raised his hands in a gesture of defeat, as if to say what did I do? Jean just smiled wryly, and took a sip of wine.

"So do I," Matthew said.

Lucien knew this, of course, had known it before he ever pointed their conversation in this direction. Matthew liked his entertainment, his quiz shows and his films and his books and his records, and Lucien imagined that Alice could use a little bit more fun in her life. Who better to help her discover just how much fun she could have than one rather lonely superintendent?

"I just don't see what all the fuss is about," Alice said, somewhat defensively.

"Well, that's because you've never been," Matthew answered. "Right. Saturday. They're showing *The Sundowners* at the Rex. I'll pick you up at 4:00."

Alice stared at him for a moment, her gaze so hopeful, so delighted, so thoroughly confused that Lucien had to look away. Whatever was passing between Alice and Matthew in this moment was too private for him to bear witness, and so he simply looked across the table at his wife. He found her watching him, as she so often did, with a soft expression on her face that told him all too plainly that she knew exactly what he'd done, and she approved of his actions. Lucien tilted his glass towards her in silent tribute, and took a long sip, thinking happy thoughts about his friends and how he lucky he was to have found such camaraderie after the many struggles of his life.

After Lucien's little attempt at matchmaking the conversation flowed more freely; Alice and Matthew both wanted to talk about poor Phillipe and the investigation they were wrapping up, and Jean just let them, thinking her own quiet thoughts. It was a kindness, she thought, this thing that Lucien had done. Whether he knew it or not Jean had begun to suspect that Alice might harbor certain fond feelings for Matthew; Alice had asked after him often while he was away, though Jean had precious little news to give her, and when Jean had told Alice that Matthew would also be joining them for dinner this evening she had blushed and mixed up her samples in the morgue. And Matthew, too, had dressed a little smarter for dinner than he ordinarily would have done, and had seized upon the opportunity Lucien had presented to him at once. Perhaps there was no grand romance in store for them, but perhaps there was, and Jean was glad to know that they were on their way to finding out just what they could be together.

It was a dance she and Lucien were still muddling through, day by day, learning how to share their lives with someone else. They had not courted, not really, not properly. They had shared a house, and drawn rather closer to one another than was wise, but there had been no trips up lover's lane in his car of an evening, no jaunts to the Rex, no meals out at fine restaurants - save of course for their disastrous trip to Henry's the previous Saturday, but that had come months into their marriage. They had learned how to live together before they had learned how to be together, put practicality before romance, and Jean was still trying to sort it all out. Lucien had seen her in her hairnet and robe before he'd seen her naked, and sometimes she felt as if they'd missed a step, somewhere along the way. There had been that period of anxious affection after Adelaide but before his proposal, of course, but
concern for their reputations had kept them from strolling hand in hand when they went to shops, kept them confined to home more often than not, and even at home it was difficult, with Charlie underfoot, to get into any sort of mischief.

And so they had jumped from a few chaste kisses to falling into bed together, gone from engaged to pregnant to married, all out of order and all far too quickly for her liking. Of course he already knew most everything about her, knew about her husband and her sons, knew how to make her laugh - and now, knew how to make her moan - but there still seemed to be so much she needed to tell him. He did not know the truth of why Jack had been sent to Melbourne, did not know how Jean blamed herself for her son's misdeeds, did not know about the proposal she'd rejected from Robert, or the time Matthew Lawson had invited her to the cinema, years and years before. So many things, that sometimes she wondered if he knew her at all.

*If he is to know you, truly, to love you, truly, you must tell him,* she thought as she watched him laughing at some dry comment Matthew had made. *He is a good man, but he is not a mind reader.*

And if she were to divulge these things to him, to let him into her heart the way she so dearly longed to do, she knew where she must begin. Little Blake was turning somersaults in her belly and Mary Ann Douglas's words rang loud in her ears. *Oh, didn't you know? She lost the baby, the first time around…*

It would not take long for word of what had transpired in the cafe to spread through town, as it no doubt was already. Jean could not - *would not* - let Lucien hear it from anyone else. She could not let him hear that she had only married Christopher because she had to, that she had been trapped, that she had done the same thing to him. Yes, Jean had no other choice at the time, no choice but to marry Christopher, but she had *loved* him. Nineteen years old, scared and naive, she had loved him, with everything she had. And though their loss had taken them hard they had continued to love one another, every day, until he left her forever. And now, now she loved Lucien, in a way that she had never known before, in a way she had not known it was possible to love another person. She would be forty-five, in two months' time, and in the intervening years she had learned so much, grown so much, changed so much, and she understood her heart better now than she ever had before. Perhaps they had done things out of order, perhaps she was afraid, perhaps she was ashamed of her own weakness, but she *loved* her husband. And if she was to love him truly, she would have to trust him, and tell him the truth.

*Tonight,* she decided. *After Alice has left, once Matthew has gone to bed. I will tell him tonight.*

There would be no more waiting, no more silent agony, no more whispered prayers and worries that she kept lodged deep in her own heart. Lucien was her husband, and she would share herself with him, every bit, no matter how distasteful. The time had come.
Chapter 28

It was a lovely meal, and if Lucien noticed that his wife was rather more quiet than usual he neither commented nor showed his concern in any outward fashion. Roast and veg and pudding and wine, it all disappeared amidst a jaunty, jovial sort of conversation, as Alice became more accustomed to the state of affairs, as Matthew relaxed, ever so slightly, though his gaze drifted often towards the blushing Doctor Harvey. Jean was pleased for them, truly she was; she loved them both, counted them as dear to her as her own family, and she wished only that they could both find a way to be a little less lonely. Even if there was no more than friendship between them, she rather thought them both in need of more friends.

Throughout the meal, and the long chat that followed as they settled in the sitting room, Lucien beside her on the sofa with his arm round her shoulders, Matthew and Alice in the adjacent armchairs, Jean tried her best to disguise her nerves. Having reached this decision she was determined to see it through, but her resolve made the prospect no easier to bear. It would take him hard, she knew, to learn that she had kept this piece of herself back from him for so long, but she fervently prayed that he would take some comfort from the fact that she had at last chosen to tell him herself, had chosen to place her trust in him. He was everything to her, this beautiful man she loved with her whole heart, and she knew it was high time she proved the strength of her devotion to him with more than promises.

At last the moment came; Matthew had walked Alice to the door, and then bid them both a fond good night. Lucien had coaxed her away from the dirty dishes, telling her they'd keep until morning while he watched her with hungry eyes, and Jean had, rather uncharacteristically, agreed. Ordinarily she would never have left a pile of dirty dishes to sit in the sink overnight, would be unable to seek her bed knowing she had left a job unfinished, but it was late, and she was tired, and the sooner she and Lucien retired to their room the sooner the whole unfortunate business would be over and done with.

_He loves you_, she told herself as she sat before her vanity, plucking the pins from her hair while Lucien shuffled back and forth between the en suite and his own dresser. _He will think no less of you, because you've done this thing._

She followed his progress in the mirror while she carefully washed the makeup from her face; he had rinsed the cream from his hair so that it fell soft and curly around his ears, was humming to himself as he changed into his pajamas. The red welts of his scars were plainly visible as he stood with his back to her, and though the sight of them, the memory of this horror he had endured never grew easier to bear Jean found some reassurance in them. When she looked upon his scars now she saw not just the echo of a terrible pain, but a reminder of the day he had let her trace them with her fingertips, when he had delivered his heart, his history, into her hands. She intended to do much the same with him tonight, and she tried to remind herself that they were strong enough to weather any storm, even this one she was so soon to unleash upon them.

At last she could dawdle no more; it was her turn to slip into the loo, to trade her dress for a soft satin nightie, to turn to their bed and her husband's waiting arms. Her heart was pounding fiercely in her chest, so fiercely she feared for her own health. It had been years, years beyond counting, since she had last spoken those words aloud, told any other soul of the grief she had endured, the terrible sin that had marked her, all her life. So long, in fact, that she was not even sure she could give them voice now, but she knew she had to try. For the sake of the love she bore her husband, she had to try.
"Come to bed, my darling," Lucien said as she stepped once more into the room. The only light came from the little lamp on the table by his side of the bed; he liked to be able to see her, and she him, when they folded themselves together beneath the sheets, and he would not turn that light out until they were done, until they were both of them sleepy and satisfied. She could tell by the way he watched her that he wanted her, and though ordinarily she would have been quite pleased by that thought now it only made her sad. It was not kisses she planned to give him this night; whatever amorous intentions he harbored she intended to disappoint them, and she did so hate to disappoint her husband.

Ever so slowly she made her way to the bed, eased herself down beside him, her movements made slow and somewhat less graceful by the burden she carried. She was six months gone, now, her belly bigger by the day, and it was that as much as anything else which had helped her to make up her mind about telling him. Six months was as far as she got, with her first, as much time as she was allowed the joy of her impending motherhood, before her plans were turned to ruin. It remained to her an important milestone; with young Christopher and Jack both she had not breathed freely until she had passed that marker, until she could convince herself that all was well. With young Christopher especially, for she had been desperately ill every single day for six months straight. This little one had not given her nearly so much trouble - at least, not physically - and she hoped that was all for the good.

As soon as she was nestled under the duvet Lucien wrapped her up on his arms, but she turned her head, let his kisses fall against her cheek.

"There's something I need to tell you," she murmured softly while her heart hammered in her chest loud as a war drum.

She could not keep the distress she felt from communicating itself in the tone of her voice, and Lucien drew back from her at once, his eyes wide and worried.

"Jean-

"Do you think you could turn out the light, please?" she asked him. Perhaps it would be easier, she thought, to do this thing in the darkness, to close her eyes and speak, and not have to watch the heartbreak and betrayal playing out across his face.

Though he was clearly concerned by her request he did not protest; he rolled away from her, turned off the lamp, and rolled back again as quickly as he was able. With his arms around her, her head pillowed on his chest, she allowed herself a moment to take a very deep breath, to soak in the warmth of him, to locate the very last reserves of her courage. Father Morton had absolved her of this sin many long years before, but Jean had been paying penance for it for her entire adult life, and revealing it now would be no easy thing, no matter how certain she was that Lucien loved her. Likely had never suspected that she was capable of such a thing, had blamed their current circumstances on his own recklessness, never knowing that his bride could be as wanton and willful as he.

"Please," he murmured, pressing a kiss against her hair. "Whatever it is-

"I was nineteen, when I married Christopher," Jean said quickly. There, she thought. It had begun, and there would be no turning back now, not until her tale was through, her grief, her lament laid bare for Lucien to make of it what he would.

"I never knew that," he said slowly. And he didn't, of course he didn't; he had known that Jean had married young, of course, but he had not known quite how young. Was he even now turning this piece of information over and over in his mind, thinking how he had been off at university, sowing
his wild oats while Jean was made a wife, with a house and a husband to look after? Their lives had charted such different paths, she often felt it was a wonder he had ever looked twice at her, or she at him, for in truth before she had really come to know him she had thought him wild and somewhat distasteful. He had won her round, slowly, and she him, and now here they lay, together in a bed that was theirs, their child nestled in her belly.

_There are so many things you don't know_, she thought sadly.

"We had no choice, you see," she said. As she spoke she closed her eyes, pressed herself as close to him as she could, braced herself for the impact. "I was already pregnant."

For the first time in more than two decades, Jean had finally breathed life into this secret. She could feel the racing of her heart, the gentle shifting of her child beneath her skin, the brush of Lucien's hand against her back, could feel the seconds ticking slowly by, could feel the weight of her own fears increasing. Whispers had dogged her steps when Jean first wed, and they were following her now, the judgement of her friends and neighbors, the chill wind that blew across her skin as the community she loved, the people who made this place her home, turned their backs on her, shut her out. She had not been Jean Randall for twenty-six years, and yet some piece of her still felt like that wayward girl, rejected by her parents, trembling as she stood before the altar at Sacred Heart and speaking the words that would change the course of her life forever, though she had no way of knowing, then, what waited in store for her. Likewise now she had spoken, had chosen to step out on a limb, to trust her husband and see what would become of it, and now there was nothing left for her to do but to wait. There was a moment of silence, as Lucien digested her words, as Jean's heart shredded itself to pieces, waiting for his judgement.

"Chris is only twenty-four," Lucien said, a question in his voice. Yes, he was a clever one, this man of hers, and he had done the maths rather quickly, and come to the correct conclusion, even if he did not understand it yet.

"Not young Christopher," she whispered, unable to speak the words any louder. "It was a girl, born too soon. A little girl. Your father was the one who…"

She lost her voice, pressed her cheek to his chest and did her best to fight back against the sudden rush of tears that threatened to drown her. Not once, in twenty-six years, had Jean spoken the truth about that loss. Not once had she allowed herself to say it, to face it, the mistakes that she had made, the price that she had paid for those mistakes. But now; _oh_, now she had, and there would be no going back. She was trembling, lying there in her bed with her husband's arms around her, shaking from head to foot as the fear she had tried to keep at bay for so very long came rushing back. Lucien was a man of the world, unconcerned with propriety as their neighbors were, and she knew she had no cause to fear his disdain. What she feared, more than anything else, was what might happen should this child be lost to her as well. If she had so willfully placed herself in this position, if she were to face the same consequences, and in so doing cost Lucien the dream that was his child. Would he blame her, should the worst happen? There was no question of whether Jean would blame herself, but she could not fathom how Lucien might respond. There would be nothing for it, she knew, but to wait, and to pray, and to try as best she could to maintain her faith in him and his love of her.

Lucien felt his heart break, as his wife whispered her confession into the darkness. A girl, born too soon. Everything made sense, now, in a way that it never had before, Jean's fears, her reticence, her insistence that their child must surely be a boy; _oh_, she had not told him as such _- not yet_- but she did not need to. For all her practicality his Jean was a superstitious sort, and she was always much too hard on herself. To see these circumstances repeating, to find herself once more pregnant before she...
was wed, rushed into marriage, was likely all it would take to convince her that the entire scenario was about to repeat itself. And, ignorant of all of this, Lucien had pushed her, time and time again, to imagine that she carried a girl once more. How dreadful must it have been for her, he asked himself, to remember her loss each time he teased her, and yet never tell him the truth of her fears? He could not bear the thought that he had caused her such pain.

And yet, she had waited six months to tell him of this thing, this momentous thing that must have been eating her alive every day. She had suffered in silence, the way she so often did, had kept her chin up, hidden her heart away from him, buried too deep for him to reach. He could not blame her for her silence, knowing its cause, knowing how devoted she was to her faith, her family, to her belief that she must carry on no matter how grief dogged her steps. He loved her tenacity as much as he loved her gentleness, and he knew he could have expected no more from her than what she had given to him.

But oh, his mind was reeling. He thought of Jean, nineteen and lovely, forced to marry Christopher so quickly, though the ties that bound them together might well have been severed the day her girl was lost. *Your father was the one,* she had started to say, and pain had lanced through him sharp as a knife, to think that his *father,* a man who had been so hard with him, a man with whom he had never reconciled, had known this thing about Jean that Lucien himself did not. *What was she like back then?* He asked himself in the darkness, thinking of the girl she had been, thinking of his father, thinking of so many things he hardly knew where to begin. *What must she have felt?*

"I would have married Christopher anyway," she told him. "Maybe not quite so soon, but eventually. I loved him, and he loved me."

"I know that, my darling," Lucien said, trying to ignore his own discomfort at the thought. He had known that, for Jean had worn Christopher's ring until the day Lucien had given her his instead. Seventeen years she had spent mourning for her Christopher, turning away other suitors, clinging to his memory. Seventeen years watching after his children, laying flowers by the stone in the cemetery erected in his memory, though no body lay beneath it. That Jean loved him had never been a question, in Lucien's mind. His own feelings for Mei Lin had faded somewhat, tainted by a patina left by time and other calamities, but Jean, Jean had remained true to her dear departed husband, every day, until Lucien himself had stepped into the frame. Somehow he had won her over, was still trying, day by day, to woo her, this beautiful love of his, and still he could not help but feel as if Christopher held a piece of Jean that Lucien would never have. Not for the first time, he found himself wondering what sort of a man Christopher Beazley had been, what they would have made of each other, if ever they had been able to meet. *Which one of us she would choose, if choose she must,* a dark voice whispered in the back of his mind.

"So you see, I've been...waiting," Jean told him in a voice thick with uncertainty. In that moment he dearly wished he had not turned out the light, wished he could see her face, could look into her eyes, if only so that he could see for himself that she was all right, if only so she could see how he adored her. She had been *waiting,* for more than six months, to face this grief, this loss anew, certain that she had sealed her own fate by stepping outside the bounds of propriety land down for her by the church. The priests, the people there; he knew most of them meant well, but he could not help the fury he felt towards them for placing such a burden upon her shoulders when she was very young, turning her grief into self-recrimination, branding her with scars as deep and painful as his own, though hers were not so easy to see.

"Oh, Jeannie," he breathed, his heart in his throat as he spoke her name, wanting so badly to tell her so many things, but it was as if she had not heard him.

"I've been waiting for it to happen again. I was six months gone, when I lost her. And it's been six
She took Lucien's hand, pressed his palm against her belly so he could feel it, the gentle fluttering movement of their child, safe and well and whole. Her fingers were warm against his wrist and his own fanned out across the swell of her stomach, as if he could in some small way hold their child, if only for a moment. There was a comfort in this, in that gentle movement, in the trust she showed to him, the way she shared this thing with him; no matter how much it hurt, Jean had chosen to unburden herself to him, and he did not want to let her down.

"So that's how I know it's a boy, Lucien," she told him, somehow managing to be matter-of-fact and terribly sad at the same time. "I lost her, but then I had my boys, and they were fine. Perfect, both of them. And he will be, too. Our son."

*Our son;* she was so proud, to say those words out loud, and Lucien was so proud to hear them, no matter the turmoil that swirled and eddied around their bed this night. Whatever ghosts haunted his steps, whatever regrets bowed her head, they had this piece of hope, this piece of joy, this love they had made together.

For a moment Lucien was silent, trying very hard to decide how best to answer her. It was not madness that had led her to this conclusion, only fear, and a faith that demanded an adherence so strict that no one, not even the inestimable Jean could follow it without stumbling from time to time. Young and scared and heartbroken she had found her own reasoning in the chaos of life, and she had clung to it for so long that he knew no words he spoke now would serve to change her mind. Still, though, he hated to see her blame herself, could not bear the thought of her spending one day more sunk in such self-recrimination.

"You know it wasn't your fault, Jean," he told her, his hands tracing up and down the slope of her back while she rested in his arms. Sometimes it was easy to forget how delicate she truly was; Jean was a force of nature, clever, sharp tongued, always moving, working, blessed with the sort of face and the sort of strength of spirit that made her the very center of any room she walked into, but here in their bed she was small once more, finely built and yet carrying a burden so great Lucien could hardly wrap his mind around it.

"Yes, I've heard that before," she answered. "But there was no other reason your father could see to explain what happened."

*Thanks for that, dad,* Lucien thought dryly.

"Sometimes these things just happen," he told her, trying to sound reassuring. "Sometimes there isn't a reason." As a doctor he knew it was true enough, had been doubly true in 1934, that it would have been damn near impossible for his father to find any explanation at all, especially when Jean was delivered of two healthy boys one right after the other, but he doubted whether that truth would be a comfort.

"Oh, my love," Jean said, her voice weary, and knowing, and impossibly sad. "There is always a reason."
There is always a reason, she'd told him, and the heaviness in her voice had conveyed within it a world of meaning he was loath to contemplate. She blamed herself, he realized, for the child she had lost. It was horrible, to think of Jean as she had been, impossibly young, and lovely, and besieged by such a guilt. Had they talked about it, she and Christopher? Had they reached this conclusion together? Or had Christopher done as Lucien intended to do now, held his wife close and whispered to her, over and over, how it wasn't her fault, how nothing could be done? Jean had lived this whole life he knew nothing about, carried within her so many stories he had never heard, so many private scars she had never shown to anyone else. She was showing him now, though, and he was trying his best to show her in turn the same patience and understanding she had showered upon him.

"Jean-" he started to say, started to tell her again you did nothing wrong, but she cut him off before he could utter another word.

"It was my fault, Lucien," she said with such conviction that it tore at his heart. "Our fault. We sinned against God, and we were punished for that sin."

Lucien had been himself so long away from the church that he had almost forgotten the power of it, the warmth of its reassurances, the sting of its reprisals. He had almost forgotten how it felt to follow such a faith, to believe so wholeheartedly in that system of things. If there was a god, that god had abandoned Lucien Blake decades before while he languished starving and abused in the camp, or at least that was the way Lucien saw it, and Lucien had formed for himself a new worldview, one which did not hold so strongly to the church's law. Jean, though, Jean's heart was so very different from his own. I've been waiting, she'd told him, and when those words passed her lips he had assumed that she felt that she had done something wrong, had in some way caused that tragedy to happen, but he had not realized until this moment just what that meant. As Jean saw it, the loss of her child was a direct result of her own misdeeds, and Lucien, ignorant of her history, had gone and placed her in this exact same position once again.

It was his turn to feel guilty, then, to think on how he had pushed her so far beyond her boundaries, how in his eagerness to have her he had encouraged her to commit a sin she feared so deeply. Of course, Jean had offered no word of complaint at the time, had not tried to stop him, not even for an instant, had begged him to continue, as hungry and desperate as he. But perhaps she had thought herself beyond such concerns, now that she was so firmly established in her middle age, now that the heady days of her youth were so far behind her. It didn't matter now, he supposed, what they had been thinking or why they had done it; the thing was done, and the time had come for them to face it.

He needed to say something, he realized. Perhaps his words would not carry much weight with her, given that she knew he was not a believer himself, given that she knew he harbored a certain amount of disdain for the church that formed the foundation of her very life, but he could not let this moment pass, could not let her go on believing that the trial she had endured was one of her own making.

Carefully Lucien turned her, rolled her beneath him, rose up above her so that he could at last look into her face, now that his eyes were accustomed to the darkness. There was sorrow in her gaze, but her expression seemed somehow peaceful, as if having finally spoken her fears aloud she had laid them to rest. For all that she seemed comfortable here with him, however, Lucien knew his wife, and he knew that there was more she needed of him, whether she could find the words to ask for it or not.
"You were very young, Jean," he said slowly. "And it is an awful tragedy. But I can't imagine even for a moment that God did this to you, that you caused it to happen."

Jean smiled sadly as she lay beneath him, still so beautiful despite the weight of her confession. "Christopher was like you," she told him, her eyes seeming very far away in that moment as she recalled the man who had been her husband, as the vile beast of jealousy began to roar in Lucien's chest, to think of how well Christopher had known her, when Lucien himself was still learning. "He said it was just the course of nature, but that never sat right with me. No one could tell me why. And if it was natural, I thought, surely someone could answer me."

That question - why - was one that had plagued Lucien all his life. He had studied so much, learned so much, read so much, and though he had found a good many answers, he had also discovered that no one, not even a doctor, could unravel all the mysteries of a human life.

"So I prayed. I asked God if he had taken her from me. I asked him if I was forgiven for my sin. I prayed, and I asked him to send me a sign that I had paid my penance. And he sent me young Christopher. That was when I knew. Do you know the story of the rainbow, Lucien?"

It seemed a bit of a non sequitur, to his mind, and so he only shook his head, shifting uneasily as he hovered over her, wanting to touch her and yet holding himself back, wanting to give her the chance to tell her story in full.

"God sent the rainbow to Noah, as a sign that he would not ever strike against the world with flood again. A sign that humanity could be redeemed, that there was still hope. Young Christopher was my rainbow, you see. My sign that I had been forgiven. I prayed for that sign, and he gave it to me. I will never have a daughter, but I have my boys. And this one now, too. I wasn't sure, before, but it's been so long now, and he seems to be doing well, and I think…" her voice trailed off, and she gave a great sigh. "I think we're going to be all right."

She was a marvel, his Jean. Brilliant and clever, she often saw connections that Lucien missed entirely, often provided the one piece of information he needed most in order to solve whatever riddle plagued him. And now she had once more stunned him with the labyrinthine twistings and turnings of her mind, how she had joined her beliefs and the harsh realities of her world to find an answer all her own. They were so very different, the pair of them, looked at the world through such different eyes, but he loved her for everything she was. He might not have shared in her superstitions, but he respected her too much to dismiss her concerns now. It did not matter what he believed, he realized slowly; all that mattered was that Jean believed it. Perhaps it was not the answer Lucien wanted, perhaps not one he ever would have reached on his own, but it was hers, and it seemed she drew some comfort from it. If Noah's rainbow meant that the world would never again be drowned in a flood, he could only hope that Jean's meant she would never have to suffer such a devastating loss a second time. Whatever he said next, he knew he must choose his words carefully, for his wife had gone out a limb, had trusted him with the deepest parts of herself, and he was grateful for that trust.

"I don't think you did anything wrong, Jean," he told her. "And I don't think less of you now that you've told me. I'm glad you've told me. I don't like the thought of you worrying all alone."

She smiled at him softly, raised her hand to press her palm against his cheek, trace the line of his beard with her thumb, the way she so often did.

"I love you," she said. "I'm sorry it took me so long to tell you the truth."

Lucien turned his head and gently kissed her palm. "Well, you've told me now, and I'm so glad that you did. I love you, my darling."
No other words would come to him, in that moment. She had given him so much to think about, this beautiful love of his; oh, he did not fault her for what she had done in the past, did not think any less of her now that he knew the circumstances of her first marriage. In fact, if it were not for the grief her first pregnancy had brought her he might well have teased her gently about it, his virtuous Jean. As it was he knew he would do no such thing, would instead treat her as kindly as he was able. He bowed his head, brushed his lips against hers softly, reverently, thinking only how he loved her, how he wished he could take these worries from her, lay her fears to rest. She seemed happier now that she had told him than she had been for months, and he prayed that this would be the end of her sorrows, at least where the baby was concerned. After all, she seemed to have some hope, now, that she had not had in the beginning. And Lucien was content to let her go on thinking their child was a boy, if that thought brought her peace. As for himself, he had never been more certain that their baby would be a girl than he was in that moment. Jean's girl, at last, safe and in her arms; Jean might have resigned herself to thinking it would never happen, but there was nothing Lucien wanted more.

With Lucien's arms around her Jean had fallen into a deep and dreamless sleep; the anxious knot of worry she had carried in the pit of her stomach for so long now seemed to have eased at last, and she felt lighter for having made her confession. Lucien did not agree with her interpretation of things, she knew, but he had not been dismissive, had not called her a fool. He had listened to her, with patience and love, had whispered warm words of comfort in her ear, and she had taken such solace in them. It seemed a bit silly, now, that she had waited so long to tell him, but the words had come to her at last, and all she felt now was relief.

It was very early the next morning when the sound of his voice pulled her up from sleep; she did not immediately move, choosing instead to soak in the gentle words he spoke, trying to discern their meaning, trying to clear the fog from her mind.

"Mummy is sleeping, just now," Lucien was saying, and she had to struggle to contain the smile that threatened to burst forth from her lips as she realized what was happening. At that moment Jean was lying on her back, and her husband had draped himself across her, was lying with his ear pressed to the curve of her belly, his hand cradling her gently as he spoke to their child.

"She had a very hard day, yesterday, and I think we should let her rest," he continued.

What a dear, sweet man he was, this love of hers. For the first time in days Jean felt no fear at all, no guilt, no worry; all she felt in that moment, listening to her husband speaking to their child, was love.

"She's the best woman in the whole world, your mummy."

Jean was fairly certain that was not even remotely true, but it touched her heart to hear Lucien say such a thing. She might not have believed it, but he did, and she loved him for it.

"Things have not been very easy for her," he continued, and Jean frowned despite herself. There were some things, she thought, that their baby did not need to know about his mother. "But she loves you so much. I know she can't wait to meet you."

That much was true; though Jean very much wanted little Blake to stay right where he was for the next several months she could not deny that she was very much looking forward to holding him in her arms, cradling him close, feeling the beat of his tiny heart beneath her fingertips.

"And I could not be happier," Lucien said. His voice was thick with emotion, and Jean felt the sting of tears in the corners of her own eyes, to hear him express himself so plainly. Whatever her own feelings, Lucien had been from the very first eager and delighted, and it was his joy, his optimism, that had carried her through her darker moments.
"You have two brothers, and a sister. And one day we'll tell you all about them, and you'll get to meet them, and they'll love you, too. Even Jack."

**Oh, Jack,** Jean thought sadly. She still had not heard a word from her wayward son, and if young Christopher had received any news of his brother he had not shared it with his mother.

"I just...oh, you were very unexpected, little one. And now I am so glad that you're here. I love you, very much, already."

It was the softness of his tone that forced her hand, more than anything else. This man, powerful and brave and strong, a soldier, a fighter, possessed such a gentle heart, and Jean loved him so completely she could not remain still a moment longer. Carefully she reached down and ran her fingers through his hair, opening her eyes at last to find him watching her over the rise of her belly, his eyes warm and full of love.

"Good morning, my darling," he whispered, his own eyes fluttering closed in contentment as still Jean's fingers threaded softly through his hair, brushed against his scalp in the way she knew he liked.

"Good morning, my love," she answered.

It **was** a good morning, she decided then. Jean had laid her burdens at his feet and he had accepted her without reservation, had been kind and so full of understanding. There was no challenge so great they could not overcome it, so long as they stood together, and in this moment Jean felt closer to him than she ever had before.

"Come here," she urged him, tugging gently on his soft blonde curls.

Lucien grinned, quick and bright, and pressed a kiss against her belly before he scrambled up to kiss her lips instead. Jean wrapped her arms around him, held him tight, and gave thanks to God for this family, this love, this blessing.
Chapter 30

27 November 1960

"Lucien," she whined, voice high and desperate as she writhed beneath him, utterly lost to the sensations of her own body, the thrumming of the blood in her veins, the swirling, towering need building where she wanted him most. Over the swell of her belly Jean could not see his face, buried as it was between her thighs, could not reach his hair to tangle her fingers in it as she longed to do, could only cast her head back against the pillows and fist her hands in the sheets and cant her hips ever closer to his questing tongue. He was driving her to madness, and he must have known it, for even as his tongue slipped between her dripping folds she could feel him smile.

He had woken hungry for her, and she had woken topful of love of him, and now they were winding themselves together while the sun began to rise beyond their bedroom windows. Soon enough she would need to bathe and dress and make her way to church, but first this, this want, this yearning, this blessing, this moment when with reverent hands and fervent prayers of her name Lucien chose to worship in his own way. There was no other word for it, for the way he touched her, held her, shattered her, revived her; in that moment, Jean felt as if she were his goddess, her thighs the altar where he knelt to offer his supplications.

Broad hands wrapped around velvet flesh, soft lips met tender skin, and the scratch of his beard and the curl of his tongue left her mewling and free, without thought or care. There was love here in this bed they shared, love in the way his breath washed warm and sweet against her center, in the way she gave herself over to him, every piece of her willingly delivered to him to do with as he wished. She wished for it, too, the release he promised her as relentlessly he delved within her, tasting her, smearing his cheeks and chin with the evidence of her arousal and giving forth a throaty laugh when a particularly undignified sound left her and her hips rose up off the bed.

"Easy, my darling," he whispered against her overheated flesh, one of his hands leaving her leg to instead press gently against her hip. Careful, he was always careful with her now, mindful of the burden she carried, his fingertips gentle and not bruising as they had sometimes been in the past, his touch feather-light and agonizing.

"Please," was her answer. Jean did not want easy; she wanted him, hard and fierce and all consuming, wanted him to increase his languid pace and fling her out amongst the stars. Perhaps some of her frustration had communicated itself to him for he pressed himself more firmly against her, tugged her left leg over his shoulder so that her heel could drum against his back while he brought his hand to join his mouth in its most pleasurable endeavor.

"Oh, god," she gave a shuddering breath as the tips of his fingers dragged against her soft heat and his tongue ran circles around the little bundle of nerves at her center that would soon prove to be her undoing. He was more focused here in the sanctuary of their bedroom than anywhere else in the world, bent solely on her pleasure as two long, thick fingers curled inside her and he suckled at her until she was panting, pleading, coming undone. There was sweat beading on her brow, her eyes screwed up tight as sparkles of light exploded behind her eyelids and her whole world went white hot and glorious. Shuddering, blissful, she curled the leg cast over his shoulder so that her heel could drum against his back while he thrust within her, overcame her, and as she felt herself begin to fall, as her inner muscles clamped down tight on his fingers and his tongue spiraled her out into release she reached for him, desperately, catching hold of the hand that rested against her body and twining their fingers together, holding on
to him for dear life as she felt herself go under. With her face turned to the pillows in a desperate bid to muffle the sound of her pleasure Jean let loose a throaty moan, and gave herself over to the flood of pleasure her husband's attentions had unleashed.

Boneless, shivering, fluttering around his fingers still bound deep inside her Jean floated on that sea of relief, gasping for air while her heart thundered in her chest like some wild joyous beast. And through it all still Lucien's tongue and lips caressed her, guided her through the last of her spasms until she had regained enough control over her riotous body to open her eyes at last.

"Come here, my love," she urged him, tugging on the hand she still held, and Lucien scrambled up beside her at once, both of them laughing at his haste to join her, though Jean's laughter was made breathless by the sensation of his fingers leaving her, painting trails of yearning against her skin everywhere he touched her.

"I love you," she told him as he came into her line of sight, though she laughed and wiped his chin with a corner of the sheet before she'd let him kiss her. His hands roamed her body as he stretched himself out alongside her, palms gliding gently over her oversensitive breasts, the curve of her belly where their child lay cocooned in safety, drifting back to trace mindless patterns against her arms, her collarbones, while all the while he kissed her, that same tongue that had moments before brought her such pleasure now inspiring a yearning of a different sort.

"And I love you, my darling Jean," he breathed against her lips.

It was wonderful, this thing he had done for her, this joy he had brought her, but it was not all she wanted of him, and she knew it was not all he wanted of her for she could feel the press of his need against her hip, hard and hot and throbbing with want of her.

"How-" she started to ask, but his strong hands moved at once, already seeking to guide her into place.

"Here," he answered, leaning over to catch hold of her bum with both hands, dragging her with him.

Breathless and full of joy they shifted together until Jean was straddling his hips, smiling so wide her cheeks fairly ached. He was so beautiful, this love of hers; Jean pressed her palms to the hard muscle of his chest and smiled down at him, his greying beard gone slightly shaggy and in need of a trim, his hair soft and curly and begging for the touch of her hand, his eyes so warm and kind, his full lips smiling so blissfully as his hands rubbed soothing circles against her thighs.

Those hands; he had always been a tactile man, his growing fondness for her evident in the lingering brush of his hand at the small of her back, the curve of her hip, the rise of her shoulder. It had happened so gradually; the first time she felt the warmth of his hand against her person she had jumped, startled to think he regarded her fondly enough to allow such casual proximity, but his expression had betrayed no impropriety, and she had thought nothing of it after that. In fact it was not until he reached for her hand on the bus to Adelaide that she realized just how often he had begun to touch her, to seek her out, just how much he seemed to need the reassurance of her, solid and real beneath his fingertips. And now that they were wed, now that they both knew and acknowledged so openly the love they bore for one another, she welcomed those touches, those reminders that even when he was distracted and pulled in a hundred different directions by the riddle of the hour, still he needed her.

Jean needed him, just as much, and so with one hand pressed to his chest she rose up on her knees, wrapping her free hand round his hardness and exulting in the way his head snapped back and her name left his lips in a strangled groan. For a moment she indulged herself in teasing him, stroking him lightly, brushing the very tip of him along the line of her sex, but only for a moment, for his hips
were snapping up towards her and her thighs were trembling from the effort of remaining suspended above him.

Without a moment's hesitation she lined herself up with him and sank down upon him, drawing soft sounds of relief and longing from both their lips as he plunged deep inside her, as her wet heat moulded around him. He had been so slow, so tender, so deliberate with her and she longed to offer him the same gentle care now, but her self-restraint was in tatters, and she could not help but rise up again, thrust down hard against him, the relentless drive of his length inside her pushing her to the very brink already. A second time she lifted herself up, sank down with a panting breath, but the third time her trembling legs gave way and she could do no more than collapse, her hands on his chest the only thing holding her upright while the swell of her belly brushed against his sweat-slicked skin and she gasped, exhausted already and yet desperately wanting to move.

Jean gave a soft mewl of frustration, grinding against him, seeking what comfort she could while she tried to regain her strength.

"Here, my love," Lucien said, and with gentle hands he rearranged her, helped her shift forward, pressing her palms to the mattress while his lips dragged against the curve of her breast and her knees settled down more firmly on either side of his hips.

"Just stay right there," he told her, and before she could utter another word his hands found her hips, and he thrust up against her, holding her in place while he let his own need drive them.

"Oh, god, yes," Jean breathed, her head dropping between her shoulders to lick at the salty sweetness of his neck while again and again his hips snapped up against her, her own gentle rocking movements forming a counterpoint to his rhythm that had them both gasping in a moment. Jean reveled in it, the power of his sleek body beneath her, the heat of him, the hardness of him, the need she felt winding once more out of her control. Everywhere he touched her she burned for him, that coil of yearning winding tighter and tighter until she could take no more, and with one more ardent thrust he pushed her from the cliff. The flood of her arousal, the breathy cry of his name from her lips, the pulsing heat of her undid him as well, and she felt his pace quicken until the furious movement of his hips stuttered against her and a groan of bone-deep satisfaction tore from his lips. As long as she could Jean held him tight within her, her forehead pressed to his, their panting lips sharing the same breath, until at last the trembling of her arms could be ignored no longer. She kissed him once, rather messily, and then rolled off him, flopping down on her back and giving a great sigh of contentment.

As was his wont when they found their passion in the morning it would seem that Lucien now was full of a boundless energy. He pressed himself hard to her side, his chin resting gently against her shoulder while his hand traced absently over the swell of her belly.

"That's one hell of a way to start the day," he said cheerily, still somewhat out of breath, and Jean just smiled at him wryly, curled her arm so that her fingers could drift absently through his unruly hair.

"I'll say," she answered, somewhat cheekily, delighting in the smile her words brought to her husband's lips. "But I will need to leave soon."

Lucien pouted somewhat adorably, but he made no move to leave her, only watched her, his delight at her proximity apparent in every line of his dear, sweet face. For her part Jean was likewise content to stay right where she was, at least for a little while; she had not missed Sunday mass one single time in the last twenty-six years, and she would not start now, not even if her reward would be a few more hours in Lucien's arms. Lucien and his affections would keep for a few hours while she was away; her devotions, however, were to Jean's mind vital in order to maintain her own health and
happiness and that of her child, and she was not willing to shirk them.

"I've been thinking, my darling," Lucien said after a time, and Jean tilted her head, watching him curiously. Whatever Lucien had been thinking, the results were as always of great interest to her.

"You know I am not a particularly devoted Catholic," he said with a hint of self-deprecation, and Jean just laughed, her heart light and sated and unconcerned with chastising him.

"But," he continued, "I know that the church is important to you. And I don't like the thought of you going alone."

Jean frowned for a moment, trying to work out his meaning, but then she gave a sigh as she realized what had urged him to say such a thing. It was not that he did not want her to leave the house unattended, she knew. It was rather that her fellow parishioners had been a source of some discomfort for her, had at times been rather cruel, and following on the heels of the incident with Mary Ann at the cafe Lucien did not want her to face such derision alone, did not want to add to the heap of her perceived sins by remaining so conspicuously absent while his wife made her way to the church. And it was true that each time Jean ventured to church without her husband in tow she only added fuel to the flames of gossip, to the whispers of how she had sinned, how she had tied herself to a man who so flagrantly disregarded the faith to which she herself had sworn her devotion.

"You don't have to," she said softly, though the more she thought about it the more she warmed to the idea. It was not that she wanted to convert him to her way of thinking, that she believed a few Sundays at Sacred Heart might restore his belief to him; Jean knew better than that. She just rather liked the thought that he cared enough for her to make such a sacrifice, liked to imagine for a moment how it would feel to have his steady presence in the pew beside her, the strength she could draw from his proximity while she felt the judgmental eyes of her neighbors upon her. "You are who you are," she told him, "and I love you, just as you are."

"And I love you, my darling," he answered with a gentle smile. "And because I love you, I want to go with you. Besides, I'd rather spend that time with you, even at church, than spend it here without you."

Having recovered sufficiently now from her shattering release Jean ponderously turned onto her side, reaching out to press her palm against his cheek, to smile at him, this man she loved so well, this man who loved her so completely.

"You are a wonderful man, Lucien Blake," she told him softly. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

And as she kissed him then she prayed most fervently that she would never have cause to find out.
Chapter 31

30 November 1960

Locate the wound.

His thoughts were racing, his heart pounding, his breath coming in sharp, wheezing gasps, but still, some piece of him remained an army medic, some deeper reserve of strength within him urging him to deal with the matter at hand. He tore at his waistcoat, tried desperately to keep himself focused while panic bit at him, black spots swimming across his vision and bright red blood sticky against his fingertips.

*Chest expanding but not contracting. Air going in but not going out, Doctor Blake.*

Lucien knew what that meant. A tension pneumothorax, no doubt the result of a punctured lung courtesy of Percy Walker.

*Course of treatment, Doctor Blake?*

Scrambling through his pockets, Lucien could have wept with joy when he discovered a pen. Not quite the needle and syringe he would have used to treat such a malady in hospital, but it would do in a pinch, release the air, relieve the pressure, give himself a fighting chance at survival. And he *had* to survive, could not perish here on the dirty floor of a dingy shed, not when Jean was at home waiting for him, with supper on the table and their child to worry about. Without a second thought he tore the pen apart, lifted his shirt, and felt for the right spot, just between his ribs. The wrong placement with the pen and he’d just speed up the inevitable, but if he could hit it just right, he might buy himself enough time to be rescued. No one knew where he was, of course, but Lucien did not have luxury to dwell on such thoughts, to lose himself to despair or even to hope. He could only act, with the quick reflexes and cool detachment his days in the army had given him. Survival, that was his only concern.

It hurt like hell, another wound so close to the first, but the rush of air against his fingertips and the sudden ease in his labored breathing told him he had done the right thing. Without hesitation he had acted, not just for his own sake, but for the sake of his girls. His Jean, and his Li, and this little one who had yet to enter the world, those three girls he loved more than his own life, those three girls he could not abandon, not now, not yet. He leaned back, blood loss and adrenaline leaving him weak and only just on the edge of consciousness. To try to rise would be suicide, and he knew he didn't have long left before his eyes would close, and his fate would rest entirely, as Jean would have said, in God's hands. Lucien wasn't sure he believed in God, but he damn sure believed in Jean.

He believed in her smile, her gentle hands, her steady courage. He believed in the peace, the hope, the joy she brought to him, the love he felt for her with every fiber of his being. He believed that she had saved him, and now he must do whatever he could to save himself, for her sake. The darkness was coming for him, and there would be no stopping it now, and so he let his head fall back, let the vision of his wife’s face swim before his eyes. All he could think of was Jean and his daughters, the opportunity for a bright future he felt slipping through his fingers as his heartbeat grew weaker, as his muscles slowly slipped out of his control.

*Not like this,* he thought, somewhat despondently. *I can't leave them like this.*

He couldn't leave Li, who was only just beginning to warm to her father, to understand him, to care for him as a daughter should, who needed his help, still, to make her way in the world, who had a
child of her own he dearly wanted to see again some day. He couldn’t leave Jean, who had already been left cold and lonely by one husband, who did not deserve to endure such pain again, Jean who carried such grief and such doubt within her. And he couldn’t leave their little one; he had thought of a name for her, but had teasingly refused to tell Jean.

_I can’t die before she has a name_, he thought. It would be cruel to leave that task to Jean, to leave her wondering, forever, what name Lucien would have chosen, what he would have thought of the one she picked.

But just before he slipped away, thoughts of Jean and his daughters running round and round in his mind, it seemed to him that a figure stepped into his field of vision, tall and black, features hidden in the gloom. The sight of that vision filled him with dread; perhaps Jean was right, and the devil was real after all.

That was Lucien’s last thought before he slipped out of consciousness altogether.

_You cannot leave me like this_, Jean thought desperately, trailing the fingertips of one hand against the tanned skin of his forearm while the other held his hand tightly, refusing to let him go.

The last few hours were a blur, the phone call from Matthew and the rush to the hospital, and then the endless waiting. It was well past midnight, now, and still Lucien slept, his chest bandaged tightly beneath the white linen shift the hospital staff had wrapped around him. So many nights Jean had spent lying beside this man, watching him as he slept, delighting to think how soft, how peaceful he looked in repose. Not so now; the sight of his face so relaxed brought her nothing but grief.

It was a grief she had known before, as she spent six long months waiting for word from Christopher, an endless purgatory that had ended, not with a letter from her beloved husband, but with a visit from an army chaplain, come to tell her that her man was never coming home.

_I cannot do this again_, she thought, tears stinging at the corners of her eyes the way they had done from the moment Matthew had led her to this room, when she had seen Lucien, _her Lucien_, so still, so quiet, as he never was in waking life. Brash, bold, cheeky, clever, Lucien lit up any room he entered, the center of her very world, even when he was cross, even when he was sad. The thought of carrying on without him was too dreadful to even consider, this man who had breathed life into her once again, in more ways than one. He had reminded her how to smile, how to dance in the sitting room, how to love another with every piece of herself, had shown her what joy he could bring her, so long as he was in her life. And he had brought her too this most unexpected gift, the child who even now was making his presence known, a little foot giving the occasional kick as he turned and shifted within her growing belly. A son, _little Blake_, this burden that had so recently begun to seem more like a blessing; she loved their little one fiercely already, but she feared she lacked the strength to carry on without his father by her side.

_I wasn’t supposed to do this alone_, Lucien. _You must come back to me._

As she watched him, thinking only how she loved him, how their son needed him, the faintest shifting in the muscles around his mouth and eyes gave her cause to hope.

"Lucien?" she breathed his name, reaching out to stroke his face, and in response to her touch he turned his head, eyes fluttering open until at long last he was looking at her.

"Ah," he said his voice low and rough and gravelly, "I’ve missed dinner, haven’t I?"

A single tear escaped her, then, a soft, breathless laugh passing from her lips as she stared at him,
drank in the sight of his face, basked in the flood of relief that washed over her even as a towering sort of fury bit at her heels. The words lingered just on the tip of her tongue, the way she would beg him to be more reasonable, to consider how she loved him, how their boy needed him, to be less careless with his own life; perhaps his life meant nothing at all to him, but it meant everything to her. The way she would ask him - likely somewhat shrilly - what on earth he thought he was doing, running off like that without telling anyone where he'd gone. She tried to tell herself that those conversations and admonitions could wait until tomorrow, that for tonight she should only love him, and give thanks to God that he was still here with her.

"It'll keep," she answered him.

Alice had been standing vigil by Jean's side through the night, but she had thankfully stepped out into the corridor to speak to Matthew, and so Jean felt not one ounce of shame as she took her husband's hand and lifted it to her lips. She would have much preferred to press a kiss to his cheek, but between the height of the bed and the swell of her belly she wasn't entirely sure she could manage it. She had to kiss him, though, had to touch him, had to show him how much she loved him, how worried she had been.

"Jean, I'm so sorry," he breathed, and all her resolutions about not chastising him vanished at once. The fear, the pain, the hopelessness that she had felt when she thought she might well have lost him forever came welling up, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"You scared me, Lucien," she answered, and the fact that she had not immediately offered her forgiveness registered with him at once, as his face fell, his expression troubled while a second, and then a third tear slipped down her cheek.

"Oh, my darling," he murmured, lifting his hand to brush her tears away with pad of his thumb. "Jean, I'm-"

"I need you, Lucien," she told him, her voice a sad and broken thing. "We need you. I've already raised two sons on my own. Don't you dare put me through that again."

She hadn't meant to say it quite so plainly, to give voice to what was in truth her second greatest fear. The greatest being, of course, the worry that something might happen to her children, any one of her children; she had been a mother for twenty-four years and she had never once stopped worrying for her boys, and she knew she never would. But added to that now was this new fear, this new doubt, this new terrible possibility that Lucien could be torn from her side. Should such a dreadful fate come to pass Jean wasn't entirely sure how she would carry on, and that was no easy thing for her to admit; she had weathered her share of storms, and always come out the other side, but now she felt this new, startling vulnerability. Where would she be, without Lucien's gentle smiles, his strong hands, his broad shoulders, his unshakeable faith in her?

"No," he agreed at once. "I would never willingly leave you, my darling. I'm right here. I'm going to be all right."

"This time," she pointed out, her words choked around the sob that had lodged itself in her throat, a cry she struggled so hard to contain. It was too much, the terror, the blinding sorrow, the unrelenting joy, the faint bite of panic; Jean's emotions were in a whirl, and it was all she could do to keep from falling to pieces right there at his bedside.

"Promise me," she all but begged him, catching hold of his hand once more. "Promise me you'll be more careful. Promise me you won't scare me like this again."

For a moment he looked at her, somewhat aghast, his lips parted as if in the act of speaking though
no words left him, and in that moment Jean felt as if she could read his very thoughts. He could make her no such promise, for such caution was not in his nature, this wild man she loved so completely. The same sense of justice she so admired in him urged him to put the needs of others above his own, and given the choice between saving himself or saving another, Lucien would never put his own life first. He needed answers like Jean needed oxygen, could no more have chosen a more sedate path for himself than he could have cut off his own right hand.

As he looked at her he drew in a deep breath, and then for the very first time since they first wed, he lied to her.

"I promise, my darling," he said.
Lucien lay very still, listening to the soft sounds of his wife's steady breathing as she rested beside him, oblivious to the turmoil that gripped him. In her sleep Jean had reached for him, the tips of her fingers finding his inner wrist, and there she kept them, a tenuous thread holding the pair of them together, even in the darkness. The little flecks of gold on the ceiling did not sparkle, now, with no lamp or fire to light them, the world beyond their bedroom window dark and at peace, but still Lucien's eyes struggled to make out those little points of light, struggled to locate the sense of comfort, familiarity, warmth they always brought to him.

As a small child this room had been a refuge for Lucien. As a boy he had often found his way here, drawn by the soft sound of his mother singing in her native tongue, drawn by the bright paints and strange statuettes and books whose names he could not decipher no matter how he admired the gilt of the lettering along their spines. When his father was cross or simply too busy to be bothered with him Lucien would come to this place, and maman would hold out her hand to him, draw him to her, let him rest on her lap or at her feet while she worked, her voice and her hands and everything about her a strange, soothing counterpoint to his father's often brusque demeanor. Forty years had passed since last Genevieve Blake had danced through that room holding her son's hands in her own, laughing and bright and full of love. Forty years, since Lucien had been a boy at ease in his mother's care, and yet still he remembered, remembered the sound of her voice, remembered how safe he had felt, while she was near. His father's stern words, the shadows that leered at him in the darkness, the monsters under the bed, all his many fears were no match for Lucien's inestimable maman.

Yet she had been taken from him, and the doors to his sanctuary had been locked, and for decades this haven had been lost to him. Nowhere was safe, in a world without his maman, not the boarding school he'd been shipped off to or even the paradise he'd found in Singapore. Blood and grief had come for Lucien Blake, time and time again. Though the promise of a bit of privacy and more space to spread out in had been sufficient to convince his wife that they ought to make the studio their bedroom, the truth was Lucien had his own reasons for wanting to fall asleep beneath that glittering ceiling every night, for wanting his child to spend the first months of her life within those four walls. Lucien's mother had kept him safe, here, and he wanted the same for his own child, wanted to see Jean sitting in the soft-cushioned rocking chair he'd procured for her with their baby in her arms, that gentle smile upon her face, wanted to fill every inch of this room with memories his own child could cherish, one day.

_I've already raised two sons on my own. Don't you dare put me through that again._

It was the second time Jean had admonished him for his laxity as regarded his personal safety, the second time she had looked at him with trembling hands and terror in her glorious eyes. She was so strong, his Jean, brave and steadfast, had over the course of her life weathered more than her fair share of storms and come out the other side intact. It was not often that she allowed her vulnerability to show, that she admitted to the fears that plagued her, but twice now she had revealed to him what she feared most. In her own way she had come to terms with her concerns about the baby, had convinced herself that having made it thus far unharmed their child would be delivered well and whole - and a boy, no matter what Lucien had to say on the subject. Those fears she had put aside, choosing to look to the future with a hopeful gaze. What she could not shake, apparently, was the fear of losing Lucien himself. Not that he could blame her, knowing what she had endured in the past; a child conceived out of wedlock, lost to her, a husband taken from her by violence, endless years of loneliness and struggle as she tried to carry on without him. It was only logical that she
should worry, now when they were both of them so much older than when they had first settled down to start their families, now that they had both known loss and pain, now that they both knew firsthand how hard the world could be. Lucien was not a young man, any more.

And yet knowing all of this he had still been reckless with his own safety, as wild and impulsive as he had been when he first came back to Ballarat with darkness dogging his steps and no concern for his own life. He had been given a choice, to do the sensible thing, to wait for Matthew or Charlie to come with him, to let the police do their job, and instead he had chosen to rush forward, a bull in a china shop, always, and nearly lost his life for his trouble. Nearly left Jean alone and with child, in a house that would remind her at every turn what she had lost. It seemed she had forgiven him, as she did not chide him when she cleaned his wound, did not turn away from him when he pulled her to him for a kiss, smiled at him softly when they lay in bed beside one another. Jean had forgiven him, but Lucien was not entirely certain he could forgive himself.

It was unthinkable, really, how cavalierly he had disregarded his wife's concerns, her feelings, her future, how selfish he had been. It was just that he had been so close, had felt the answer to the riddle right within his grasp, and he had been unable to stop himself from chasing after it. Fifty years old, and still it would seem he had not learned the lesson of restraint.

Carefully he turned toward her now; Lucien had been stabbed on his left side, and Jean lay at his right, and so he shifted gingerly, keeping his weight off his injury, trying not to pull at the bandages that covered his side and yet determined to look up on her face. She was beautiful always, and he loved her always, but there was something about seeing her like this, peaceful, unbowed by worries, the little lines at her brow and her mouth soft and smooth now as she dreamed, that filled him with an almost painful sort of adoration. Her left hand lay still alongside him, but her right rested against the swell of her belly, reaching out to comfort their child, even in sleep.

As her belly grew and spring wore inexorably into summer Jean complained often of feeling rather overheated, and in an attempt to help her feel more comfortable Lucien had sprung into action. With the help of a bright-eyed girl at the local department store Lucien had placed an order for several items from Melbourne, and even now Jean was wearing a satin pajama set he had bought for her, a loose fitting pair of shorts with a generous elastic waist beneath a soft lace-trimmed camisole. The pale pink satin against her soft skin, the sight of her lean arms and the slope of her shoulder and the curve of her legs left him almost breathless with longing for her. She was lovely, and he adored her, and he had very nearly broken her heart.

In the darkness he watched her, the steady rise and fall of her chest in time to her soft breathing, the delicate curve of her hand against her stomach, the pale pink of her parted lips, the sharp rise of her cheekbones. Everything about her entranced him; not just the loveliness of her features but the fire of her spirit, the way she cared for him, the way she encouraged him, bolstered him when his own soul was flagging and did not hesitate to set his feet upon a different path when he felt himself beginning to slide into darkness. She was brave, and kind, and gentle, brooked no nonsense but smiled at him softly when he held out his hand to her, danced her round and round the sitting room. There was no other woman in the world who could hold a candle to his Jean, Lucien was sure. And though he knew he ought to try, for her sake, to look after himself, to be more circumspect as befitted a father, a grandfather, a man who had somewhat begrudgingly become a pillar of his community, Lucien was not entirely sure he was capable of being what she needed. Jean had so much faith in him, seemed so sure that she could see goodness in him, but Lucien did not share in that certainty.

"I can feel you thinking," his wife mumbled into the darkness, her hand reaching for him, finding purchase against his forearm though she did not open her eyes.

"It's nothing," he lied, pressing a kiss against the rise of her shoulder. "Sleep, my darling."
In response she only pouted, cracking one eye open to watch him warily in the darkness.

"The doctor said you should only lay on your back," she chided him, her hand trailing up his arm to push ineffectually at his shoulder. Lucien just laughed, and kissed her skin again.

"I'm fine," he said. "For a few minutes, at least."

It would seem that Jean remained unconvinced, for with a groan she rolled laboriously onto her side to face him, her legs splaying out and the soft satin of her camisole brushing enticingly against his skin. With one hand she reached up, pressed her palm against his cheek, her thumb brushing gently against the line of his beard while he hummed and closed his eyes, pressed himself into her touch happy as a cat in the sun. The sound of her voice, the shine of her eyes seemed to be enough to dispel his gloomy thoughts, at least for now; Jean was lovely, and she was here, and Lucien knew he ought to be grateful for this gift he had been given.

"What are you thinking, my love?"

Almost always she called him that now, his Jean who so rarely bestowed such affectionate endearments on anyone at all. Her boys she often called sweetheart, but everyone else, Charlie and Danny and Mattie and all the other souls they had gathered into their makeshift little family, she called them by their names. Not Lucien, though; my love, she called him, telling him always how she cared for him, how much he meant to her. My darling, he called her, wanting her to know always how precious she was to him, how he adored her, how he would do anything for her. Anything, it seemed, except change his nature to soothe her worried soul.

"I was thinking of you," he answered truthfully. For he had been, had been thinking of his Jean and how he loved her, thinking how she deserved so much more than he could give her.

She frowned at him, while still her hand rested against his face.

"I don't want to hurt you, my darling."

At his whispered confession her frown deepened, and she shuffled that little bit closer to him, rested her head against his bicep and let him hold her, let him draw strength from the warmth of her nestled in close to him.

"You haven't," she told him earnestly. "There have been times when you have scared me, when I've been worried about you, but you have never hurt me, Lucien."

He turned his head, brushed his lips against her palm, and tried to find the words to tell her what she meant to him, to tell her of the fears he carried in his heart. But as he looked at her it occurred to him that Jean had burdens enough as it was, and that if he wanted to protect her, to love her, to make her proud of him, it was his deeds and not his words that would set her fretful heart to rest. He would have to try his very best to be the man that she needed him to be, to prove his devotion to her. And so he only smiled, and leaned over despite the protestation of the stitches in his side to press his lips to hers, to seal his unspoken promise with a kiss. And in the brush of their lips he felt her smile, felt her melt around him, and a desperate sort of yearning welled up within him. It would be some time before he was fully healed, before his punctured lung could withstand any sort of vigorous activity, before the gashes in his side would knit themselves back together. Endless weeks when he would be unable to hold his wife as he wished stretched out before him, but though he could not seek his pleasure the way he would most like to he was nonetheless resolved that Jean deserved to feel, to know, to experience his love of her to the extent that he was able.

Practicality meant that he must pull back and ease the tension in his weary limbs, and so he did, but
he allowed his hand to wander, fingertips following the fine lines of her elegant neck, dancing over the dip at her collarbone, trailing against the lace that outlined the perfect curve of her breast. Jean drew in a sharp breath, arching into his touch even as her lips parted, no doubt intending to discourage him lest him do himself further injury.

"I love you, Jean," he breathed into the darkness. "You are so beautiful." His palm molded to the swell of her breast and beneath soft satin he felt her nipple, pebbled and straining for his touch.

"Lucien," came the breathless sound of her voice, and in the darkness he smiled. This much he could do, could show her with the reverent touch of his hand how precious she was to him, how he meant to be there for her, with her, always, and so his hands continued to wander, traversing the dips and curves and lines of her body he had come to know so well over the last few months. Though she would never dare to speak of such things aloud Lucien knew full well that the changes in her body and the rush of her hormones would have left Jean feeling rather more amorous than usual - although, if he were being entirely honest with himself, he had only ever made love to her once when she was not expecting, and so he was reliant on past experiences and medical training to make up for his own lack of knowledge as regarded Jean and her appetites - and he could feel her longing for him in the heat of her skin, in the way her fingers drifted over his scalp to tangle in his hair.

"I love you," he said again, and then his hand slipped over the curve of her belly and beneath the elastic slung low over her hips and neither of them spoke again for quite some time beyond fervent whispers and Jean's breathy gasps. This much he could do for her, and so he did it with relish, unrelenting until at last he could bring her to bliss, could feel her joy, her pleasure, pulsing like a living thing cradled in his hand. This vow he had made to her all in silence, that he would do his best to be everything she needed him to be, and so he began that journey with her, in his arms, in their bed, on this quiet night.
This is nice, Jean thought, smiling to herself as she sat nestled in the corner of the sofa, knitting needles darting and weaving as Little Blake's blanket continued to take shape beneath her expert hands. From the parlor behind her the soft sounds of Lucien playing the piano wafted out to the sitting room, coloring everything with a gentle, melancholy sort of air. To her left Matthew was leaning back in an armchair with the newspaper open in front of him and to her right Alice sat with a medical journal in hand, reading up on...well, come to think of it, Jean wasn't entirely sure what Alice was reading about, but it was nice to have her close by, anyway. Nice to have them all gathered together, nice to sit comfortably with one another even when they weren't speaking, nice to hear Lucien playing with deft, sober hands. It was nice to look down and see the swell of her belly, to think how her child would grow up safe with these people, how each of them would in their own way love and cherish Little Blake.

It was nice that Lucien was up and about, able to move around now though Jean insisted he wear his soft jumpers rather than his tie and waistcoat, though she refused to book a single patient to see him, though she knew he was climbing the walls, desperate for something to do. Idleness did not come easily to Lucien; his eyes would go wild and his hands would begin to tremble and every ghost, every demon, every terrible thought that had ever dogged his steps would overwhelm him at once. Activity, of any sort, kept the sorrow at bay, held him together, gave him cause to feel useful, productive, proud of himself. In her way Jean had tried to help him; while she knew he was not well enough to see to patients or to go gallivanting around crime scenes she had put his knife skills to work in the kitchen, set him to chopping vegetables and the like while she pressed kisses to the top of his head and thanked him most sincerely, had taken him with her to the sunroom and used his deft hands to assist in the gentle work of repotting her begonias, had placed her own hands upon his shoulders and steered him toward the piano bench, eager for the soft sound of music to fill their home. These things she had done to keep him busy, to show him how she loved him, how she understood his need to be useful, and these tasks he had undertaken with a grateful heart. It was not enough, and they both knew it, but it was all that Jean could allow, at present. Her husband, her beautiful man, so recently wounded, was not yet ready to face the world beyond their door as he longed to do, and Jean was determined to keep him safe.

"That's lovely," Alice commented, not looking up from her journal while behind them Lucien began to play a new tune.

"As Time Goes By," Matthew volunteered the name of the piece, though Alice had not asked.

"We danced to this song at our wedding," Jean said softly, glancing up from her knitting, smiling when she caught the way Alice's gaze had settled on Matthew's face, smiling as she remembered the joy of the dance, as she remembered watching Alice and Matthew sneaking out of the reception together. "It's always been a favorite of mine."

They were quiet again, then, listening to Lucien play, every note hovering bright and beautiful in the warmth of the evening, all of them at peace. Lucien was safe, Little Blake was well, their friends were happy and close to hand, Christmas was fast approaching, and all was well. Jean lacked for nothing, in that moment, was comfortable and happy, her heart full to bursting with love. It was a very near thing, Lucien's most recent brush with death, but he had been contrite and attentive ever since, and Jean had held him close and kissed his skin and sent up silent prayers of gratitude. He was here, with her, still, and every moment they were allowed to spend together seemed to her to be a
precious gift.

The glorious respite of the evening was not meant to last, however, for the telephone interrupted the serenity of the moment, shrill and foreboding. Grimacing Jean rose to her feet, abandoning her knitting on the sofa so that she could make her way to the kitchen and answer that most unwelcome call.

Everything happened rather quickly, after that. Matthew shuffled off to his room as quickly as his leg would allow, changing into his uniform while Alice and Lucien made their plans. Alice would attend to the autopsy as Lucien was not yet well enough to undertake such an endeavor, but she would ring him with details and send him the reports, and he would help from home. It was not Jean's preference to bring death and loss and sorrow into her home, not so soon after Lucien's wounding, but she supposed that was preferable to sending him out into the darkness and so she had reluctantly agreed. The evening had been so gentle, so full of quiet promise before, but darkness seemed to have flooded in through the windows and extinguished the little bit of hope she'd managed to curate for herself.

The sound of Matthew's cane tapping in the corridor had Alice rushing from the room in a moment, and just like that Jean and Lucien were alone, again. Perhaps some of her distress showed on her face for Lucien crossed to her side at once, wrapped one arm gently round her waist and drew her to him.

"It's all right, my darling," he murmured, pressing his lips to her temple in a comforting sort of way. "I will stay right here with you. I just...I can't bear the thought of sitting by when I could be of so much more use elsewhere."

"You're useful to me right here," Jean answered, though she knew there was no point in trying to dissuade him. She loved Lucien, just as he was, and loving him meant accepting him, his faults and his glories, his strengths and his vulnerabilities. That unyielding desire to do good, that selfless pursuit of justice, these qualities she had fallen in love with, but to love those parts of him meant to reconcile herself to the fact that he would always consider his personal well-being of less importance than anyone else's. Lucien wanted to help, and he did not care if he killed himself in the process. Love of his wife had instilled the smallest piece of prudence in him, now that he had seen firsthand how she adored him, how she did not want to carry on without him, and so he had deferred to her, had not chased Matthew and Alice out the door, but he could not remove himself from the process altogether. He thought that he had done the right thing here, that he had found a compromise that would work for all of them, and perhaps he had. He could assist his friends in their work while he remained within arm's reach of his wife, and so Jean took a very deep breath, and tried to will away the tension, the fear that bound her heart like chains.

"Play something for me, Lucien," she whispered.

She felt his smile in the brush of his lips against her skin, but then he was pulling away from her, dutifully returning to the piano to do as she had asked. It was in Jean's mind to go back to her knitting, to continue working on Little Blake's blanket outside his father's line of sight - for Jean remained determined not to reveal to Lucien the name she had chosen for their son or the initials she was working into his blanket - but then the sound of Lucien's song resolved itself in her mind, and her feet were moving once again, carrying her away from the sofa and to the place where her husband sat, gracefully picking out the gentlest, most beautiful song.

Gingerly Jean sank to the bench beside him, though she sat with her back toward the keys as there was not room enough for her to squeeze between the bench and the piano. He moved with such ease, such certainty, his expression serene, sincere, so lovely to behold, and as she watched him playing Jean could not help but recall how it had been in the beginning, when he had only just come
back to Ballarat, when they were only just learning how to live with one another, when the sound of the piano would only come floating up the stairs on nights when he'd had too much to drink. The music then had been disjointed and sad, his fingers tripping over the keys while he reached for the whiskey and silent tears gathered in the corners of Jean's eyes to think of the depth of grief he must have carried, this man who was all tight smiles in the daylight and maudlin songs in the darkness. Not so, any more, for now he sat beside with her a smile on his face, playing a lullaby. Oh, she thought, how times have changed, and us along with them.

Jean reached out and placed one hand upon his thigh, and then as he continued to play she began to hum. The piece he had chosen to play for her was Brahms's Lullaby; though Lucien could not possibly have known it, this was the very song Jean's mother had hummed to all of her children each night as she laid them down for bed. There had been no other source of music in the Randall house when Jean was small, no instruments, no wireless, no singing, but that little humming tune had been there, always, a piece of comfort in the bleakness of her childhood. And though her children were grown before Jean ever even learned the name of the melody she had gifted it to her boys as well, had held them close and rocked them to sleep while she hummed that same gentle song. To hear Lucien play it now, while she sat alongside him, while she carried their child, while their future stretched wide and hopeful before them, filled her heart with a joy so sharp and sweet it was very nearly painful. That beautiful song meant so very much to Jean, and somehow Lucien had chosen it, and the sound of it reminded her that she had so much to be grateful for. Lucien was here, with her, and so long as he remained she was sure that all would be well.

10 December 1960

"You should have some breakfast," Jean said, her words tumbling out a bit too quick and a bit too high pitched, even to her own ears. "Do you want eggs or toast? No, you should have eggs."

Her hands were trembling, the world tilting dangerously beneath her feet, and somehow she felt that if only she could keep moving, if only she could keep busy, she might somehow banish the visions of that poor girl from her mind. It was no use, however, for Lucien stepped up close to her, whispered her name and laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder, and it all came spilling out at once.

Jean thought she had done the right thing, insisting that she go with Lucien to the morgue, insisting that she keep an eye on her reckless husband. After all, she'd seen more than her fair share of dead bodies, and it would hardly be the first time she'd ever seen one laid out on that silver table. It was, however, the first time she had ever seen her husband at his work, the first time she had ever watched him focus in on the dead, the first time she had ever heard him speak to a victim so tenderly, the first time the body in the center of the room had belonged to a young girl who had been brutally tortured before her death. Perhaps it was that, more than anything else, that had sent Jean scurrying from the room as quickly as decorum would allow, that set her hands to trembling now. A beautiful girl, barely seventeen years old, full of life and promise, a girl who had been murdered, a girl who had suffered such pain in the final weeks of her life. A girl who had not been wanted, and such a thought was unbearable to Jean, whose heart was so full of love.

"Jean, I'm so sorry," Lucien said softly, and Jean trembled, and the next thing she knew he had drawn her into his arms, was gently running his hands up and down her back while tears coursed down her cheeks. "I shouldn't have let you come with me."

Jean bristled at his words, at the implication that Lucien could have made that choice for her, that there was anyone or anything to blame for her grief save for the monster who had killed that poor girl, but she knew he meant well, and her heart was too heavy to admonish him now.

"She was so young, and someone made her suffer over and over before she was…" Jean's voice
trailed off, and she buried her face against her husband's chest for a moment, trying to draw strength from the way he held her, the way he loved her. "I can't believe that he would do that to his own daughter," Jean told him in a small voice. It was easier to say it when she wasn't looking at him, when she did not have to feel the weight of his gaze upon her. It was the one thing that Jean could not escape, as she had looked down on poor Charlotte, the knowledge that someone had inflicted such pain on her, that the police believed her father the likely culprit. It would hardly be the first time a parent had abused their own child, Jean knew, and yet still she could hardly fathom it. Jean who loved all her children so fiercely, who even now carried the loss of her own daughter heavy as a stone in her heart, could not imagine how a father's heart could be turned to such cruelty. And though she ached for poor Charlotte, she could not help but think of Lucien, how he had spent seventeen years scouring the globe in search of his daughter, how he had abandoned his life at once the moment he had word of her, how now his gentle hands sought out the kicks of his son beneath Jean's skin, how he had smiled while he played the gentle lullaby, and she gave thanks to God that the father of her child would never, could never, be so cruel as the person who had hurt Charlotte.

"We don't know who hurt her yet, Jean," Lucien pointed out gently, "but we will find out, I promise you. And when we do, they will answer for what they've done."

"I understand why you had to go there," Jean said then, slipping out of his embrace to wipe at her tear-stained cheeks, though she allowed Lucien's hand to linger on her hip, to maintain the contact between them. And she did understand, perhaps for the very first time, why Lucien had chosen this path for himself, why he had to attend the autopsy in person, why his work was so important to him.

"It's the least I can do for her," Lucien told her softly.

In that moment Jean felt a sudden wash of love for her husband, for his tender heart, for the way he remained determined to respect poor Charlotte's humanity, for his determination to do everything he could for her. While Jean was certain that she would not be setting foot inside the morgue any time soon, she was doubly certain in that moment that she would not try to keep Lucien away any longer. He needed this, needed to bring peace and closure to the families of the dead, and Jean knew she needed to set aside her own fears and let him.
Chapter 34

15 December 1960

The house was all in darkness as Lucien rose silently from his bed, taking a moment to smile down at his wife in wonder. Only a moment, to think how beautiful she was, to gaze in awe and hopeless love at the soft lines of her face, the swell of her belly grown larger by the day, the shiny dark curl of her hair against the pillowcase. Only a moment, and then he was turning away, slipping into his favorite blue robe and stepping from the room on silent feet.

It was difficult to say what exactly had woken him, stirred this restlessness in him, but the moment his eyes first fluttered open his heart had begun to race and his hands began to twitch, a feeling of claustrophobia sparking through his nerves like an electric jolt. A year before, two years before, if he had found himself awake and troubled in the dark of the night the whiskey bottle and the piano would have soothed him into slumber, but the whiskey he found somewhat less appealing these days, as his wife's stomach turned at the smell of it on his lips, and the piano he would not touch as the hour was grown so very late and his Jean needed her sleep. So it was that he did not make his way to the drinks cart in the corner of the study or to the piano in the parlor but instead found himself in the sitting room, staring at the unlit Christmas tree.

Ten days til Christmas, now. The plans had all been made, bus tickets purchased, orders placed with the butcher and the green grocer. Young Christopher and his little family would be traveling to Ballarat the Friday before, returning to Adelaide on Boxing Day when Mattie intended to arrive and take their place. A kind letter had arrived from Li, warm wishes from his daughter and congratulations on the impending birth of her new little sister. That letter had calmed his anxious heart, for in truth he had not known until he read it how Li might take the news. It was never his intention to replace or forget his family, his wife lost to violence, his daughter torn from his side. Rebuilding his relationship with Li remained one of the crowning achievements of his life, her joy his most fervent desire. She and her family were well and safe, and the guilt Lucien had carried for nearly two decades faded with each new letter he received, though he knew in his heart he would never banish it completely, would never truly forgive himself for all the years he'd lost. Oh, Jean would tell him it wasn't his fault, but he couldn't quite accept that, somehow. He knew he never would.

Just as Jean it seemed would never forgive herself for the failings of Jack's character; they did not discuss him often, her wayward boy, but Lucien had heard her whispering a rosary for her son on more than one occasion, recalled all too well the grief in her shining eyes when she told him that Jack would not be coming to the wedding, when she explained that he had not responded to Christopher's attempts to invite him for Christmas. He was a wild thing, Jean's darling boy, and she wanted better for him than the life that he had chosen, remained convinced that somehow it was her fault that he had grown up selfish and cruel. Lucien wasn't so sure, but he had only been a father for such a little while, and Jean had raised her boys all on her own. Their experiences with parenthood could not have been more different.

And yet here they stood, on the brink of starting out on that adventure together. On a whim Lucien flipped the switch and lit the tree, stood for a time staring at the sparkling lights and thinking of their children, Jean's sons and his daughter and this new little one who would soon join them. There was nothing he had found quite like the love he bore his children, the reckless joy and the unbearable, immutable fear. A new life, wholly unique, and yet forever his to protect, to guide, to nurture. Li and Christopher both had children of their own, now, but they still needed their parents, just as Lucien needed the father who had always been so distant from him.
For the first time in quite a while Lucien's thoughts turned then to his father, wondering what Thomas would think if he could see what his son had made of himself. Wondering what he would say to see his son installed in his house, taking over his practice, married to his housekeeper, expecting a new child when he was already a grandfather himself. Would it have shocked him to see Lucien so content in this life he had once scorned, to know that Jean, brilliant, beautiful, steady Jean had so completely thrown her lot in with his? Thomas had not approved of Lucien's first wife, and though it was plain that Thomas had been fond of Jean it was difficult to say whether he would have approved of this new match. Blake men were not the sort to marry their housekeepers and yet Lucien had done so with a happy heart, as he remained wholly, desperately in love with that woman who had so utterly changed his life.

"There's something wrong with you," a low voice grumbled out from behind him, and Lucien jumped as if he had been struck, convinced for one mad moment that it was the ghost of his father, risen from the grave to chastise him once again. It wasn't, of course, was only Matthew, dressed in his pajamas and leaning on his cane, peering at Lucien through the gloom.

"And you should be sleeping," Lucien answered with a weary smile.

"You're one to talk," Matthew said as he came limping over.

It had been in Lucien's mind to wonder, at first, if it would be at all strange to have Matthew living here in the house. Lucien and Jean had grown rather accustomed to having the house all to themselves, had until Matthew's arrival enjoyed one another's company - and rather a lot more - in any room, at any time, at any volume without care. To invite another into their home, to learn to share that space once again, to adhere to a level of circumspection they had quite forgotten in Charlie's absence, had required a bit of patience and understanding - and more than a few wry glances - from all three of them, but in the end Lucien was glad to have his friend so close to hand. The first floor bedroom suited Matthew's leg just fine, and was far enough removed from the studio to allow Lucien and his wife a modicum of privacy. And it was, he thought, quite nice to have a friend about. Though Lucien loved long quiet evenings spent with his arms wrapped around Jean he found that there was something rather charming about having someone else there, someone to laugh with, talk to, about all manner of things. It was also rather convenient for his work as police surgeon, and he rather thought that Matthew benefited from the company as well.

"Everything all right?" Matthew murmured as he came to a stop by Lucien's side.

"Fine, everything's fine," Lucien answered quickly. "I just couldn't sleep."

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his robe to hide their trembling. There was no other reasoning he could give, no way to explain to Matthew how even on the quietest night still he sometimes felt as if he were trapped in that unbearable, infernal cell, imprisoned for days on end, starving and half-mad from loneliness. How even when he ought to be happy sorrow nipped at his heels, reminded him of all that he had lost, of all he stood to lose, reminded him of every wrong he had ever done.

"Strange, isn't it," Matthew said, standing beside him and yet not looking at him. "How different Christmas feels now. Not like when we were kids."

Lucien hummed, staring once more at the tree. Matthew was right, of course; as a grown man Lucien had found that Christmas had lost some of its joy, its wonder, its magic. He often rather low, and rather lonely on that day, had in years past spent it drunk as a lord, hoping the day would pass him by with no memories to haunt him in the still of the night. This year, though, this year was different. This year he had Jean and the miracle of the child she carried, had his friends, his family to gather round his table and share in the celebration. The lights seemed brighter, somehow, the ornaments
upon the tree more charming, the warmth of the summer sun more inviting. It didn't seem fair, somehow, to say all that to Matthew when the man had just remarked on his less than festive feelings, but Lucien couldn't let the moment pass.

"What I've found is Christmas is not about the day," he said softly. "It's about the people in your life. It's about having them all together. And I'm quite glad you'll be here to share it with us."

Matthew grunted somewhat noncommittally, and Lucien smiled.

"And," he added, somewhat cheekily, "I'm glad Alice will be with us, too."

The expression on Matthew's face was priceless, a mix of indignation and delight he tried to cover by ducking his head and giving a little cough.

"Yes, well," he said gruffly. "She shouldn't be alone on Christmas."

"Everything all right?" Jean's soft voice carried from the entryway, and Lucien turned towards her at once, a soft smile splitting his face at the sight of her. In deference to her somewhat scant pajamas she had wrapped herself in the grey satin robe Lucien had purchased for her while they were on honeymoon in Melbourne, a fine soft garment embroidered round the hem and sleeves with a pattern of delicate white flowers. The robe strained to cover the swell of her belly but it fit, still, and she looked positively angelic to Lucien's eyes.

"Apologies, Jean," Matthew said. "Didn't mean to wake you." His gaze passed from Lucien to Jean and back again, and he gave a sly sort of smile. "I'll leave you to it," he murmured, and with those words he left them, the gentle sound of his cane tapping across the floor accompanying him as he went.

Jean moved to take his place at once, and as she drew nearer Lucien lifted his arm so that she might slide beneath it. He pulled her in close and pressed a tender kiss against her temple as they both gazed upon the glory of the Christmas tree.

"You sure you're all right?" she asked him in a hushed, reverent sort of voice. Lucien wasn't entirely sure what he had done to deserve a woman as good and as kind as his Jean, but he was grateful for her, every moment of every day.

"I couldn't sleep," he answered. "I didn't want to wake you, but it seems I've failed rather spectacularly."

Jean just laughed and nestled closer to him.

"I can't sleep without you there," she confessed. "I've got used to your snoring."

A little laugh escaped him, and with it the inexplicable panic that had roused him from his slumber. The house was warm and quiet, the people he loved were safe and happy, the Christmas tree was shining beautifully, and all was well. His soldier's heart had been diligent and afraid for so very long that the terror came calling for him sometimes even in moments of peace. Before now, before Jean, before he'd found a place he could truly call his home, nothing he had found could quiet the racing of his pulse, the echo of the guns in his ears, could still the clenching of his fists and release the chains of grief that bound his heart. Now, however, he had found a world of goodness, and he rejoiced in it.

"Besides," she continued, turning to face him while his arms wrapped around her on reflex, so that she stood gazing up at him while he clasped his hands together at the small of her back and held her close and her own hands reached up to catch the lapels of his robe, "we need all the sleep we can get. Pretty soon we won't be getting much at all."
It was hardly noticeable, the tightening at the corners of her eyes, the turn of her mouth, the somewhat forced enthusiasm in her tone, but it was there just the same, the fear, the trepidation, the uncertainty that had plagued her from the moment they first learned of the baby's existence. For months now Jean had been slowly making her way through the maze of her own heart, overcoming the obstacles of grief and shame that kept her from enjoying this most unexpected blessing, and though she for the most part come through the dark days of doubt some of that fear lingered, still. The memories of grief had left her shaken to her very core, and though with each passing day their child continued to grow and kick and bring to her mother nothing but joy, that sorrow could not be banished in its entirety.

"I can do without sleep," Lucien told her, leaning in close so the tips of their noses brushed together for a moment, his beard tickling the soft skin of her cheek when he shifted and pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth. In this moment, beneath the sparkling lights of the Christmas tree, when all the world was still and their lives were full of so many good things, Lucien did not want to think thoughts of sorrow. He wanted, more than anything, to make his wife happy, and so he kissed her again, and then murmured softly, "but I can't do without you."

And in his arms Jean smiled, tangling her hands in her hair and pulling him down towards her for a proper kiss, a kiss that lingered, a kiss that carried them out of the sitting room and back to their bed, all thoughts of lamentation utterly forgotten, at least for one night.
Chapter 35

23 December 1960

"You seem happy, mum," Christopher said as he settled himself down on the sofa. He was not quite smiling, but then he so rarely did; Jean's handsome boy had grown into a somber young man, responsible and reserved and careful to never let his emotions show. It was so difficult to for her to know if he was truly happy with the life that he had chosen, the duties he had taken on for himself. If he was unhappy with his lot in life he would never speak a word to that effect, and she knew it; Jean rather hoped that this little visit might be a chance for her to observe him and set her own fears to rest. The weeks she had spent in Adelaide were a distant memory now; at the time Christopher and his wife had both been so exhausted, the baby so troubled, Jean herself so distracted by the complexities of her own emotions that she had not been able to get a sense of how Christopher was feeling. Things had settled down somewhat now, and Jean had been hoping to have a chance to speak to her son alone.

And it seemed that the perfect moment for such a chat had come, as Ruby was currently resting upstairs; the bus ride had been a long one and it had not agreed with Ruby's disposition. From where Jean sat firmly ensconced in the armchair she could just glimpse Lucien sitting at his piano with little Amelia on his lap, and a smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she watched them together. At just over a year old Amelia was walking and babbling happily, giving no sign of the discontent that had plagued her in the early days of her life, and it would seem that she had taken a shine to her new grandfather. Jean could think of nothing more delightful.

"I am," she said simply.

And she was; she was happy to have Christopher's little family visiting for Christmas, was happy to hear the sound of music and her granddaughter's laughter floating in the air, was warm and content as she sat knitting Little Blake's blanket. It was very nearly finished, and at this moment was spread out across the swell of her belly. The blanket was a bright shade of blue, very nearly the color of Lucien's eyes, trimmed in white, the yarn soft and neatly stitched. There was a roast in the oven and Matthew and Alice would be joining them for dinner and she could feel the flutter of the baby's movement beneath her skin; the only thing that could possibly have made her happier in that moment would be to have Jack home as well, but Jean had chosen to count her blessings rather than lament for her wayward boy.

"You're feeling all right?" Christopher pressed her. Though his tone was level and his posture relaxed - or at least as close to relaxed as Christopher ever came - the turn of his lips and the tightening at the corners of his eyes spoke of his concern for her. His wife's pregnancy had not been an easy one, nor had Amelia's delivery, and he must have been worried that Jean herself was set to experience the same.

"I am," she repeated, still smiling softly. "Honestly, Christopher, I'm well, and the baby is well, and everything is going to be all right."

Strange, the difference a few months could make. When she'd first learned of her pregnancy Jean had been beside herself with grief, with fear, with doubt, but as the days wore on those worries lessened. Lucien loved her, and she loved him, and there had been no indication that anything was amiss. She whispered her prayers and went to church and tended to her home, and no calamity befell her. With two months left to go she knew better than to get ahead of herself, but she had for the most part stopped worrying about those matters that were beyond her control. *What will be will be,* she told herself, *and no stopping it.*
A particularly shrill sound of glee echoed from the room where Lucien was entertaining Amelia, followed by a few off notes from the piano and the sound of Lucien's own laughter, and Jean's smile grew so wide her cheeks fairly ached with it.

"He's good with her," Christopher said softly.

Jean kept her eyes on her knitting, thinking only how lucky she was that Christopher, at least, appeared to be quite fond of Lucien. After all, they had between them arranged for Christopher's visit at her birthday, and they had parted with a good strong handshake and kind words for one another. When Christopher made his infrequent phone calls to his mother he always inquired after Lucien, and they had been nothing but friendly to one another since Christopher's arrival earlier in the day. Not so with Jack, who had viewed Lucien with nothing but disdain and had not spoken a word to his mother, had not even troubled to write her a letter since the day he had stormed out of the house, possibly for good. Thoughts of Jack threatened to derail Jean's sense of optimism, and so she tried to banish them from her mind, to focus her attention on the son who was here, this boy she loved more than her own life.

"He has a daughter of his own, you know," Jean reminded him gently. "He enjoys having a little one about."

"That's good," Christopher said, but he offered no further inquiry, and a gentle sort of silence fell between them.

Though her hands remained busy at their task Jean once more glanced towards Lucien and Amelia, though whatever soft words he offered the child were spoken in a voice too low for Jean to make them out. Yes, he was good with Amelia, had earned her trust and her delight from the moment they met, had cheerfully volunteered to watch after her so that her mother could rest, and to see them together filled Jean's heart full to bursting with love of her family. And yet, the longer she thought about it the more a certain sense of sadness began to grow deep within her. It was plain that Lucien adored Amelia, that she had already completely wrapped him around her little finger. Her eyes were a light shade somewhere between grey and blue, eyes that reminded Jean rather forcefully of her own, her hair soft and dark and curling ever so slightly, the way that Christopher's did. She was a charming child, and Lucien would do anything for her. Watching them together Jean could not help but wonder if Lucien had been the same with his own daughter, if he had told her stories and slipped her sweets while her mother wasn't watching and carried her on his shoulders with that same proud smile upon his face.

Little Blake was well, healthy and whole and making his presence known at every turn and growing just the way he ought to be, and while Jean gave thanks for that some small piece of her griefed to think she could not give Lucien back what he had missed, could not present him with a daughter to raise and cherish. Oh, he had his Li, and adored her with everything he had, but he had missed so much of her life, and there was a selfish piece of Jean's heart that wanted to give those experiences back to him, wanted to help fill in the blanks of that life he had lived before, that life that had been cut short by calamity. And, if she were being completely honest, she wanted that for herself, too, a little girl to cradle in her arms, someone who could learn all the lessons Jean had to teach, someone to whom she could bequeath her skills.

Oh, she had done her best with her boys; they had left home knowing their way around the kitchen, knowing how to sew their own buttons and darn their own socks. They had taught her lessons, too; when they were little Jean had hitched up her long skirts and kicked the football with them, watched them climbing trees with a hand over her mouth to keep from scolding them, had tried to teach them how to handle schoolyard bullies in the way their father would have wanted. She loved them both, treasured every moment she had spent with them, but she had never had a daughter of her own, and
she could not help but think how nice it might have been, and lament.

"What are you making?" Christopher asked after a time, leaning towards her inquisitively.

With some relief Jean latched onto the question, grateful for a distraction from the morose turn of her thoughts.

"It's a blanket," she told him proudly. "For the baby."

The corner of Christopher's mouth lifted slightly, the faintest trace of a smile ghosting across his features.

"Amelia loves the one you made for her."

Jean beamed at her son; she was quite proud of that blanket, pale pink and edged with little white flowers. It had taken her ages, and to know that her granddaughter appreciated it was the best reward she could have hoped for in exchange for such effort.

"Would you like to see it?" she asked, giving the blanket a shake and holding it up for Christopher's inspection.

"Perfect as always, mum," he praised her, but then his brow furrowed and he reached out, catching hold of the bottom corner. "S-A-B," he read the letters aloud. "What's this?"

A faint blush stained Jean's cheeks, but she knew she had no choice but to answer.

"Those are his initials," she explained.

"His?" Christopher's tone was faintly amused as he let the blanket drop and Jean smoothed it across her lap once more. "You've already chosen a name? Awfully confident it'll be a boy then, aren't you?"

"Of course it'll be a boy," Jean said, trying to sound like an authority on the subject. "A mother knows these things, Christopher."

"Does the doc know you've already chosen his name?"

He could be so shrewd, so observant when he wanted to be, and it seemed he had with one glance seen straight through her.

"He knows, but he doesn't know what it is, so I will thank you to keep this to yourself, mister," Jean told him tartly.

And then, though she could hardly believe it, Christopher laughed. Well, perhaps it was more of a scoff, but Jean was so delighted she decided to overlook his incredulity and focus instead on the fact that he was happy, and well, and here, sitting and enjoying a little chat with his mum.

"I don't know how to explain it," Christopher said after a moment, settling back against the sofa and regarding his mother with a thoughtful gaze. "But you seem different, somehow. I don't think I've ever seen you like this."

"Like what?"

Jean wasn't entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer to that question, but she could not let it lie unaddressed.
"Happy," he said simply. "You just seem so...happy."

"Oh, sweetheart," Jean sighed. Carefully she placed her knitting in the basket at her feet and then ponderously rose, hating how much effort even that small act seemed to take. She took a single step and then folded herself in beside her son on the sofa. He had touched on the truth, for Jean could not recall having been quite this happy in years; there had been so much grief, so much sorrow in her life, and now to be surrounded by love, well and safe and delighted by her circumstances, she felt as if she were floating on a cloud of joy. The last few months had not been without their disasters; she had very nearly lost Lucien three weeks earlier, and she had not forgotten the bite of that fear. But he was on the mend, was at that moment playing a soft song on the piano, still whole, still with her.

"I loved your father," she said softly. "I loved him so much, Christopher. I tried to do my best for you and your brother, tried to carry on, but it was so hard. I...he meant everything to me, and when we lost him I felt as if I could never be that happy again."

It was the truth, a truth she had carried in her heart for nearly two decades, a truth she had never shared with her son. At least, not out loud. But she felt he ought to hear it now, that he ought to know she had not forgotten her family, had not forgotten her past.

"I still go and speak to him sometime," she confessed. "Oh, I know he's not there, it's just a marker, but it helps. He was my very best friend. He knew me when I was young, younger than you are now. I didn't know how to get along without him."

She fell silent, thinking of her Christopher. Her memories of him were frozen in time; while Jean had grown, changed, aged with the passing of the years her Christopher had been granted no such gift, remained perpetually young, impulsive and free in her mind. Before Lucien, he had been the only one who ever truly knew her, all of her, the only person she allowed a glimpse into the inner workings of her heart. In losing him she had lost a piece of herself, and no matter how happy she was now, that piece would always remain with him, buried in the soil of a foreign land Jean would never see.

"But?" Young Christopher prodded her when she had been silent too long.

"But I learned," she answered. "Times were hard, when you were little. I missed your father so much, and there was never enough money, and Jack was...Jack, and I felt like I wasn't enough for you boys. And then you left." She smiled sadly, reached out to take Christopher's hand when he started to protest. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do, sweetheart. It was my job to teach you how to be a man, how to look after yourself, and that means that I always knew one day you'd set out on your own. And I am so proud of you, love," she added, her voice breaking as she spoke the word proud, for she was, was so proud to think that her boy had grown into such a brave, selfless young man. "You have done so well for yourself. So much better than I ever dreamed. But it was hard being on my own again. And then...well, then I met Lucien."

And he changed my whole life, she thought, blinking back tears. He had come to her in the darkness that had fallen when Thomas passed, had filled the hole in Jean's heart with his boyish exuberance, his love of learning, his earnest heart. He had opened up the whole world to her, had given her everything she'd ever dreamed of, had set their feet upon the path to a future that seemed so much brighter than Jean ever could have hoped.

"I love him so much," she said. It was hard, to speak such a thought aloud, but Christopher needed to hear it. "And we are so happy. But that doesn't mean I love you, or your brother, or your father any less."

Christopher squeezed her hand gently and cleared his throat, the only outward indications he gave of
the feelings that Jean knew must have been swirling within him. He was so like his mother, her
darling boy, found it so hard to share himself with another.

"I'm glad," he said.
Chapter 36

24 December 1960

At Jean's insistence - and, though he would never say such a thing aloud, to his own very great relief - Lucien had whiled away an hour or two lying in their grand bed in the studio. He was not yet fully recovered from the stabbing, his lung still healing, and he needed the rest, no matter what his ego might have to say on the subject. You promised me you'd look after yourself, Jean had told him in that soft, faintly disappointed way she had, and he could deny her nothing. As lovely as it was having family and friends beneath their roof he found he tired easily, and would sometimes find himself gasping for breath, even when he was doing nothing strenuous at all. An hour or two was no great sacrifice, in the grand scheme of things, and it gave him time to close his eyes and lose himself in warm thoughts of their family, their future, the happiness that had so changed his life. And so he had stretched himself out upon the bed and thought of Little Blake - who had a name now, in his mind, though he would not share it with anyone - thought of how it might feel to lie in this bed with his child resting on his chest, his wife beside him, his whole world contained in that one room beneath his mother's gently sparkling flecks of gold. It was strange, really, how his life had begun in that house, how his fondest memories of childhood were made in that room, how after so many years, so many struggles, so many losses he had made his way back there at last. Strange, how his life had come full circle, how his child would be raised beneath the same roof. It was strange, but it was right, too, and the thought delighted him in a way he never could have imagined when he was a young man so determined to distance himself from his father's legacy.

When he felt that he had lingered long enough in the studio - their bedroom, now, though they still referred to it as the studio more often than not, and likely always would - he rose to his feet, tidied his hair as best he could and buttoned himself back into the shirt he'd left hanging in the wardrobe so as not to wrinkle it while he was abed. Satisfied that his appearance was smart enough to meet with Jean's approval he made his way out, following the quiet sound of his wife's laughter to the kitchen where she was holding court as she prepared their dinner.

She was a vision, his Jean, wrapped in a soft blue dress that was rather more form-fitting than most expectant mothers preferred; she'd always had a penchant for tight skirts and well-tailored blouses, his Jean, and she did not mind showing off the swell of her belly now, even if her appearance did raise a few eyebrows in town. For his part Lucien adored it, the confidence she'd found once she'd laid her burdens at his feet, and he very much appreciated the view of her now, the shine of her dark curls, the brilliance of her smile.

Matthew and Alice were there, and young Christopher as well, the four of them chatting animatedly, but before Lucien made his presence known he took stock of the situation, concern overtaking him as he realized that there were two very important ladies missing from their number. Ruby and Amelia were nowhere in sight, and this troubled him somewhat as since their arrival Ruby had seemed to him to be rather more quiet and withdrawn than a woman her age ought to have been, particularly in the presence of her own family.

"Jean, my darling," he said, stepping into the room, stopping to clap young Christopher on the shoulder as he passed.

"Oh, Lucien!" she beamed at him, everything about her disposition so bright and cheerful that even his worries for Ruby paled in comparison to the sheer luminescence of his beautiful wife.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked him as he approached and dropped a gentle kiss against her cheek.
"Fit as a fiddle," he answered, smiling. Strange, how everyone else in the room seemed to vanish when he was looking into Jean's eyes, strange how nothing else seemed to matter when she was by his side. "Is there any tea about?"

Jean assured him that indeed there was, and in a moment he was cradling a cup in his hands.

"Better make that two," he murmured to her softly while Matthew and Alice kept Christopher entertained in the background.

Jean seemed to understand at once, fetching down another cup and filling it, adding a single sugar cube.

"Sunroom," she whispered to him conspiratorially.

He kissed her again, grateful as ever for that keen intuition so characteristic of his darling wife, and then he was stepping from the kitchen with a cup in each hand, maneuvering the door with his foot.

She was right, as ever, for when Lucien made his way into the sunroom it was to find Ruby sitting on the little sofa with Amelia on her lap. Ruby looked up sharply at the sound of his footfalls, but when she realized who had intruded upon her solitude she relaxed - albeit only very slightly.

"Doctor Blake," she greeted him in a tired little voice.

Amelia's eyes went wide and she let forth a shrill sound of glee at his approach; there was a very nervous moment as Lucien sat down beside Ruby and Amelia tried to scramble into his lap and he very nearly upended both cups of tea right then and there, but they made it through, somehow, and Amelia settled on his lap, reaching up to pat his bearded cheek with one soft little hand while Ruby took the tea cup he offered her with a quiet word of thanks.

There were many things Lucien wanted to say to his young daughter-in-law, but he had no idea how to even begin a conversation with her, and so for a moment he focused his attention on Amelia, a bright-eyed, curious child who seemed most enamored with her grandfather's beard. Having been born and raised on an army base Lucien knew she likely hadn't seen a single bearded face in all her young life, and he indulged her, even when she caught her little fingers in the short strands and tugged, babbling gleefully all the while.

"She adores you, you know," Ruby told him in a soft voice.

"She's a delightful child," Lucien answered, trying to hide his wince. "It's lovely having you all here."

Carefully he sat Amelia on her feet, watched her totter off to explore the sunroom, though she kept close enough to the sofa to set her mother's mind at rest. It seemed that Ruby had made an overture of sorts, and so Lucien resolved himself to carry on the conversation, to determine the cause of Ruby's discontent.

"My daughter Li is just about your age, you know," he told her. "Amelia reminds me of her, in some ways."

Ruby regarded him cautiously over the rim of her teacup; though she was somewhat reticent she was in truth a beautiful young woman, with her huge, trusting doe's eyes, her soft, honey-brown hair. She was a tiny thing, of a height with Jean but waifish and retiring. Though he had shared a few meals with her in Adelaide he found he knew almost nothing about her, her family, her interests, her general outlook on the world, only that Jean had described her as highly-strung in a disapproving tone of voice. How Ruby and Christopher had met, how they had courted, how they had come to be
"Where is she? Your daughter?" Ruby asked him, turning those brown eyes his way, her expression full of concern.

"Shanghai, with her family," Lucien explained. "We were separated during the war, you see. Her mother was killed and I was captured, and she was taken in by a Chinese couple. It took me seventeen years to find her."

"Oh, how dreadful," she sighed, and in her tone, in her face, he saw a depth of empathy he had not quite expected from one so young. It would seem that while Christopher was as self-controlled and reserved as his mother Ruby wore her very heart on her sleeve, and a sudden smile came to Lucien, as he thought how well Ruby must compliment her husband, how Jean herself had settled down with a man more ruled by his emotions than she. There was a sort of symmetry in their circumstances that he rather approved of.

"It was dreadful," he conceded, "being separated from her. But we've reconnected now. I traveled there to see her, and I got to meet my granddaughter."

"Oh, that's wonderful, Doctor Blake," she told him, true joy replacing her concern so quickly it left Lucien feeling a bit dizzy.

"Please," he said with a smile, "call me Lucien. And yes, it was rather wonderful. My little granddaughter Yu is only a few months older than Amelia."

"Oh, I do so hope they'll get to meet one day," Ruby said, a bit wistfully, and there it was again, a sudden, sharp change in her tone, in the lines of her face, as if with each passing second the course of her shifted and turned, unpredictably. "They should know their cousins."

He stared at her, momentarily stunned by the way she had so easily accepted him, and by extension his daughter and granddaughter, as part of the family.

"And Christopher's little brother should get to know his nieces," she added, though her smile had faded somewhat. And wasn't that a curious thing, he thought, that Yu should so delight her, while Little Blake seemed to cause her concern?

"I see Jean's gotten to you then," he said in an attempt at forced joviality. "She's convinced the baby is going to be a boy."

"Jean says a mother always knows," Ruby answered morosely, ducking her gaze to stare down at her tea cup. "I didn't have any idea, with Amelia. I didn't have any idea whether she would be a boy or a girl, and I didn't know what to do with her and I…" she caught herself before she could finish that thought, swallowing down her words with a sip of tea. She had said enough, however, to reveal her own insecurities, to shed some light onto the nature of the tension between herself and Jean.

"Jean has her own reasons for believing what she does," he told her carefully, as kindly as he could manage. He could never, would never dream of betraying the trust Jean had placed in him, sharing her secrets with her daughter-in-law, but it suddenly seemed very important that he talk to Ruby about it, that he try to assuage her obvious concerns about her own skills as a mother. "But she has no more insight than you or I do, really. There could be two of them in there for all we know."

Ruby offered him a weak little smile. "Still, though. I'm sure Jean's right. Jean's right about everything."
Lucien had spoken those same words himself more times than he could count, had ruefully confessed that Jean was smarter than him - and likely anyone he knew - but somehow coming from Ruby it didn't quite seem like praise.

"Ruby-"

"She doesn't like me," the girl confessed, and at last it all became quite clear to Lucien. He spared a glance for Amelia, who was staring longingly through the glass towards the garden beyond, but the child was behaving herself and in no immediate danger of harm, and so he returned his attentions once more to her mother. It seemed that Ruby had just given him the reasoning behind her silences, her apparent melancholy. So far he had gathered that she was a thoughtful, emotional sort of girl, and that Jean's approval - an approval Ruby felt she had not earned - was very important to her. And Lucien knew Jean would be devastated to think that she had wounded Ruby in such a way, that regardless of any fault Jean might have found in her it would have been Jean's preference for them all to get along.

"I'm sure that's not true," he demurred, but then Ruby turned those hopeless eyes on him and protested at once.

"Everything I do is wrong," she said, somewhat desperately. "When we brought Amelia home all she did was cry and I didn't know how to fasten her nappies and I couldn't keep up with the laundry and then Jean came and she was perfect at everything and Amelia loved her, and…"

Once more it seemed that Ruby realized too late how much she had divulged and hasten to quiet herself, but Lucien was grateful for her candor. Yes, he supposed that to a young mother just learning how to manage her first child Jean would seem perfect, given how adept she was at managing a household, performing a dozen different tasks at once, all without a single strand of hair out of place. But Jean was much older, had looked after a farm and her boys and then Thomas Blake and then his irascible son, had followed a meandering path all her own that had brought her through so many different phases of life, none of which Ruby had experienced for herself.

"Oh, Ruby," he murmured. "You must remember, Jean's had rather a lot of practice at this. She had two babies of her own, and she already learned all those lessons. And she has to keep up with me, and I can tell you, that's no easy feat."

Ruby offered him a watery smile, her lower lip trembling as she tried so very hard not to cry.

"You and Jean are very different," he continued, and though his companion's face fell he soldiered on, determined to speak his piece. "But then you and Christopher are very different, aren't you? And he loves you very much."

"Chris is the best thing that's ever happened to me," Ruby told him, and her voice was so very earnest he knew those words must have been true.

"Jean and Christopher are very much alike," he reminded her, grateful to finally reach the crux of his position on the matter. "They're both very practical, and they do what needs doing, but they aren't used to discussing...personal matters. Feelings. I'm sure Jean never meant to hurt you, Ruby, she just wanted to help. That's how she shows her affection to the ones she loves, by looking after them. You needed help, and she went all the way to Adelaide to be there for you." And she had left him in the process, nearly broken his heart in two, but of course he didn't think Ruby needed to know about the entirety of the circumstances surrounding Jean's departure and subsequent return.

"Everything I did with Amelia was wrong," Ruby interjected then.
"Did Jean tell you that you were making a mistake?" he asked shrewdly. No, Lucien had not been there to witness their every interaction, but he knew his Jean, and he was certain now that whatever had transpired between the two women had been no more than a miscommunication caused by their wildly different natures.

"No," Ruby answered slowly.

"Did she make suggestions? Offer to teach you a different way?"

Ruby nodded dumbly, the light of comprehension dawning in her eyes.

"Jean had to look after Jack and young Christopher all by herself, for a very long while. And I can promise you that when she was your age, when the boys were little like Amelia is now, she made her fair share of mistakes. But she learned, and maybe she wants to help you, so you don't have to struggle the same way she did."

With a soft sound of distress Ruby placed her teacup on the low table in front of them and buried her face in her hands, and Lucien just watched her, somewhat aghast and completely unprepared to deal with a crying woman in his sunroom.

"I've made a right mess of things," she told him thickly, the shaking of her shoulders giving evidence of her tears.

"It's hardly your fault, Ruby," he told her firmly. "It's difficult sometimes for us to understand one another, even the people we love. But I know Jean wants you to be happy, and you've made her so happy, coming to stay with us."

It seemed that little Amelia had taken note of her mother's distress for she toddled over to them on unsteady legs, reaching for her mother's hand with a curious expression on her face. Ruby scooped her up at once, cradling her child close as she took a deep, steadying breath.

"Thank you, Doctor - Lucien," she said then, catching his eye over Amelia's head. "I hadn't thought about it like that. Christopher doesn't talk about it much, what things were like when he was little."

"Maybe you should ask him sometime," Lucien suggested. It had done him a world of good, learning more about Jean, her history, the many experiences that had shaped her into the woman that he loved, all the little moments he had missed that knitted themselves together to form the truth of her.

"I think you'll make a wonderful father," Ruby told him. "You've helped me so much, and you've only been sitting here a few minutes."

It was Lucien's turn to offer her a sad smile; he had been a wonderful father once, when Li was small, but those days were so far behind him, and he worried, sometimes, about what would happen when Little Blake arrived. He was far too old to be starting over, had been far too long without his child by his side, and his memories of her early days were cloaked in a golden haze, treasured but distorted by grief and the passage of time. How he would fare in the future remained to be seen, and he had his doubts.

"We all just do the best we can," he told her.

For that was what he intended to do himself. Little Blake would be joining them in two months' time, and by then it wouldn't really matter what Lucien thought or feared about himself. He would have his child to hold, to protect, to guide, to cherish, and he was determined to do for her what he never could for her sister, to be there for her, every minute, for as long as he was able. And he would love
her, as he loved them all, his darling girls. Even Ruby, who now counted among their number.

"Right then," he said, gathering himself and rising somewhat creakily to his feet. "Let's see about dinner, shall we?"

Ruby smiled and followed his lead, holding Amelia on her hip while Lucien juggled their teacups and they went back into the kitchen, together. The scene that greeted them was much the same as the one Lucien had left behind, all these people he loved gathered into one room with glasses in their hands and smiles upon their faces, laughing and talking to one another while the wireless played softly in the background.

"There you are," Matthew grumbled, but Jean just smiled, catching Lucien's gaze and lifting a single eyebrow in question. He gave a subtle shake of his head, as if to tell her we'll discuss it later, and she seemed to accept that.

"Is it nice out, Ruby?" Jean asked softly as Lucien approached his wife, carefully depositing the teacups in the sink before allowing his hand to come to rest at the small of her back, leaning over to catch a whiff of the meal she was preparing.

"It's a lovely evening," Ruby answered, making her way towards her husband, a lightness to her step and a clarity to her voice that had not been there before. "And dinner smells wonderful."

"Oh!" Jean seemed genuinely delighted by the praise. "Well, thank you, Ruby. Why don't you have a seat, and I'll get you something to drink?"

And just like that they slid into place, all six of them - well, seven, counting little Amelia, who soon became the absolute center of attention - content with one another on a beautiful Christmas Eve.
“That was a lovely day,” Jean said, sighing as she rolled onto her side to face him. With one hand she propped her head up, watching him with a soft, fond sort of expression, and with the other she reached out to press her palm against his chest. Lucien smiled, lifting her hand to his lips briefly before dropping it back down, delighted by the warm slide of her skin against his own, just above his beating heart. Yes, it had been a lovely day, a wonderful day, a day full of joy as they entertained their friends and family, and Lucien could hardly imagine a better one. Perhaps if Jack had come, or his Li, perhaps if they had been able to host all their children beneath one roof that might have made the day completely perfect, but as it was he knew better than to hope for such things, to allow sorrow to distract him from the beauty of the moment.

For though a piece of his heart would always miss his darling Li, would always lament for Jean who he knew fretted so over her Jack, in truth his soul was light and filled with joy. He had seen Christopher laugh, had played silly games with little Amelia, had gone to sit beside his Jean for a special Mass at Sacred Heart and held her hand while the familiar rituals washed over him, the only importance they held for him the delight they brought to his beautiful wife. They had eaten a fine meal and in the morning would wake and open presents and bask in the peace of the season. He had purchased a few gifts for Jean, and was very much looking forward to watching her as she opened them, to seeing her soft smile, and he had spent much of the afternoon entertaining notions of a private Christmas celebration there in the warmth and quiet of their bed once everyone else had gone to sleep. Reality was rather less rosy, however, for he was not yet recovered, his lungs not yet ready for such strain, and in every line of Jean’s face he could see the evidence of her own exhaustion.

“Yes,” he agreed, shifting so that he could wrap his arms around her, so she could rest her head on his bicep and he could feel the gentle press of her belly against his bare stomach. “I can’t recall a better Christmas,” he confessed. Beneath him Jean hummed, turned her head to press a kiss against his skin.

“Even Ruby seemed happy,” she told him, a drowsy note to her voice.

Though Jean seemed perilously close to falling asleep she had just unintentionally touched on a matter that had been bothering Lucien most of the evening. Earlier in the day he had sat in the sunroom with Jean’s tempestuous daughter-in-law, had spoken quietly to the girl and learned the cause of her apparent distress. And having discovered that Jean lay at the heart of Ruby’s disquiet, he felt compelled to discuss the matter with his wife, no matter how uncomfortable that conversation might prove to be. Yes, Ruby’s spirits had improved but Jean remained somewhat wary of her, speaking to her politely but with none of the warmth she reserved for her son, for her friends, for her husband. Ruby had wilted slightly as the evening wore on, but to her credit she had not withdrawn, had persevered and for that Lucien felt she ought to be commended, particularly given her natural
inclination towards reticence.

“Speaking of Ruby,” he said, his arms tightening their grip on Jean ever so slightly. “She and I had an interesting chat today.”

Jean hummed, sleepy and unbothered by his words. “Yes, I know. I really ought to thank you for that, my love. Whatever you said to her it seems to have done the trick. She seemed much happier after you talked.”

“Ah,” he said somewhat lamely, casting about for the right words to say to explain the situation to Jean, to ask her if she could - what, exactly? He wasn’t sure. “The thing is, Jean...well...Ruby thinks you don’t like her.”

At those words Jean lifted her head to stare at him incredulously, all traces of sleepy delight vanished from her face in a moment.

“That’s what this has all been about?” she asked, her eyebrow arching in disbelief. “I thought there was something genuinely wrong with her and it’s just...she’s just worried about my opinion of her?”

“Your opinion of her matters more to that girl than just about anything else,” Lucien told her, trying not to sound too stern, too judgmental. In his estimation Ruby was a very pleasant girl, but he could understand how the sudden swing of her emotions could exhaust those around her, particularly Jean, who believed that such inner turmoil ought to be kept very tightly under wraps. Perseverance in the face of adversity, that was Jean’s way, chin up and carry on; whether she felt that young Ruby ought to have been the same Lucien wasn’t sure, but it was clear the two ladies had wildly different perspectives on life.

“She’s Christopher’s wife,” Jean said. “She’s a part of my family. I don’t know why she would think I don’t...like her.”

And therein lay the crux of the problem, for Lucien could think of no delicate way to point out that she had made no secret of the fact that she found Ruby high strung and somewhat dramatic. He did not wish to accuse her of anything, to ruin the beauty of this night, and so he chose a different track.

“Apparently, Ruby thinks you’re perfect,” Lucien told her.
“Oh, if only she knew,” Jean sighed, and in that sigh Lucien heard a world of sorrow. He knew where her mind had gone, what thoughts plagued her now; Jean did not think herself perfect for she knew better than anyone else the name and number of her own sins, punished herself for them more severely than even the church would have required. Every mistake Jean had ever made she carried within her heart, everywhere she went, but of course it was not the sort of thing she would have discussed with her daughter-in-law, and young Ruby had no way of knowing just how far from the path of righteousness Jean’s steps had fallen. Not that she needed to, necessarily, Lucien thought as he smoothed his hand along the elegant curve of Jean’s spine; Ruby did not need to know the circumstances of Jean’s second marriage - or indeed the first - did not need to know of Jean’s heartbreak, the argument that had sent Christopher Senior from her side, never to be seen again. But perhaps there were other things, more mundane mishaps from the boys’ youth Jean could share with her, some kindness, some sympathy from one woman who had been made a mother too young to another.

“Maybe it’s time she knew,” he said slowly, rushing to explain himself when he felt Jean tense in his arms. “I don’t mean that you ought to tell her about...well, more delicate matters, but perhaps if you shared with her, talked about the boys when they were little, that sort of thing, it might make her feel more comfortable with you.”

“She really told you she thinks I’m perfect?” Jean asked, staring up at him with grey eyes bright and sparkling, despite the furrow of her brow.

“She did,” he answered, leaning down to press a kiss against her forehead. “And, if you ask me, she’s not far off the mark.”

“Silly man,” she chided him lightly, though her cheeks flushed pink at the praise.

“I’m serious,” he pressed her earnestly. “You are so brave, Jean. And you are so kind, and I sometimes suspect that you know everyone in town. These hands,” he lifted her palm once more to his lips, kissing her gently for emphasis, “can accomplish any task. Everything you touch becomes a work of art, my darling. And you are so beautiful,” another kiss, this time to the tender wrinkles at the corner of her eye. “And everywhere you go, people love you. Amelia loves you, and you already knew just how to look after her when Ruby hadn’t yet learned what to do. To a young woman like Ruby, who doesn’t have much experience of life, I imagine it’s easy to think of you as perfect.”

There were tears standing in the corner of Jean’s eyes by the time his little speech was through, and fear lanced through him sharp as a knife as he worried that he had overstepped, that he had, however intentionally, wounded his beloved. He needn’t have worried, however, for Jean gathered herself together and rose up to plant a kiss against his lips, soft and sweet.

“You say the most wonderful things,” she told him, her voice faintly awestruck, as if she had never
before received such praise.

“I love you,” he answered simply, for that seemed to be the only explanation for the fondness he felt for her, this beautiful woman he adored with everything he had.

“I do feel bad about Ruby,” Jean sighed, relaxing against him once more. “I suppose I could make more of an effort with her. I don’t dislike her, you know,” she added, and Lucien just grinned into the darkness, for he had suspected much the same. “I’m afraid I wasn't as...enthusiastic about their marriage as I could have been,” she confessed, and Lucien found himself listening intently, eager to learn more about Jean's past, the making of her family. “But that wasn't because I didn't care for Ruby. They were so young, Lucien, and I didn't want...I wanted more for them.”

More for them than what I had. Lucien could almost hear those words, could understand exactly what it was she meant, even if Jean couldn't speak that truth aloud. His heart ached for her, the girl she had been, nineteen and scared, eager to see the world but tied to hearth and home by circumstances beyond her own control. Of course she would have wanted her son to be happier than she had been in her youth, of course she would have feared for him; Lucien knew what it was, to be a parent, to dream of more for his children.

“They made their own choices, Jean,” he told her gently. “And they seem happy.”

“They are,” she agreed. “Christopher told me so. He loves Ruby and Amelia, and I'm glad he's found his way. I'm so proud of him, Lucien.” She sighed and nestled herself that little bit closer to him. “That's the thing about children, I suppose. When they're little you can protect them, and guide them, and then one day they're grown up and making their own choices and you just have to let them.”

Though he never would have told her, the truth was her quiet words wounded him, just a little, as he thought of all he had missed with Li, how she had been forced to grow up without her parents there beside her, how he was only now beginning to know the woman she had become, whereas Jean had been able to accompany her boys on that journey from the very start. Still, though, they had both been given a second chance at that joy, the wonder of parenthood, and he was so very grateful for it, grateful for the child Jean carried safe and warm beneath her skin.

“What do you think she'll be like?” He asked her suddenly, his palm coming to rest against the swell of her belly. “This little one, I mean. What sort of person do you think she'll be?”

Jean smiled in the darkness and covered his hand with her own. “I hope he'll be just like his father,” she answered. “I hope he will be as brave, and as kind, and as gentle as you.”
She remained as determined as ever that the baby must be a boy, but Lucien did not argue the point; he found it rather lovely, this hope she carried, and if indeed he was destined to have a son of his own he would count himself blessed beyond measure.

“I hope she will be as clever and as beautiful as you, my darling.”

He kissed her again, and they settled back amongst the pillows, content with one another and delighted by the prospect of their growing family.
Chapter 38

26 December 1960

"Oh, Jean, you look beautiful!" Mattie squealed as she came flying through the doorway and straight into Jean's embrace. For a moment Lucien watched them fondly, his wife and this girl who was as good as her daughter, the casual, earnest affection they displayed for one another. The sight of them together, trading cheek kisses while Jean complimented Mattie's new hairstyle and Mattie cooed about how well Jean's pregnancy suited her, warmed his heart and filled him with such gladness that he did not even grumble about being forced to stand out on the porch with Mattie's travelling case in hand while he waited for them to clear the entryway.

"Come on then, let's have a cup of tea," Jean said, and Mattie beamed at her, wrapping her arm around Jean's waist whimsically. And so they danced away from him, the sound of their laughter and the faint scent of Jean's perfume floating on the air.

It was really, truly lovely to have Mattie back in the house again, if only for a little while. In the beginning, it was Mattie's presence that had kept him in check - to a certain extent. He would have left town the day of his father's funeral were it not for the fact that Mattie needed time to secure lodgings. In those early days he had moderated his voice for her sake, not for Jean's, for even then he had known that Jean possessed a will of steel and would not be cowed by some man barking at her as he came and went. He had kept his drinking to himself, for the most part, not because he worried what Jean would say but because Mattie was of an age with his own child, and he did not want her to see him in such a state. It was Jean who put him to bed when he'd had a few too many, Jean who came to him when he shouted in the still of the night, Jean who saw him at his lowest points, Jean who knew the name and number of every sin he'd tried to hide from their lodger. Had it not been for Mattie, well, what might have happened to him didn't bear thinking about.

And as he grew more comfortable with his new life in Ballarat, Mattie had been a constant source of joy for him. Jean knew him for what he was, and while she looked after him she remained cooler to him in those early days, wary in many ways. Mattie, though, Mattie burst with life, with laughter, with affection. It had delighted him, having a young woman about, even if he wept into his whiskey glass of a night thinking how he would never know whether his own child shared Mattie's vivacity, if she lived at all. There had been so many questions, so many doubts, so much grief in those days, and it was strange to think how far he had come, how much he owed to the two ladies currently enjoying a cup of tea in his kitchen.

With a smile on his face Lucien stowed Mattie's case by the foot of the stairs and went off to find them. They were seated at the table, laughing over their cups, and when Lucien entered Jean lifted her head and gave him a warm smile.

"There's more, if you'd like," she said, gesturing vaguely towards the kettle. The holidays had all but exhausted her, he knew, and he was not about to request that she make his tea; Lucien was more than capable of completing that task himself, and he wanted Jean to stay right where she was, content and delighted.

"Thank you, my darling," Lucien answered, pausing to rest his hands on her shoulders and press a kiss to the top of her head before he went in search of the kettle. Such easy affection came naturally as breathing to him now, and he did not even think before he spoke, before he acted, did not even consider for a moment how strange this might look to Mattie, who had left them before they made their courtship public. To his mind there was no need now for the obfuscation they had relied on in the days between Jean's return from Adelaide and Mattie's departure, for now he and Jean were wed.
and she was carrying his child and all the world knew how he loved her. Why then should he worry about letting Mattie see the evidence of that affection?

"It's strange," she mused from the other side of the table, and Lucien turned with teacup in hand to face her, wondering what she could possibly have meant. "Everything is so different now."

"Oh, I think you'll find some things are still very much the same," Lucien said winsomely as he took his seat beside Jean. She lifted her eyebrow at him in question, and he grinned, and her cheeks turned pink, no doubt recalling the kisses they'd snatched while Mattie was still in the house, they way they had been circling ever closer to one another even as they tried to evade her suspicions.

"But you're married now!" Mattie pointed out delightedly. "And you're going to have a baby soon, and Charlie is gone but Matthew is here, and I...I feel as if London is my home, now. It hasn't even been a whole year but I feel as if that's where I belong."

"That's the nature of growing older," Jean told her, and Lucien just took a sip of his tea, thinking how wise, how clever, how kind she was, how damned lucky he was to have this woman in his life. "A place that used to be home feels foreign, and a place that used to be strange becomes home. You can't move back, Mattie. All we can do is move forward. You will always be welcome here for a visit, anytime, but you've found a new place for yourself and that's wonderful."

"Oh, Jean," there were tears in the corners of Mattie's eyes as she suddenly sprang up from her chair and crossed to throw her arms around Jean's neck. "I have missed you both so much," she said softly.

"We missed you, too, sweetheart," Jean answered, just as gently. It was a testament to the change she'd undergone these last few months, the way she'd opened her heart, allowed her affections to show so plainly, that she used the same term of endearment for Mattie now that in the past she had reserved for her sons.

"Very much," Lucien agreed in a low voice, and then Mattie laughed and danced away from Jean to press a kiss against his cheek before settling back down in her chair without the slightest hint of self-consciousness in the wake of her display of affection.

"Now," she said, "tell me everything. Have you thought about names?"

Lucien and Jean exchanged a wry glance at that, and Mattie, to her credit, noticed it at once.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"We have a...difference of opinion on the subject," Lucien said lightly.

"But you'll find out what we've chosen soon enough," Jean supplied. She had rather deliberately dodged the subject of their little wager, and Lucien respected her decision not to bring it up in this moment. While it was for him a bit of a lark, their friendly disagreement as regarded the gender of the baby, he knew it was deeply personal for Jean, and there was no need to go into the somewhat morbid thinking behind their arrangement on this beautiful afternoon.

"Do you know, I've been reading about research they've been doing in Scotland. They're using ultrasonic sound waves to create an image of the fetus in the womb. It actually creates a sort of photograph, and they've been able to use it to identify the stage of development. You can actually see the baby's head!"

As Mattie spoke Jean went a bit pale, one of her hands rising up subconsciously to rest against the swell of her belly, as if to protect Little Blake from the mad Scottish scientists.
"That can't be safe," she said.

Lucien draped one of his arms over her shoulders, and sought at once to reassure her. "No, no, I've read about it, too," he began. "They've been doing this for several years now, and there have been no ill effects on the children. They're thinking that with more time and study they may be able to refine the images. It's possible that at some point they might be able to use this process to determine the baby's sex and check for anomalies prior to birth. It's very promising, even if the rest of the world hasn't quite caught on yet."

Jean gave a soft little hmph of displeasure. "Well," she said, "I'm perfectly happy to wait until he gets here. I don't need to see a photograph to know that he's perfectly healthy."

"Of course, my darling," Lucien answered her. He pressed a kiss to her temple and she shifted more firmly against him, and the conversation carried on to less weighty subjects.

It was much later that evening when Mattie came slipping down the stairs, intent on fetching a glass of water. They had passed a lovely few hours together, laughing and chatting. So many of their friends had come round for dinner, Charlie and Danny and Matthew and Alice, and Mattie had enjoyed herself immensely. But she was exhausted from the travel, still somewhat out of sorts with the shift from a London winter to a Ballarat summer, and Jean looked equally wrung out. So they had all agreed to turn in early, and Mattie had departed up the stairs to her old room at once. Having unpacked a few of her belongings and changed into her pajamas she found herself a bit parched, however, and so she left her bed behind in favor of the kitchen.

She had thought as she left her room that everyone else must surely be in bed, but as she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard the soft sound of voices coming from the sitting room. As quietly as she could she approached, and peaked in through the doorway to find Lucien leading Jean towards the wireless by the hand.

"Dance with me, my darling," he was saying. Evidently they had only just finished the washing up, but it would seem that Lucien was not quite ready for sleep. Mattie did not hear Jean's answer, but then she supposed she did not really need to for in a moment there was the gentle sound of music, and they were sliding their arms around one another, soft smiles on their faces as they began to sway to the beat.

Mattie hardly dared breathe, moved almost to tears by the sight of their gentle affection for one another. After Lucien had gone tearing off to Adelaide Mattie had been certain that they were in love, had wasted all her girlish enthusiasm on the thought of how wonderful it would be for them to find their way together. Two people both widowed by war, who had of necessity grown rather close to one another, two people Mattie adored; it was to her mind like something from one of those paperback novels her school friends had hungrily devoured in their younger days. And now here they were, together, dancing as close as Jean's swollen belly would allow, the light of love shining from their eyes as they gazed so fondly at one another.

That's one lucky child, Mattie thought, for her own parents had harbored no such fondness for one another. There had been no dancing in her house when she was young, no gentle, casual affection such as Lucien and Jean showered on one another. They would make wonderful parents, she knew; she had seen Jean with her sons, and with Danny, had seen how Lucien dropped everything to tear off to China the moment he found his daughter, had seen how tenderly the pair of them treated her when she was a lodger in this house, and she felt that this little one, boy or girl, had been rather blessed when it came to the matter of his parents. This child would grow up in a house full of music and love and laughter, and Mattie could think of nothing better.
And she was delighted, too, to see Jean and Lucien smiling so widely, no longer stalked by the ghosts that had for so long haunted their steps. Sorrow had hung like a cloud upon that house for so long, as Jean mourned for her husband, worried for her boys, as Thomas fretted over his son and then left them all behind, as Lucien came storming in wearing his pain as a badge of honor upon his chest. Not so any more, for love had come bursting through as sunshine through the windows, and now there was nothing but smiles and delight in that place. Lucien bowed his head to kiss his wife and Mattie turned away, drifting into the kitchen on silent feet, her heart at peace. Yes, London was her home now, but a piece of her would always reside within these four walls, with those two people who had so shaped her into the woman she had become.
With a low, weary groan of discontent Lucien dragged himself from the now tepid bathwater, rising slowly on joints gone creaky with disuse. No matter what his mind might have to say on the matter his body reminded him each evening that it had not been so very long since his stabbing, and at the present moment he felt rather as if he’d been run over by his father's old Holden. Though he had done his best to heed Jean's wishes, to be gracious in the face of her pouting lip and pleading eyes, he knew he had pushed himself rather harder than he ought to have done, and his recovery had been slow. There was just so very much to do, mysteries to solve, preparations to make as Little Blake's arrival drew ever nearer, and then the endless parade of family and friends for the holidays, and Lucien had chafed at the thought of lying idle. He had indulged Jean as far as he could, but no one, not even his inestimable wife, could keep Lucien Blake out of action for long. He was desperate to hold her, more than anything, to wrap her lean thighs around his hips and delve into her with all the force his passionate love of her could muster, but he tired easily, and even as he healed her belly grew, and he worried that they might fast be running out of time to enjoy such pleasures without worry of waking their sleeping child. Oh, he bore no ill will toward Little Blake, was beside himself with excitement at the thought of holding his child in his arms, but still, he knew from experience that certain things must inevitably change, once the baby arrived. Opportunities for the sorts of activities Lucien had in mind might well be few and far between, at least for the first few months.

Tonight would have been a perfect night for such reckless abandon, as Matthew had departed some hours earlier and curtly informed Lucien he would not be returning home that evening. The excuse he gave was a thin one, something about a New Year's Eve party in town, but Lucien knew no such party was afoot for two reasons; the first being that he himself had received no such invitation, and he could not fathom any host would invite the Chief Superintendent and not his police surgeon, the second - far more telling - reason being that when he had asked Alice if she had plans for the night she had told him straight out that she would be entertaining a guest. A guest, just the one, and Lucien rather thought he knew who her mysterious visitor might be. They were painfully private, Alice and Matthew, and so Lucien had teased her only a little, and then let the subject drop.

So it was that he and Jean had the house to themselves for the evening, and had he been match fit they may well have made the most of their time together, the opportunity to be as loud as they wished in any room they chose. To his great lament, however, the pulmonologist had been quite firm in telling Lucien that he must wait six weeks before undertaking any strenuous activity, and so it was that he would have to restrain himself another fortnight. Such self-denial did not come easily to him, but he knew that Jean would be less easily swayed; she had heard the doctor's orders herself, and she was a task-master of a nurse, and twice already she had expressed her distress at his cavalier attitude towards his own personal safety. No, for the sake of her peace of mind and the bliss of their marital bed he would keep his hands and his lascivious thoughts to himself. At least for two more weeks.

The bath had been Jean's idea, to soothe his weary bones, and it had left him loose and sleepy, eager to seek the comfort of his wife's embrace, to hold her, even if no more was allowed to pass between them. There had been a time when Lucien had quite enjoyed sharing that bath with Jean, but his chest was too tender for her to rest against it the way he would have liked, and she found rising from the bath a struggle now. Another joy that would have to wait, then, though he knew it would be far longer than a fortnight before he was able to hold her in the bath once more.

Thinking thoughts of Jean, how lovely she was, how he adored her, he toweled off rather absent-mindedly and then slipped into his favorite navy robe. On silent feet he padded from the en suite
back into the studio, and began the search for his wife.

She was not in their bed, as he had imagined she must surely be at this time of the evening, but he could hear the soft, sweet sound of her voice, singing a song that tugged at his heartstrings, a phantom of memory pulling him back to the peaceful days of his own childhood. He followed that sound as if hypnotized, and discovered her in the corner of the studio they had set aside for a nursery. She was seated in the cushioned rocking chair he had procured for her, swollen feet lifted up and resting on a little footstool, her head thrown back and her eyes closed as she sang, softly, a lullaby. The words flowed over him cool and calm as water, but what moved him most about the picture she presented was the way her hands were resting gently against the swell of her belly, as if she were trying already to hold Little Blake close. She was singing her song for their child, he knew, as if Little Blake could hear her mother's song, as if she would be soothed into slumber by it even now.

There had been a time when Jean could hardly speak of the baby at all but so much had changed over the last few months, Jean herself most of all. She had always been brave, and kind, and good, but he had never seen her smile quite so much, had never heard her laugh so often, had never witnessed such open affection as she displayed now, for him, for their friends, for their family, for their child. She had made her peace with the course their lives had taken, and more than that had embraced their path with open arms. Her bones were made of steel, but her heart was soft and warm, and he was more grateful than he could say for the gift that was his life with her.

Though he had made no sound she must have sensed that he was near, for she opened her eyes, smiling as her song drew to a close. She held out her hand to him and he was by her side in a moment, clasping her hand in both of his, watching her with a feeling of such earnest devotion rising in his heart that he could not stop himself from speaking.

"I love you, my darling," he told her.

"I know," she answered with playful smile. "Help me up, please."

And so he did, holding on tight as she struggled to rise to her feet. The moment she was steady he wrapped his arms around her, and she gave a soft, delighted sort of sigh as she nestled in against him, pressing her lips against his neck once in a gentle sort of greeting.

"Bed," she whispered when he made no attempt to move, and he agreed at once. Together they crossed the room, letting their robes fall to the floor so that they could slide beneath the duvet together, Lucien wearing nothing but his trunks, Jean clad only in a short satin chemise, trimmed in a fine lace that skimmed the tops of her breasts and left him breathless with longing for her. For a moment they shuffled together until at last they were comfortable, as Jean lay on her side with her head pillowed on his arm. Her fingertips traced nonsense patterns over his chest and he soaked in the sensation of her smooth skin against his own, knowing he must be content with that exhilarating touch, and no more.

"I was thinking," she said, and he hummed, a soft little sound intended to encourage her. Though during the daylight hours she remained as formidable as ever Jean had developed a penchant for revealing her secrets once the sun sank below the horizon. Perhaps it was simply that she felt safe here, in their bed, in his arms, knowing no one else was about to hear, enjoying these precious moments they were able to spend utterly alone, uninterrupted, or perhaps it was some other more primal response to the darkness, but at any rate Lucien listened with rapt attention, for he wanted nothing so much as to know her, every piece of her, completely.

"I was thinking how much things have changed, since the last time I did this."

It was not exactly what he was expecting, somehow; though Lucien had learned, by drips and drabs,
more of Jean's early days, her mother's illness, her father's heavy hand, the hunger and the faith that
had sustained her, the way she and Christopher had begun their lives together, there was still much
he didn't know about how things had been for Jean when her boys were small. He had seen the farm
that had been hers, once, the rich dark soil, the small, ramshackle house, and he had been shocked to
his core - though he never would have dared to voice such a thought aloud - by how humble her
beginnings had been. Knowing that they had spent their youth in such different circumstances was
one thing; seeing it for himself had been something else entirely.

"I did my best, for the boys. I wanted them to have choices in life. Christopher and I had no choice at
all; when we married, his father gave him our little farm. He'd had no education and we didn't have
any money. There was nowhere else for us to go, with a baby on the way and then...then we
just stayed, because that place had become our home, and young Christopher came along not long
after. I couldn't afford to send my boys to university. Oh, Jack never would have wanted to go, but
young Christopher, he might have..." her voice hitched, just a little, and though he could not see her
face he knew it grieved her, still, to think her boy a soldier in service to the same army that had taken
his father from her. "But this little one," she started again, more firmly this time. "He could go
anywhere, do anything, be anything he wants to be. He has so many more opportunities available to
him. He can live a life I never even dreamed of, back then."

Her words troubled him, more than he could say. Oh, he knew she had not trapped him for his
money, that when they first met she would have scoffed at the very idea of settling down with him,
reckless and wild and unpredictable as he was. Jean was here now because she loved him, and that
he would never doubt. What troubled him, a very great to deal, was that her words forced him to
confront his own blessings. Life had not been without its troubles, in his early days, but he had never
wanted for anything, had walked the streets of Paris before his tenth birthday, had been afforded the
best possible education, had seen and done so much by the time he settled into married life - the first
time - had been given so many gifts that Jean had been denied. It didn't seem fair, somehow, that
someone as quick and clever and capable as Jean could have been so restrained by something as
inconsequential as an accident of birth.

He did not have the first idea how to respond to her, but then he did not think she really expected
him to, for in a moment she was speaking again.

"I don't mean to say that I regret anything that happened before," she added quickly. "I was happy,
then. I love my family. I just mean...things are very different now, and some days I still feel as if I'm
trying to catch up with all the changes."

"You don't have to do anything or be anything else, Jean," he told her. "I love you, just as you are.
And I know things are different...we've both done this before, but this is the very first time we've
done this together. I rather expect we'll be making it up as we go."

Jean laughed lightly. "I would expect nothing else from you, Lucien."

He just grinned, and held her closer. Yes, circumstances had changed. Jean was nothing like Mei
Lin, his life now nothing like it had been during his early days in Singapore. And likewise, he knew
that he was a different sort of man than Christopher had been, had gleaned as much from the few
details Jean had given him. Thought parts of this dance were intimately familiar, the truth was they
were charting a new course, and neither of them knew quite what to expect. What Lucien did know,
without a doubt, was that he loved this woman, and that whatever happened next, it would be all the
more wonderful for having her by his side.
Chapter 40

15 January 1961

Having never actually been struck by lightning Jean was hardly an expert on the subject but she could think of no other way to describe her current predicament. She felt hot, almost feverish, a desperate, sizzling sort of sensation crawling across her skin, too fast for her to stop it, too delicious for her to want to. All through mass that morning her cheeks had burned, to think just how far from the gospel her thoughts had traveled, mortified at the thought that God himself could look into her heart in this place and see what sort of images tormented her, what sort of longing set her to rubbing her thighs together discretely beneath her dress in search of some relief.

Lucien was no help, for it was his fault that she had found herself in this situation in the first place; she had woken that morning with her husband's body wrapped around her, his heavy arm draped over her chest, his lips against her neck, his hardness insistent and yearning against her hip. Her body had heard the call and answered at once, a rush of heat and wetness flooding her, but when she turned her head to press a kiss against his cheek he only smiled, and rubbed his palm across her belly once before rolling away from her, muttering about breakfast and church. She had stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending; he had lit a fire deep within her and then simply walked away, despite the fact that the doctor had finally deemed him ready for strenuous activity, despite the fact that Lucien himself had no interest in the goings on at Sacred Heart and would ordinarily have been delighted to forgo mass in favor of worshiping between his wife's thighs. She had tried, briefly, to rekindle what had begun there in their bed, had pressed herself against his back as close as she could manage and whispered his name, but he had only smiled, and offered to make her a cup of tea.

It had been six weeks of this, six weeks of Lucien treating her so gently, as if she were made of glass, pulling away each time a spark of something flared between them, and until now Jean had chosen to believe that he was only - somewhat uncharacteristically - determined to follow his doctor's orders. Now, though, they had no such restraint upon them, and she could not fathom why he did not seem interested in what she had so boldly tried to offer him. Her hand upon his thigh while they sat together at the breakfast table, a kiss against his neck while they dressed, her blatant display in the bedroom wearing nothing but her knickers while she stood before her wardrobe; Jean had tried her best to bring him around to her way of thinking, but he had brushed her off, had only smiled, and stepped away, time and time again.

I must be too fat, now, she thought as she sat in that pew, unsatisfied and distracted. At eight months gone she had reached a state best described as ungainly, pink and silver stretch marks scoring her stomach, her breasts in a way they had not done with her boys. Jean was certain she had gained more weight this time around; perhaps that was why her husband did not seem keen on returning her advances. Another, somewhat kinder thought occurred to her; perhaps he simply worried for her, worried that such strain would not be good for her, so close to her delivery. Well, I'll put an end to that, she told herself; she had a month left to go, but she and Christopher had managed to find their way together a bare two days before Jack was born. She had no intention of spending the last month of her pregnancy in celibacy, hungry for her husband's touch while he denied them both out of some misplaced sense of chivalry. She did not want his tender touch, his thoughtful restraint; she wanted Lucien, wanted him to sate the ache between her thighs, wanted to feel the heat of his skin pressed flush to her own, wanted him to remind her that no matter how things might change he still desired her.

Unless he doesn't, a cruel voice whispered in the back of her mind, and her thoughts turned once more to the swell of her belly, the changes in her shape. She didn't want to believe it, that Lucien's
affections could so easily be turned, that he would not love her now, large with his child, as he had done when she was lithe and lean. As she saw it, there was only one way to solve her dilemma, to find out for herself exactly why his hands had turned cold, why he shied away from her, and so she gave up all pretense of listening to the homily and focused instead on formulating a new plan to get her husband's attention.

It would be easy enough to orchestrate, she knew. Matthew had made plans to visit Alice for lunch, and so they would once more have the house to themselves. A whole afternoon in which they could do whatever they pleased, and Jean knew exactly where her pleasure might lie on this sunny day. The service ended, and they strode out in a throng of people; Lucien offered her his arm, and she took it, offering him in turn her most winning smile. His eyes were warm and soft as he regarded her, and he reached up to cover her hand with his own, and even in that small gesture Jean found cause to hope. They did not speak much, as Lucien drove them home, but Jean kept her hand firmly on his thigh, drifting ever higher, wishing she were bold enough to take hold of him here in the car and yet knowing that such an act would be folly, for even if Lucien proved himself more amorous in the afternoon than he had been in the morning there was precious little they could do about it in the car. She settled for squeezing the hard muscle of his thigh ever so gently, soaking in the heat of him through the thin fabric of his trousers, until they returned home and he lifted her hand from his body, pressing a tender kiss against her palm.

Out of the car, up the front walk, through the door; he held her hand, every step of the way, until he was hanging his hat on its accustomed peg and she was laying her handbag on the sidetable.

"I think I'll go and read the paper," he said, already turning his back on her, heading for the sanctuary of his study, "unless you need help with lunch?"

Jean stared at his back, somewhat aghast, and found herself answering, "no, I'll be all right, thank you."

She could hardly believe it, that he should be so content to leave her, to go and lock himself away and not spend another moment in the heady haze of want she had been slowly cultivating around them. Rather than wounding her, however, such a thought only inspired a low, simmering sort of anger in her. He might have intended to leave her to her cooking, but Jean had rather more pressing business to attend to at present, and so she stepped out of her shoes, right there in the corridor, and then reached for the buttons of her dress. Piece by piece she stripped herself bare, letting each garment flutter to the floor with no care for where it landed. This was no time for propriety or tidiness; Jean wanted her husband, and she wanted him now, and if he had no use for her she would rather hear him say it outright than to continue to dance in such uncertainty.

And so she squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and strode into his study, completely, utterly naked.

It was killing him, keeping his hands to himself. He had woken hungry for her, had indeed spent most of the day half-hard and delirious with want of her, but somehow he had found the strength to restrain himself for her sake. It was no easy task, and Jean herself was making things harder - more difficult, he thought, teeth clenching even as his cock twitched in his pants - for him by the second. Yes, the doctor had given him a clean bill of health, but they had only just over a month, until the baby was due to arrive, and he worried that Jean would be not interested at all in the sort of activities that plagued his thoughts through every waking moment. As he recalled, Mei Lin had lost all interest in sex with him around the six month mark, and he had borne it with good grace, knowing that she was uncomfortable and out of sorts, loving her enough to wait until Li's birth, until Mei Lin had healed, until she felt enough like herself to enjoy his attentions. The waiting had been torture, but in
the end it had been more than worth it, for Mei Lin had returned to his arms eager and content. He would never dare force himself where he was not wanted, and having never actually experienced the myriad changes that assaulted his wife on a daily basis he had no way to know, really, what she must be feeling. Jean had been soft and warm and affectionate, as ever, but he had not had her for nearly two months now, and he worried that he might well have missed out on the opportunity to join himself to her before the baby was born. He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter, that he could wait a while longer; he loved her too much not to.

But oh, the drive home from Sacred Heart had been all but unbearable beneath Jean's gentle touch, and as they entered their home he had caught a slight whiff of her perfume, and his desire had roared to life once more. He had slunk off to the study, desperate to preserve his dignity, hiding himself behind the newspaper while he tried to will his body back under control, but it would seem that his torture was not at an end, for then he heard the sound of the door opening.

He lifted his head, mouth open to ask Jean if everything was all right, but he lost his voice, lost his breath, damn near fell out of his chair as she strode into view.

She was completely, deliciously, inexplicably naked, and the sheer eroticism of the sight of her, his beautiful wife coming to him so boldly in the middle of the day, left him all but paralyzed with need. He sat unblinking, unmoving, simply basking in the radiance of her, the curve of her hips, the swell of her breasts, her slender shoulders, pale skin smooth as satin and calling out his name, her eyes fierce and bright. She was the loveliest thing he'd ever seen in his entire life, and he would have told her so if only he had breath enough to speak.

The long silence seemed to steal away some of her confidence, and she wrapped her arms around herself, though she found the courage to take a single step towards him.

"Lucien?"

"Oh, my darling," he answered, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

Emboldened she began to approach him in earnest, and yet he found he could not move, could only watch the soft sway of her body, hypnotized by the glory of her.

"I miss you," she whispered as she drew close, reaching for one of his hands. The contrast between them was stark and electrifying, her soft, delicate hands wrapped around his much larger, much stronger one, her fingers slender and fine, his longer and thicker and scarred in places. She took his hand, placed it on the curve of her hip, and he nearly groaned aloud at the heat of her skin beneath his palm.

"If you don't want-" she started to say, and then he realized at once the mistake he had made, just how foolish he had been in holding himself back from her.

"I want you," he breathed, watching the way her cheeks redden at the words. "More than anything."

"Then please," she started to say, her voice a pleading whine, and he answered her at once.

Quick as he could manage he was on his feet, turning her deftly in his arms so that the curve of her spine pressed flush to the plane of his chest. With one hand he cupped her breast while with the other he reached up, traced the elegant lines of her neck until his fingertips brushed the underside of her jaw, turned her head so that he could capture her lips with his own. He kissed her hungrily, messily, desperately, kneaded her breast beneath his palm and ground his desperate hardness against the soft swell of her bum. She melted back against him, offering him every piece of herself, and he took it gladly, allowed his free hand to trail back down her body until his fingers disappeared into the thatch
of curls at her center and found her blistering hot and slippery with need.

She broke from their kiss with a gasp, throwing her head back against his shoulder in bliss while he traced the shape of her soaking folds, teased the little bundle of nerves at her center until she was mewling with want. In that moment his baser instincts were screaming with the need to bend her over the desk and take her hard and fast from behind, but she carried a precious burden, and he would do no such thing. Instead he let his lips fall to the curve of her neck, catching her skin between his teeth, soft lips soothing the sting while he reached for his own belt. No words passed between them; Lucien was too busy kissing her to speak, and Jean was panting, eager and ready for him, and in the end he supposed that words weren't really needed. The moment his belt hit the floor he slipped free from his trousers, and then pulled Jean back against him while he collapsed into his chair, cock hard and aching for her, and Jean sprawled across his lap. She leaned forward, knowing already what it was he intended, and braced her hands against the desktop, her back bowing into an arch that pressed the generous swell of her bum back against his hardness. He groaned, and she laughed, lifted her hips to grind against him, painting him with her wetness while he steeled himself against the sudden rise of his arousal.

He caught her hip in one hand, wrapped the other around the base of his shaft, and then she was sliding down atop him, his thick length vanishing between her slippery folds, and the sound that tore out of his throat at the sensation was a desperate, feral thing. Jean whimpered and thrust back against him, and as she did he sank that little bit deeper inside her. Bit by bit she took him in until she was seated on his lap and he was filling her to the hilt and they were both of them, at last, content.

"I love you," he whispered, pressing a fervent kiss to the soft skin of her shoulder.

"Please," she mewled in response. He shared in her desperation and so did not wait; he used the hand upon her hip to guide her as she rose up, as his length slid almost all the way out of her, as she lowered herself and took him back in again. It started slow, and gentle, but he could feel Jean's legs trembling from the strain and so took matters into his hands, planted his feet up on the floor and thrust up into her hard, and harder still. In response she keened, high and sweet, stopped moving entirely, simply braced herself against the desk and let him take her, driving up into her hard and fast and hungry. Gasps and groans and the wet slap of flesh on flesh echoed through the studio, and Lucien relished in it, his wife's obvious desire for him, his own need of her, this thing between them electric and unstoppable.

He grit his teeth as he drew nearer his own completion; she was too beguiling to resist, and from the tenor of her moans and the way her inner walls clenched around him he could tell that she was close. Still he drove up, with all the strength he could muster, his length disappearing into her again, and again, and again, until she shifted, pressed back against him hard and freed one of her hands to rub against her center. The sight of it, the brush of her fingertips against his rock-hard length as he drove into her, the knowledge that this was Jean, free and wanton and desperate for him, was nearly enough to drive him mad. Once, twice, three times more, and then she was coming undone, moaning her pleasure until he could stand it no more. He caught her hips in both his hands and plunged her down onto him, let her grind into him until he could stand it no more and with a groan of his own he tumbled into bliss.

Jean collapsed back against him, sweaty and trembling and stated, and he held her close, his pulse thundering in his chest like the hoofbeats of some while beast. He could hardly breathe but still he dragged his lips against her skin everywhere he could reach until at last they had both calmed enough for speech.

"Don't ever," she said between panting breaths, "make me wait six weeks for you again."
Lucien laughed, relieved and delighted. "Never, my darling," he agreed.
"Are you not terribly uncomfortable?" Alice asked with her characteristic eager curiosity.

Jean smiled, one hand resting gently against the swell of her belly. They were sitting together at the kitchen table, lingering over cups of tea and the crumbs of their lunch. It was a warm, beautiful day, and Jean was delighted to have Alice for company, to while away the time in desultory conversation until Lucien returned from the police station and wrapped her in his arms once more.

"Oh, it's not so bad," she said, and Alice raised an incredulous eyebrow, and Jean laughed, caught out in her lie. "All right yes, I'm dreadfully uncomfortable. My back aches and my feet are swollen and I'm rushing to the loo every ten minutes and I can barely sleep. It's...I can't describe it, really, how it feels. It's quite the strangest thing. But just when I think it's going to drive me mad I can feel him move, and I remember that it's all for Little Blake, and I don't mind it so very much any more."

And that was the truth, for every time she felt the tremulous kick of a tiny little foot beneath her skin she was reminded that in just one month's time she would be welcoming Little Blake into the world, would be able to hold him in her arms, this child who was so terribly unexpected, whose arrival she now looked forward to with fevered anticipation. Jean had endured quite enough waiting, to her mind; oh she knew that the time was not yet right, that she had a few weeks more to languish, sore and ungainly, before she finally beheld the end result of nine months of distress, of tears and grief and doubt, but she had faith that it would all be worth it, in the end, when she was finally able to hold her son. Lucien's son, this child she would present to him so proudly, a little boy she dearly hoped would have his father's wild blonde curls and bright blue eyes. A child to carry on his family's name, a child she would sing to, a child who grow up hearing the stories of his father and his grandfather and all their many good deeds, a child she could love, with all her heart.

In the beginning she had worried that she would never receive such a blessing, but they had come so very far, and with each passing day her confidence grew. Lucien had insisted on a few additional visits to his surgery, so that he might monitor her progress, but he had pronounced her fit as a fiddle, and Little Blake continued to make his presence known at all hours of the day and night, his movements a reassurance to his mother's anxious heart. Her child was well, and Jean was well, and Lucien loved them both fiercely; she could not ask for more. They had gathered together all the many things they might need in preparation for Little Blake's arrival, the corner of the studio now decorated and ready to welcome its newest occupant, and all that was left to Jean was to wait, and savor these last few days before everything in her life completely changed, forever.

"I've often wondered what it must feel like," Alice said. It was Jean's turn to level her with an incredulous gaze, and Alice's cheeks colored as she realized how her words might have sounded.

"Purely out of curiosity," Alice said firmly. "I'm interested in the process, but the results...I've never particularly wanted a child. I'm not good with children. I never know what to say to them. And it seems to me they require far too much attention."

Jean's smile faltered somewhat, though she tried not to allow evidence of her sudden change in mood to show upon her face. In a way she could understand what Alice was saying, why a woman who had worked so hard to build a life on her own terms would be so completely disinterested in motherhood, but the words struck a chord somewhere deep within Jean's very soul. Alice's life had not been an easy one, but she had taken a path entirely of her own making, had set a goal for herself and struggled until she accomplished it, set herself up as one of the very first female doctors in the
history of Ballarat Hospital. Alice had taken the time to consider whether or not children would be a part of her life, and had come to the conclusion that she had no deep-seated urge to be a mother. Jean, though, Jean felt as though she had never been given a choice in the matter. Nineteen and scared there had been no other choice but for her to marry Christopher, and even when that child was lost it was too late for Jean to change her course; she was a wife by then, and Christopher was managing the farm, and they were so very settled.

This time too she had not chosen motherhood, had not accepted Lucien’s proposal thinking that a child would be in their future. She had dreamed only of being his wife, the places they might go, the delights he might show her, the joy she might find spending every night wrapped in his embrace, but the wheels of fate had dealt her a most unexpected hand, and she had done as she always did, had found a way to move forward, even when all her dreams were turned to ruin, when it seemed as if her very life might have ended. Lucien remained determined that having a baby would not limit her to the small, difficult life she’d known before, and she tried her best to share in his optimism, but she could not help but wonder how different things might have been, if only she’d had the time to sit down and think this choice through, to make an informed decision on her own. Would she have chosen this, Little Blake and years of nappies and sleepless nights and a lifetime of fretting over him, or would she have chosen a life without such cares?

Then again, she supposed, in a way she had chosen. She could have left Christopher, after that first time; her heart had been broken and nothing he said would soothe her, and she spent some nights wondering what might become of her should she pack a bag and take the first bus to Melbourne, if she started a fresh, if she charted a new course. She had chosen to stay, however, for she loved her husband dearly, and in truth having been given the smallest taste of what it might be like to have a child of her own she had ached down to her very bones for it. When she’d discovered she was pregnant the second time she had wept, and Christopher had gathered her into his arms and spun her round the kitchen, laughing delightedly while she clung to him, praying that this gift would change their lives for the better. She had made her choice, the night she rolled closer to her husband and let him hold her; she had chosen the farm, and the family they might make together, over dreams of a bigger life. And in giving herself to Lucien before they were wed, going to his bed bold and wanton, she had chosen to take this risk. It had seemed a very small risk at the time, but eight months later she could not deny that a part of her had known this might well be the outcome.

What mattered more than anything, she supposed, was whether she regretted the life she’d led, the choices she had made, and as she considered it she found the answer was a resounding no. She had loved Christopher, had loved him so much that she spent seventeen long years in mourning for him, determined to never open her heart to another. And she loved her boys, in a way she had never before imagined she could love another; every moment of doubt was worth it in the end for those two young men who were part of her very soul. She had delighted in them when they were small, and she was grateful that she had them to ground her after Christopher's passing; she was not sure what would have become of her, had she found herself utterly without purpose in those terrible days, and she was glad that she would never have to know. And now there was this little one, this little one she would hold and sing to just as she had his brothers, this little one whose life she was certain would bring her joy.

_Sometimes we end up exactly where we're meant to be, facing the challenges we're meant to face._

Lucien had said those words to her once, and they came back to her now, a reassurance she sorely needed. Yes, her life had been very different from Alice's, but she would not wish to trade places with the good doctor, even for a moment. Her life was her own, and she had found her happiness in it.

"I don't mean to say there's anything wrong with having children," Alice said, frowning as if she
worried how her words might have been taken, and Jean suddenly realized she'd been quiet far too long. With a gentle smile she reached out and patted Alice on the arm.

"No, I know," she said. "You're right, they are a lot of work. And it's not always easy. We all make our own choices, Alice, and no one else has any right to tell us how we ought to live." Alice would never presume to deride Jean for choosing motherhood over a career, and Jean would never judge her friend for having chosen to forgo a family; they were very different women, living very different lives, and Jean was deeply grateful to have such a friend, one who respected those differences between them.

They passed the rest of the afternoon in quiet conversation, and while Jean enjoyed herself immensely in truth her thoughts had drifted to the past, meandering over and through the events that had so changed her, the guideposts of her life. And so when Alice departed Jean squeezed herself into her shoes, wrote a note for Lucien, gathered up her handbag, and made her way out the door in a contemplative mood.

She was thinking of Lucien, of how they had talked, more than once, about the way a single decision could change the course of a life. She was thinking of her own decisions, and the nature of her heart, the way she had so often in the past done what was needed regardless of her own desires. She was thinking how her life must look to a woman like Alice; oh, Alice praised her at every turn and afforded her nothing but respect, but Jean knew she had lived a life centered on her home, cooking and cleaning and looking after those under her care, children and husbands and boarders and irascible old doctors. Jean was a voracious reader but she had never gone to university like Lucien and Alice, had never once traveled outside the country, had never done so very many things. She loved her life, truly, but she felt the weight of those nevers as her footsteps led her ever closer to her destination.

There was only one place she could go, thinking such thoughts, and her feet followed the familiar path until at last she was standing in the church cemetery, looking down on the little marker just on the edge of the field that bore her husband's name. Ordinarily she would have knelt and pressed her fingertips to the stone, but in her current state she was certain that she would never be able to regain her footing on her own. And so she only stood, bowed her head, closed her eyes, and spoke to him in a quiet voice as though she were whispering a prayer.

"Hello, Christopher," she said. In the beginning, when the marker had first been installed, Jean had felt a bit strange standing in the cemetery and talking to no one, but just saying the words had eased her grief so greatly that she had long since ceased to feel any sort of shame. "I know it's been a long time." It had in fact been about three months since last she'd stood there; Lucien knew she still visited this place on occasion, and he never begrudged her this need to feel close to someone who had once meant so much to her. She had come, had told Christopher of the baby, her marriage, her fears, and each time had left somewhat stronger than when she arrived. "The baby will be here soon, and then it might be quite some time before I can see you again. But I will come back, I promise."

That Christopher had been buried so far from home was a truth that would never cease to wound her; he had been so young, so terribly young, and she hated to think of him all alone, heartsick and scared and desperate for his family. He remained forever frozen in time, a young man not yet thirty, a young man who looked so like her Jack, a young man who had so much to live for, and yet had perished just the same. He had died far from home, but she would never abandon him.

"I just wanted to say...I know there were times you thought I regretted it. Marrying you. But I chose you, sweetheart. Every time, I chose you. And I was so proud to be your wife." Tears clouded her vision, but only for a moment; she wiped them with the back of her hand, took a very deep breath, and continued. "I'm sorry if you ever thought that you weren't enough for me. You actually meant
everything to me. But I have to start to live my life again. And I hope that in some small way you might be happy to know that I haven't given up. I've found my way."

And she had, at long last. She was no longer lost in grief or loneliness, no longer consumed by doubt. The faith that had buoyed her, faith in her church, her God, her own strength, had seen her through, and now she stood on the brink of a brand new adventure, a brand new joy she never could have imagined. Finally, she was beginning to believe that everything would be all right.
"This," she said with a bone-deep sigh of contentment, "was a wonderful idea."

Lucien smiled, though she could not see him, bowed his head and let his lips brush against the elegant curve of her neck. They were sitting together on a blanket spread beneath the sparse limbs of an old and sprawling tree, watching as the sun sank across Lake Wendouree. Lucien's back rested against the tree, and Jean sat nestled between his thighs, her head resting against his collarbone, his arms wrapped loosely around her. It had all been Lucien's idea, to spend the day spoiling Jean; there was just over a week left until Little Blake's expected arrival, and Lucien knew that any day now their little one would come screaming into the world. He wanted to take this chance now, before it was too late, to shower his Jean with every ounce of the love and affection he carried for her.

They had started the day in bed, slow and languorous and sweet, and after Lucien had gone and prepared a simple breakfast of eggs and tea, averting disaster in the process - if only just. They had eaten together, naked and laughing in their bed, and then he had helped her into the bath. It took some doing, to get her in it, but once she was lying there, soaking in the warm water with a blissful expression on her face, Lucien had declared it well worth the effort. He had sat on the floor beside her, her hands drifting softly through his hair while they spoke of nothing of import, only rejoiced in being together. Such moments of solitude would be rare in the future, Lucien knew, and so he resolved himself to enjoy this one immensely. Her gentle touch, her soft voice, the sheer loveliness of her was to him a most precious gift, one to be savored, again and again, for all the rest of his days.

When the water went cold and Jean began to complain he drained the tub and then lifted her bodily from it, laughing at her grumbling; you'll be able to do this on your own soon enough, he reminded her, and a strange, somewhat sad expression had overcome her features at those words. He had sought to reverse his misstep at once; so you might as well enjoy having me as your personal manservant, my darling, he had told her, and she had found the good grace to laugh, and then everything was all right again.

Lunch was next, delivered from the cafe by Matthew Lawson's fresh-faced - and terribly confused - new constable, and then they had retreated once more to their bed, dozing and talking and touching intermittently until the time was right. This was the second to last item on his agenda for the day, a quiet picnic on the shores of the lake, watching the sunset together, before he intended to lead her back to their car, back to their home, back to their bed.

"I'm glad you like it," he said, and beneath him his wife hummed, and pressed herself a little closer to him.

The sunset was beautiful, more lovely than he could have hoped for, the sky shot through with pinks and reds and purples, glowing brilliantly, and he could not help but feel that such a sight had been made for his Jean, a natural, awe-inspiring beauty that nearly rivaled her own. He wanted, more than anything, to shower her with beautiful things, to give to her everything she could ever wish for and more besides. He wanted to love her, to cherish her, to dance with her through the sitting room and take her hand on the streets of Paris and see her smile, every moment of every day for the rest of his life. He wanted her just like this, safe and happy and well in his arms, always.

"I'm afraid you'll have to pick me up again," she told him wryly, and Lucien just laughed. Yes, at this stage of her pregnancy he expected nothing less, and had factored that into his plans.
"Luckily for you, I think I can manage," he assured her. "But we can stay a few moments more. Unless you're uncomfortable?"

Jean just hummed, running her fingertips along the back of his hand where it rested just above the swell of her belly.

"We can wait a bit longer," she told him.

What she had not told him, what she had in fact been trying very hard for most of the day not to tell him, was that she expected he had some grand romantic designs for their evening once they left this place, and she was fairly certain those plans would soon be laid to waste.

It had started that morning in the bath; a low aching in her back, the occasional clenching pain. Not frequent enough to cause alarm, and no other signs had manifested, but Jean had done this dance before, and she knew the steps. It had been the same with both of her boys; she had begun to feel the first tremors of her labor hours and hours before it truly began, and then her waters had broken, and then it had been hours more of pain and fear before her children were delivered. Though the contractions were more frequent now she was using Lucien's watch to keep the time between them, and she rather thought she could afford to spend a few minutes more nestled in her husband's embrace. He had gone to such lengths to orchestrate this perfect day for them, and Jean could think of no better ending than clambering into the car beside him and gently telling him to steer them towards the hospital. She thought of how he might grin, how he might laugh, how his hands might shake, and she smiled, a soft, secret smile just for herself. This gift she would give him; he had showered her with gifts this Valentine's Day, but she rather suspected that hers would trump them all.

Which was not to say that she was not afraid; Jean was in fact absolutely bloody terrified, but the minutes between the pain, when she could sit in this familiar place with the beautiful sight of the sunset before her and the warmth of her husband at her back, offered her some reassurance. They had made it this far, she reminded herself; both young Christopher and Jack had been delivered without complication, and she told herself firmly that having made it this far with Little Blake the worst was behind them. Oh, there was pain ahead, of that there was no doubt, but Lucien would be with her, and the doctors and the nurses at the hospital - a luxury she had not had, while delivering her boys at home - and she had faith that all would be well. She had to have faith, for the fear that nipped at her heels served no purpose, would not help her in the hours ahead. What would help, she knew, was having Lucien there beside her, having his hand to hold. That had been a sticking point between them; who had ever heard of such a thing, she'd asked him, a father in the delivery room? But Lucien had insisted that he was her doctor, too, that nothing and no one would keep him from her side. And though Jean thought the whole thing rather strange she had to admit that she was grateful, too. He would be a comfort to her, of that she was certain. He always was.

Another contraction hit and she glanced down at his watch, somewhat chagrined to find that only three minutes had passed since the last one.

_Time to go_, she told herself. Things were progressing rather rapidly, now, and she would prefer to get to the hospital sooner rather than later. The hospital wasn't terribly far to drive but still, she told herself, better safe than sorry.

"All right, my love," she said, lifting his hand from her belly and pressing a kiss against his palm. "Help me up, please?"

There came the fleeting brush of his lips against her neck, and then he was shuffling to his feet, careful not to jostle her too much in the process. And then he was standing over her, backlit by the sunset, strong and gentle and _hers_, completely, and her heart sang in her chest as he stooped and
wrapped his arms around her, lifted her from the ground and set her gently upon her feet.

But then, oh then a fierce wave of dizziness overcame her, and a contraction struck her so quick and so sharp that she gasped, and a sudden flood of wetness flowed down over her thighs. She stumbled into him, heart racing, stomach heaving, and had she been the sort of woman to use such language she would have sworn. She had waited too long, it would seem, and Little Blake appeared determined to make his entrance into the world sooner rather than later. As she sagged against him Lucien caught her at once, wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

"Jean?" he asked in a voice dripping with fear.

"I think we need to go to the hospital," she answered him breathlessly.

Lucien felt rather as if he had been struck in the face with a brick. This was the last thing he had expected; oh, he knew that such things were unpredictable, that Little Blake would come when she was good and ready, but he had never once, not even for a moment, thought that it might happen now, while they stood on the familiar shore of Lake Wendouree a goodly distance from the car with night falling all around them. Jean was unsteady on her feet and panic bit at him as his doctor's mind began to list every possible disaster that might lie in wait for them, as his father's heart cried out in terror at the very prospect. It would do Jean no good for him to let his doubts show, for him to admit that he worried for her, delivering a child at her age, worried about what might lie in wait for them once her labor began. It was too late for such worries, for her waters had broken and if the look on her face was anything to go by she was already in some degree of pain. It had begun, and there would be no stopping it.

*Be calm,* he told himself. *For her sake, be calm.*

"Can you walk, my darling?" he asked her, keeping his arms around her, hold her against his chest.

"I think so," she answered, his brave Jean, determined as ever to face the world on her own two feet, but they took only a single step before a shudder passed through her and she leaned into him once more, winded and ashen-faced.

"Right," he said grimly, and without further discussion he looped one arm around her back and the other beneath her knees, lifted her into his arms and began to march determinedly toward the car, abandoning the blanket and the remnants of their picnic without a second thought. He supposed he ought to have been grateful that Jean had been so slight to begin with, that even with the added weight of their child beneath her skin he could still carry her. Perhaps not as easily he once could have, for his muscles strained and sweat began to bead on his brow, but he could do it just the same, could protect her, this woman who had become the very center of his world.

"I'm so sorry, Lucien," she whispered raggedly against his neck.

"You've nothing to be sorry for," he panted back, his heart aching at the thought that she might blame herself for this, for the timing of it.

"You planned such a perfect day, and I've gone and spoiled it."

Lucien could not spare the breath to speak, now, so he only held her tight and increased his pace. To his mind she had done no such thing; it wasn't as if Jean had decided to start proceedings in this manner, and he dearly hoped that one day they could look back on this moment with fond smiles, remembering how they had started their family in this most unexpected way. One day soon this would be a good memory, he told himself, even if in the moment his heart was shrieking. Those
fears, those worries, he tried to push back; he needed to get her to the hospital, needed her surrounded by trained professionals ready and willing to help no matter what crisis arose, and he could focus on nothing else.

Jean's arms tightened around his neck and a soft sound of distress left her, and Lucien's stomach clenched in terror; everything was happening so quickly, now. Far too quickly for his liking. He wanted to ask her how far apart the contractions were, how long they lasted, but he could not find the words, and in any event he wasn't entirely she would be able to answer him. As her body changed her watch-band had grown too tight for her to wear it, and his own was hidden from both of them as he held her tight against him; there was no really, for them to determine the exact timing just now. And so he only walked, as quickly as he could, until at last, mercifully, the car came into view.

"Almost there," he gasped, and in response Jean offered only another low, desperate sound of pain.

It took some doing, getting the car door open while he kept Jean in his arms, but he managed, somehow, until he was laying her out across the long bench seat in the back. His whole body was trembling from adrenaline, from fear, from the strain of carrying her to this place, but he reminded himself to be grateful for small mercies; at least they had made it this far.

"Too fast," Jean gasped as she stretched herself out along the back seat, her hands rising to cradle the swell of her belly.

For an instant Lucien simply looked at her, grimly trying to evaluate the situation. He had a choice, to clamber behind the wheel and drive like hell for the hospital or to kneel down and take stock of the situation right here. It would take him at least twenty minutes to reach the hospital, but this was not Jean's first child, and it could well be that they didn't have twenty minutes. Which is it to be, Doctor Blake? He asked himself. There's a torch in the boot, or you could take your chances on the road.

"Right," he said. "I'll just be a moment, my darling."

The sound that left his wife's lips then could best be described as a screech.

"Lucien! What on earth are you doing?"

He did not answer, only stripped off his jacket and threw it into the boot before grabbing hold of the torch and returning to her at once.

"Are you having a contraction now?" he asked as he came back to her, standing just on the other side of the open door, studying her face carefully over the heaving swell of her belly.

Jean's eyes blazed and she opened her mouth as if to shout at him again, but the indignation left her as a grimace of pain overtook her features and a shudder ran through her whole body. That was all the answer he needed.

"It's been less than a minute since the last one," he told her, reaching for her foot. "I need to check how far along you are before we try to go anywhere. I don't mean to alarm you, my darling, but-"

"Lucien Radcliffe Blake!" Jean shrieked, jerking her foot out of his grasp. "My baby will not be born in the backseat of your car!"

"Jean," he answered firmly, taking hold of her once more. "You may not have a choice in the matter. I need you to trust me. Can you do that? Can you trust me, my darling?"

There was nothing but terror in her eyes, wide and bright and shining with unshed tears,
sight of her so small, so helpless, tore at his very soul, but he would not be deterred. It was his job, as he saw it, to do whatever it took to keep her safe, and that meant he would not dare risk traveling with her in such a delicate condition. Better the car than the grass, he thought grimly, and at last Jean relented, let him spread her legs and strip her of her soaking knickers, her hand rising up to cover her face as Lucien turned on the torch, and tried to get a proper look at the situation.

Mother of God, he thought.

"Jean," he said slowly. "I know you're scared. But I'm right here, and I promise that I won't let anything happen to you. Do you hear me?"

"Lucien-" she gasped, trembling as another wave of pain overtook her.

"It's time," he answered.
Jean was crying. She couldn't help it. The pain was terrible, yes, never ending, shocking, breath-stealing in its intensity, but what she found so much harder to bear was the sharp sting of her fear. It was fear that left her shaking, sent tears coursing down her cheeks; pain she could bear, had borne all her life, with good grace and gentle hands, but the fear she felt now eclipsed any emotion she had ever experienced before.

For months she had been certain that history was destined to repeat itself, that she would never know the joy of holding Lucien's child in her arms, certain that the time would come when she would be called to account for her sins. But the days had passed and her belly had grown and Little Blake turned somersaults beneath her skin and those doubts had given way to a boundless joy. She made her plans, humming and knitting and counting the days, certain that all would be well, that no calamity could be befall them when the time finally came for her go to hospital. Lucien had promised her that he would be by her side, and she knew that no harm would come to her so long as her Lucien was there to watch over her, to protect her, to love her as only he could.

He was here now, his hands gentle on her skin, but though she was grateful for him she could not help but worry that it would not be enough. Not for her a long slow delivery attended by doctors and nurses, safe and well; no, this was a disaster, trapped in the backseat of the car so far from help of any sort, with darkness falling all around them and only Lucien's hands and the old torch to aid her. This was it, she realized, the moment when she would be called upon to pay her debts, to account for all her sins with blood and pain. Nine months' grace she had been granted, nine months spent wrapped in the warmth of Lucien's embrace, and now she found herself certain that nine months of joy was all she would have. Pain seared her to the core, left her weak and gasping, everything happening much too quickly, much faster than she thought possible, events spinning wildly out of control, and there was, to her mind, no way this could end except badly.

"Lucien," she gasped, finding the strength to prop herself up on her elbows, to look down at where he knelt somewhat awkwardly between her thighs. His jacket, tie, and waistcoat had all been discarded, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and until she spoke his focus had been centered wholly on her, the place where the pain bit at her so sharply she was sure she would not survive it. At the sound of his name falling from her lips he raised his head however, his eyes a bit wild round the edges, and caught her gaze at once.

"Not long now," he said faintly. That was not what she wanted to hear; she wanted him to tell her that his initial assessment was wrong, that she hadn't waited too long to tell him, that they had time enough to get to the hospital, still, to salvage this moment, but such reassurances were not in the offing. She shook her head, and tried to focus on the words she needed to speak, the instructions he needed to hear.

"Something is wrong," she said, hating how pitiful she sounded, her voice thin and weak, wishing she could have been stronger, for his sake. Oh, Lucien. My Lucien, she thought morosely. I'm so sorry. "It's too fast."

"It will be all right," he said firmly, but Jean just closed her eyes against the pain, certain that if she looked at him now she would not be able to get the words out.

"His name is Samuel," she gasped. "Promise me, Lucien. Promise me you will name him Samuel. Samuel Alexander Blake."
SAB, the little letters she had so lovingly stitched into the corner of the soft, sky-blue blanket currently nestled in the corner of the antique baby's cradle in the studio, the blanket meant for her son, their son, this child she was struggling even now to bring into this world. He had made it this far, little Samuel, this baby she had prayed for everyday, this little boy on whom all of her hopes and all of her dreams and all of her fears rested so completely. Lucien's face paled at her words but the pain redoubled, an overwhelming urge to push overtaking her, and she sagged back against the car door, weak and terrified.

"We will name him together, my love," Lucien told her firmly. "Just stay with me, Jean. Stay with me, my darling." His tone was begging, his words a desperate plea, and Jean tried to focus on them, tried to do what he'd asked, though the roar of blood in her ears made it difficult for her to focus on anything at all.

"Are you ready?"

Jean wanted to laugh, wanted to scream, wanted to vault from the car and run like hell, wanted to find herself anywhere but here, trapped in this moment of horror. No, she was not ready, not by any metric, was in fact wholly unprepared to face this reality. This will be the end of me, she thought grimly. But if it must be, let it be, if only to keep him safe. Samuel, her dream, this life she would give her own to protect; if such a sacrifice be asked of her she would make it, for his sake.

"I need to push," she groaned, answering Lucien's question and trying to find within her some reserve of strength to see her through to the end of this ordeal.

"Whenever you're ready," Lucien answered her.

She was not ready, but she could not wait another moment longer.

Samuel, Lucien thought faintly as he helped Jean to brace her legs, tried to watch the scene unfolding before him with a doctor's sense of detachment and not a father's sense of dread. It was funny, really, that she'd chosen that name, and he wanted to tell her so, wanted to tell her why, wanted to tell her so many things, but he knew that now was not the time. What Jean needed from him now, more than anything, was his strength; she needed him to be calm, needed him to be sure, needed him to hold her steady while fear and pain tore her to shreds. In her desperate plea he had heard the words she could not say, had understood the exact nature of the terror that gripped her; Jean did not think she would survive this ordeal, but Lucien could not spare a moment to consider such an outcome, for he surely would have gone stark raving mad with grief. It was unthinkable, that he should lose her now, after everything, was a horror the likes of which he could not imagine, and so he chose not to.

She will be all right, he told himself. She has to be. There was no other option.

The time had come, and so it began.

When asked about it later Lucien would find himself utterly at a loss to say just how long it took, how long Jean panted and wept and struggled there in the car. A few minutes, at most, for she had been so close already when they stood by the lakeside and it seemed that Little Blake was in no mood to wait. Lucien had not delivered many babies, had in truth devoted very little time to the study of childbirth, but while he was hardly an expert on such matters he would, for the rest of his life, tell anyone who listened that his child had inherited the Blake predisposition towards impatience and recklessness. There was nothing more reckless than this, than the surge of Jean's hips in the backseat of the car, the shrill call of her voice, the sudden, miraculous slide of his child out of her body and into his hands.
The baby's piercing cry rent the air and Jean collapsed against the seat, boneless and spent, shivering and weeping, and Lucien knelt with his squalling child cradled in his hands, so small, so fragile in comparison to his own breadth. Little arms and little legs, little hands and little feet, ten fingers, ten toes, a strong set of lungs; their child was crying, red faced and covered in all sorts of unmentionable mess, but alive, and whole, and well.

"Oh, Jean," he breathed, awe-struck and utterly floored by this sight.

"Is he all right?" she demanded breathlessly, lacking the strength to rise and yet, Lucien knew, desperate to know the answer.

"She's perfect."

At those words Jean shifted, lifting herself up just enough to rest once more against the car door, watching him with eyes that shone with tears.

"She?" Jean repeated faintly.

"She," he answered, laughing. She, their perfect little girl, the answer to Jean's prayers, here at last.

Jean was weeping again, and Lucien was worried about the baby catching cold, and so he moved, as carefully as he could, and Jean met him, propelled by hysterical strength now that she could see their child for herself, now that she knew this miracle had come to pass, that she at last had a daughter of her own to hold. Jean reached for the baby and Lucien passed her over at once, neither of them sparing a moment to consider the mess they were making of their clothes. Lucien's own shirt was ruined already and so he tore it from his shoulders as he watched his wife cradling their daughter in her arms, her tears splashing freely down her cheeks while she stared in wonder at this gift they had been given.

"Here," he said, leaning over, and together they wrapped their screaming child in his ruined shirt. Warmer now and safe in her mother's arms the baby began to calm, and Jean and Lucien both stared at her, unable to look away. In that moment, Lucien was fairly certain he would spend the rest of his life looking at her just like this, as if she were the most precious, most wonderful, most blessed thing in all the world. For to him she was, and always would be.

"She's beautiful," Jean whispered, fingertips trailing gently over their daughter's forehead, taking note of her downy blonde hair, her touch reverent and trembling.

"You're beautiful," Lucien answered, for she was, and she needed to know it.

"Hello, my beautiful girl," Jean breathed, hardly daring to believe it. Still the baby's eyes remained closed in protest to the feeble light of the torch, but her face was perfect, delicate and soft, every inch of her just as it should be. The pain had not faded and Jean knew her ordeal was not yet at an end, but she had come through the worst of it, for now she held her daughter close, now she knew, without a doubt, that she had been forgiven, that her child was safe, that all would be well. Every doubt and every fear had been banished by the light of this little face, the comforting weight of her in Jean's arms. The Lord had heard her prayers, after all, and he had answered them, every one.

"Would you like to know her name, my darling?" Lucien asked her.

A wan little smile tugged at the corner of Jean's lips. Of course, she thought. Lucien had won their little wager, and whatever he chose to call the baby it would certainly not be Samuel. Not any more. I shall have to knit another blanket, Jean thought wryly.
"Please," she said, eager to hear it, eager to know the name that would belong to the little angel she held in her arms.

"Her name is Sophie," Lucien said, and Jean looked up at him sharply, shocked to think that he, too, had chosen a name beginning with S, that their thoughts had run the same course, wondering if he had only decided just this moment, just to make her happy. "Sophie Anne Blake."

SAB.

The tears returned, as Jean carefully reached for him, as he took her hand and lifted it to his lips, pressed a gentle kiss against her palm.

"I chose it months ago," Lucien confessed. "I really had no idea, my darling."

His words were too earnest, his face too open, for her to disbelieve him; somehow they had done this thing together, had without knowing it set their minds upon the same course, and Jean gave thanks for it, for this man who understood her so completely, this man she adored with her whole heart.

"It's perfect," she told him, her eyes dropping away from Lucien and returning once more to her daughter's face. "Welcome home, Sophie," she said.
"Back in a tick," Lucien murmured, though he made no move to leave her, simply stood hanging through the open car door, watching her with eyes so soft and full of love she nearly wept to look at him. He painted quite the picture, wearing only his vest and a pair of filthy trousers, his hands pink-stained from blood and worse, a lopsided grin tugging up the corners of his mouth. There was no denying the strength of him, the breadth of his shoulders, the flexing muscles of his biceps, the red and silver ridges of his scars just visible through the thin material of his vest; he was strong, solid, steady, the rock she clung to in the chaos of her life, and as she looked at him she could not deny how she needed him, wanted him, loved him with everything she had. She could not deny it, and so she did not stop herself from giving voice to the words that swirled through her mind.

"I love you," she told him, her arms still wrapped tight around her precious burden, her heart so full she felt like to burst from the strain of keeping it inside.

His grin widened, but he could not reach her from his position, could not kiss her as his expression told her so plainly he longed to do, could only stare at her and their child in wonder. Jean knew rather how he felt, for she felt the same, in that moment, consumed by awe, by wild, reckless joy, exhausted and delighted and buoyed aloft on the boundless sea of their love for one another.

"Right," he said, and at last he tore himself away, left her so that he could venture into the hospital. He had been very clear on that point, that he did not want Jean to walk anywhere just yet, that he wanted a wheelchair for her at the least. He would go and fetch someone, and she would wait, lying in the backseat of the car with little Sophie cradled in her arms. It was no great imposition to allow him this gesture of chivalry, to let him do as he wished now that they had arrived at the hospital; it was, after all, his domain, and Jean was too tired to protest at present.

"It's just you and me now, little one," Jean said softly, staring down at her daughter, still wrapped up tight in Lucien's shirt.

At the sound of her mother's voice Sophie's delicate eyelashes fluttered, and in the next instant she had fixed her mother with an eerily familiar blue-grey stare. Oh, Jean knew from experience their color might well change over the next few weeks, but at this very moment Sophie's eyes were the exact same shade as Jean's, and in her heart Jean rather wished they'd stay that way. If the wispy blonde curls currently matted to Sophie's forehead were any indication she had inherited her father's hair, and Jean liked the thought of seeing a piece of herself in her daughter, as well.

They had cleaned her up as best they could in the carpark, and then counted little fingers and toes; Lucien had seen to the umbilical cord himself with a little knife from the boot of the car, had pressed his ear against Sophie's little chest and listened to the beating of her little heart, the expansion of her little lungs, watching Jean with tears in his eyes while he reassured himself that Sophie was well, and whole, was exactly as she should have been. And when at last he was satisfied he had driven - agonizingly slowly - to the hospital, determined that Sophie should be weighed and measured, that Jean should be given a proper examination, that they should get this part right, at least. None of the rest of it had gone to plan, but as Jean looked at Sophie now she found she did not regret a moment of it. Not the reckless, dangerous way she'd fallen into bed with Lucien the night he proposed to her, not their hasty wedding, not a moment of any day she'd spent learning how to be his wife. Even the horror in the carpark she did not regret, for as she reckoned it now those moments were precious, a gift only she and Lucien needed to be privy to. Jack and young Christopher had both been delivered at home, safe and well without the need of a hospital, and while the car was hardly an ideal delivery
room the fact that Lucien's hands were the first to hold little Sophie was a treasure for which Jean would give thanks all the rest of her life.

"Hello, my darling girl," Jean said as still Sophie watched her, quiet and still, calm in her mother's embrace. She had a serious sort of face, but a dainty one, too; in the line of Sophie's jaw, the curve of her cheek, Jean saw the echo of her own delicate features, and as she watched this child in her arms her tears returned, though they were tears of joy now, rather than fear. There was no more fear, no more doubt, no more grief, for Jean had been presented with a most unexpected blessing.

She loved her boys, loved them fiercely, would not trade either of them for anything, had always been happy with her family, but always in her heart the grief had lingered, just on the edges of her soul, a melancholy that grew softer, less distinct with each passing year and yet remained. A life that could have been, if only circumstances were a different, a hundred possibilities never realized, the girl Jean had lost when she was young and scared, this dream she had longed for and been denied; she had learned to live with that sense of loss, with the understanding that she had brought such devastation upon herself, had convinced herself that no matter how her life might change this one gift she would always be denied.

And yet, it would seem that God's plan was more miraculous, more incredible than she had ever imagined, for in her arms she held the answer to her every prayer. She had kept her faith, in her god and her church, in the love she bore her husband, had whispered her prayers of contrition, her breathless pleas for clemency, and now she sat with a daughter of her very own to hold. Lucien would not agree, she knew, would likely be smug and self-satisfied for the rest of his life, secure in the knowledge that he had been right from the beginning, that Jean's fears were unfounded. That was simply how he viewed the world, as a series of questions to be answered with logic and experimentation and sheer personal determination. Jean would not try to disabuse him of that notion, but for all the rest of her days she would remain convinced that Sophie was nothing short of a miracle, a gift sent to remind her that she had been forgiven, that all was well.

"I have waited for you," she whispered, "for such a long time."

"Lucien!"

Alice's voice echoed shrilly as he came striding into the hospital, making his way towards the nurse's station. He had no idea what she was doing there at this time of the evening, but quite frankly he didn't care; this was one of the happiest days of his entire life, and he was overjoyed to see a friendly face waiting for him, to be able to share his delight with one of his dearest friends.

"Doctor Harvey!" he answered her in a booming voice, and before she could protest he crossed the space between them and gathered her into his arms, the force of their collision so great that he quite literally swept her off her feet, spinning her round in a circle while he laughed delightedly all the while.

"Have you gone mad?" Alice shrieked, and in deference to her sensibilities and the watching nurses Lucien put her back on her feet at once, planting a kiss against her cheek before stepping back to a more respectful distance.

"I have a daughter!" He proclaimed; he could not hide his excitement, his joy, the boundless love that left him bouncing on the balls of his feet like a child in a sweetie shop, his grin so broad and so relentless that his cheeks fairly ached with it. "Sophie Anne Blake, born about an hour ago."

"Oh, Lucien! That's...well that's..." Alice stumbled over her words for a moment, shocked and fidgeting with her hands as if she did not know quite what to do, and then it would seem she decided
to throw caution to the wind for she stepped right up to him and caught him once more in a fierce embrace. "Congratulations," she murmured, somewhat thickly.

They must have painted quite the picture, he thought, him standing there in nothing but a vest and filthy trousers, holding on to Doctor Harvey in full view of all and sundry, but he did not share Jean’s fear of gossip, and anyway, he thought, let them say what they would, for he knew the truth. He loved his wife in a way he had never loved another living soul, and she had just been delivered of a beautiful, healthy baby girl, and all was right with the world; he could not spare a moment to worry about how some nameless gossip might perceive him.

"Where is she?" Alice demanded as once more they separated.

"In the car, out front. I just came to get a wheelchair for Jean. You must come and see them, Alice. It really is the most remarkable thing."

The head nurse had caught sight of them, a matronly, somewhat imposing woman of middle years and a sour disposition, and she rushed toward them at once, a disapproving look on her face.

"Is everything quite all right, Doctor Blake?" she asked, giving him a quick once-over, her eyebrow rising incredulously at his disheveled appearance.

"Couldn't be better," he answered jovially. Not even the nurse's foul mood could sway him, not today, this beautiful, blessed day. Jean was well and safe, blissfully happy and faring well, and she had given birth to a daughter, despite all her fears and all her worries. Though he had not told her so Lucien had whispered a few prayers of his own, that Jean might at long last have a daughter of her very own; he could not say for certain whether he believed in God, but he damn sure believed in Jean, and he wanted that for her, wanted her to find a way to forgive herself for mistakes made so long in the past. And oh, but that boon had been granted, and he could not have been more delighted.

"Could we have a wheelchair for Mrs. Blake, please?" Alice said, shooting Lucien a somewhat flabbergasted look, as if she had no idea how to manage him when he was in such a jubilant mood. "She's just given birth, and we'll need to examine her and the child."

"Given birth?" the nurse repeated, her expression growing ever more distasteful, as if she blamed Lucien for the unorthodox circumstances of his child's delivery. "Where?"

"In the backseat of the car, actually," Lucien told her, grinning. Alice's eyebrows rose so high they very nearly disappeared into her hairline. "And they're still there, at the moment, so if we could-"

Another, much younger, much friendlier nurse appeared then, having no doubt overheard the ruckus. She was pushing a wheelchair, and she gave it over to Lucien at once with a gentle smile. "Congratulations, Doctor Blake," the young woman told him softly.

"Thank you, my dear," he answered winsomely, and then he and Alice turned together, he pushing the wheelchair, she keeping step beside him.

"The backseat of the car?" she asked him as they walked.

"Oh, Alice, it's a wonderful story. I'll let Jean tell you all about it, though."

"Oh, Jean," Alice sighed, holding little Sophie securely in her arms while Lucien helped Jean out of the car and into the chair. It had been rather harder than she expected, handing her child off to someone else, but there had been no other way to see Jean safely out of the car, and after all this
was Alice, not some random passerby; Jean had every intention of asking Alice to be Sophie's godmother, once things settled down. The poor dear looked a bit awkward, as if she had never held a baby before, though Jean supposed she must have at some point; Alice was a doctor, after all.

"She's lovely."

"So is her mother," Lucien answered, pressing a kiss against Jean's temple as she settled back into the chair with a sigh.

"I'm so glad you're here, Alice," Jean told her honestly, offering her a wan little smile as Alice passed Sophie back, as Jean cradled her close and tried to relax. Her whole body ached, and the car would need seeing to - it might be best just to burn it and buy another, she thought - and Lucien was insisting on a proper examination for mother and baby before any of them would be allowed to rest, but still her joy remained. Though she would need to eat, and soon, little Sophie was quiet for the moment, and Lucien paused with his hands on Jean's shoulders, pressed a kiss to the top of her head as he too gazed down at their daughter in wonder. Yes, Jean was glad that Alice was here, to witness this joy, this peace, this happiness, that they could already begin to share this momentous occasion with those closest to them.

"Will you ring Matthew for us? she asked Alice. "He must be wondering where we are." That was true enough, but she also felt she'd rather like to see him, and she knew that Lucien would, too, that he would want to see his friend, this man who would be their child's godfather.

"I'd be happy to, Jean."

"Are you ready, my darling?" Lucien asked her. Jean tilted her chin so that she could stare up at him, thinking how wildly different she felt compared to when he'd last asked her that question.

"I am," came her answer.

And that was that. Together they made their way into the hospital, Lucien and Jean and Sophie and Alice, all of them wrapped in a strange, reverent, wonderful silence as they contemplated the miracle that had occurred this night, as they looked to the future, and all the many changes still in store for them.
"Doctor Blake, I really must protest!" the head nurse sputtered as Lucien led Matthew and Alice onto the maternity ward, grinning. He didn't give a fig for her protestations, and had half a mind to tell her so. One of the hospital doctors had seen to Jean and Sophie, had with the assistance of the nurses measured his daughter's height and weight, had done all of this while Lucien was waylaid in the corridor by the head nurse, who explained to him - in minute detail - just what was expected of him at this juncture. The mother and child are to be kept on the ward for no less than one week, she'd told him, and the father may be allowed to visit during daylight hours, but the baby will be kept in the nursery. You can view her through the glass, if you like.

What if I don't like? Lucien had wanted to ask. It was nonsense, really, these new rules that had come seeping over from England like some sort of child-fearing plague. As far as he could see Jean and Sophie were both healthy, and keeping them both quarantined here - and denying him the opportunity to go in and hold his own child for a full week - was nothing short of an absurdity. The head nurse was implacable, however, and liked Lucien not one little bit, and so he had held his tongue. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, he told himself; he would do as he pleased, and the nurse and her rules could go hang.

"Oh, it's only for a moment," he told her with a winsome smile, ushering his friends through the door to the little room where Jean laid abed with Sophie in her arms. The head nurse drew herself up to her full height, prepared to launch into some sort of diatribe, but Lucien just kept smiling, and closed the door smartly in her face.

"There," he said triumphantly. "That's that."

Jean threw him a dark look, but Alice and Matthew distracted her at once, approaching her bedside in a slow, reverent sort of way.

"Come say hello to your goddaughter, Matthew," Jean told him. As Matthew stepped forward Lucien couldn't help but notice the way his hand hovered at the small of Alice's back, not quite touching her and yet gravitating towards her all the same. It reminded him, rather forcefully, of the way he had found himself unable to keep his hands off Jean in the early days of their infatuation, when he was just beginning to realize how deeply he cared for her, when that affection seemed to come bursting out of him at every moment, a force beyond his own control. Alice and Matthew had been enjoying rather a lot of long, late afternoon lunches recently, Lucien knew, had been spending more and more time in one another's company, and as far as Lucien was concerned that was all for the good. He loved them both dearly, and he wanted, more than anything, to see them both happy. And, he supposed, it might present a convenient avenue for Matthew to leave the house, should he suddenly find himself matrimonially-minded. Not that Lucien wanted his friend to leave them, of course, he just imagined that life might become a bit vexsome for Matthew Lawson if he carried on living in a house with a married couple and a new baby.

"She's beautiful, Jean," Matthew said. He reached out with a slightly unsteady hand, as if he intended to brush his fingertips against Sophie's perfect little forehead, but then he drew back as if he'd thought better of it. In the bed Jean simply beamed, her face pale and showing her exhaustion and yet full of a joy she could not hide.

Matthew shuffled a little awkwardly on his feet, bringing both hands to rest against the top of his cane, as if he wasn't entirely sure what was expected of him, and all the while Alice hovered by his
side, smiling shyly.

"What are you calling her, then?" he asked.

"Sophie," Lucien and Jean answered in unison. His wife caught his eye, and grinned, and Lucien felt his heart swell with love at the sight of her radiant delight.

"Sophie Anne," he expanded.

"A good name," Matthew grunted.

"It's a beautiful name," Alice said, a note of warning in her tone, as if she felt Matthew's praise had not been effusive enough, and sought to correct his error at once, and Lucien just grinned. What a marvelous day this is, he thought but then the door flew open, and the head nurse rushed in with the doctor in tow.

"Visiting hours are over, Doctor Blake," she told him smugly.

Lucien knew when he'd been beaten, and so this time he gave in to her with all the good grace he could muster.

"Of course," he said.

Matthew and Alice did not share Lucien's penchant for defying authority, and so they each kissed Jean on the cheek and offered her their congratulations once more before stepping out into the corridor together. Perhaps, Lucien thought, Matthew might take this opportunity to play the gentleman, to see Doctor Harvey safely to her home. Perhaps the good doctor might invite him in for a nightcap, to show her gratitude. Perhaps they might continue together, softly, quietly, the way they did everything, minute by minute building a story of their very own. Perhaps whatever story their lives might tell would be quite different from the course Jean and Lucien had taken, but he knew it would be no less profound for those differences.

"And you, Doctor Blake," the nurse said, bustling towards Jean's bedside with a menacing sort of efficiency while the doctor loitered in the doorway staring longingly at his watch. "Time for you to be off as well. I'll take the baby to the nursery and you can look in on her tomorrow."

At the words I'll take the baby Jean's face had gone white as a sheet, and her hold on her precious bundle tightened visibly. Lucien, recognizing the fear in his wife's eyes and understanding its cause at once, stepped forward and stopped the nurse with a hand on her elbow.

"That won't be necessary," he said firmly.

There was the soft sound of a footfall behind them as the doctor left, and some of the fight seemed to go out of the nurse as she realized she no longer had any assistance to support the fiction of her authority.

"These things are done in a certain way, Doctor Blake," she told him, making one last stand on her principles, but Lucien would not be deterred.

"Yes, and Mrs. Blake and I have three other children between us who were all born in their family homes and never once set foot inside a hospital, and they're all in perfect health. I am Mrs. Blake's primary physician and I will determine the course of her care. I say the baby stays. And as her physician, I will be staying as well. Perhaps you could be so kind as to send one of the other nurses up with a bassinet."
There was a moment when it seemed the nurse was determined to protest, or perhaps to take Sophie away by main force, but it was late, and Lucien had all the righteous surety of a new father - and the Superintendent of the Ballarat Police Department - on his side. Her shoulders slumped and she departed with a leaden step, muttering under her breath all the while. The moment the door closed behind her Lucien and Jean both breathed a sigh of relief, and he came to perch upon the edge of her bed, staring down at them, his two darling girls, in wonder.

"Thank you, Lucien," Jean told him softly. Carefully she rearranged her hold on their sleeping daughter so that she could reach out, and clasp his hand gently in her own. "I couldn't bear it if they took her from me now. I couldn't bear it if they took you from me."

Lucien smiled, lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss against her palm. "No chance of that, my darling," he assured her. And he meant it, for there was no force on earth that could tear him from her side now.

"You should try to rest, though, Jean. You've had rather an exciting day."

She laughed, just a little, that light, tinkling-bell laugh he loved so much, and he kissed her hand again, delighted by her continued good spirits. Something had changed in her, the moment he first laid little Sophie in her arms; it was as if every doubt, every fear had been purged from her at once, and all that remained was love. And in a way he could understand that, for he knew that little Sophie represented the forgiveness Jean had been seeking for more than two decades, now, that her arrival in this world, a bit ahead of schedule but nonetheless safe and healthy, had vanquished the last remnants of her mother's guilt. There was nothing left to fear, when Sophie was here, breathing steadily, when she had nursed with gusto and then fallen into a peaceful sleep, when they were all together, untroubled by the world beyond that little room.

"I'll take her for a while," Lucien said. "And we'll stay right here in this chair," he continued when he saw the momentary look of trepidation that crossed Jean's face. "You try to sleep, and we'll both be here when you wake up."

This seemed acceptable to Jean, for she passed Sophie over without further complaint. Lucien rose carefully to his feet, mindful of the treasure he now held cradled in his arms, bowed and brushed a kiss against his wife's forehead before he settled into the uncomfortable chair at her bedside.

"Sleep, my darling," he told her. Jean smiled at him once, and then closed her eyes, and so Lucien allowed his attention to settle on the delicate features of his sleeping daughter.

"Sleep, little one," he murmured softly, and Sophie did just as her father asked.

"I don't know if you'll remember this," Lucien was saying softly as Jean's eyes fluttered open. Beyond the curtains on the little window the sun was not yet shining, and she supposed it must still be night, or else very early morning. As quietly as she could she turned her head, and saw Lucien with Sophie tucked into the corner of his arm. Their daughter's eyes were open, watching her father intently, and every fiber of Lucien's being seemed to be focused on her. "But I told you once that you have a sister. Li. She's much bigger than you, of course. But I think she will love you, very much. I will tell her all about you, as soon as we get home. She's very far away from us, just now, but one day soon I hope to change that."

Jean's heart constricted at the note of sorrow in his tone; she knew how it wounded him, how he still blamed himself for missing so much of Li's life, for the many accidents of fate that had torn him from her, through no fault of his own. How many times, she wondered, had she watched him with Mattie, and thought how sad it was that he could be such a good father to a girl who was not his daughter,
while his own child remained distant from him, in spirit as well as in geography? More times than
she could bear to count, she knew. Over the last few months her thoughts had drifted often to
Lucien's daughter, his first wife, given over to a million questions about his life before they met,
before they wed, before the course of their lives changed so completely. Often she had felt as if his
past self were a different man entirely, a man to whom she had never been introduced. And yet now
she was beginning to think that was not so, for while she had never seen Lucien interact with his Li
she could watch him now with Sophie, and she knew for a fact that he loved his first child as
fiercely, as completely as he loved his second.

"Being her dad was the best part of my life, until I met your mum," he told Sophie gently, and Jean
felt the sting of tears in the corners of her eyes at the conviction of his words. "And I promise I will
do my best, little one. For all of you. I will be here for you, and your mum, and your sister and your
brothers, in whatever way you need, every day, for the rest of my life."

Jean opened her mouth to speak, to reassure him, to tell him how she loved him, but Sophie chose
that moment to let forth a soft, snuffling sound of distress, as if she were trying to decide whether or
not she wanted to cry. Lucien's eyes flicked to Jean's bed at once, perhaps trying to determine
whether or not she had woken at the sound of their daughter's voice, and so he found her staring at
him with her heart in her throat.

"Hello, love," he said, offering that warm little smile he reserved just for her. Sophie began to cry in
earnest then, and Lucien's cheeks went a bit pink, as if he worried he had done something to cause
her discomfort.

"I think she's hungry," Jean told him, a bit thickly as the emotion of a moment before still lingered.
Though she was not sure how long she had been sleeping she knew it had been at least two hours
since Sophie had last been fed, and so it seemed to her the most logical cause for her current distress.
As quickly as he could Lucien rose, and Jean shuffled around, propping herself up and freeing
herself from the flimsy hospital gown she wore. Her suspicions had been correct, it seemed, for when
she held Sophie close it only took a moment for her to latch on, and then she was nursing, and
Lucien was watching them both with a gentle sort of wonder on his face.

"You're going to get very bored of watching her eat, Lucien," Jean said, a bit primly. Beside her
Lucien just laughed, and pressed a gentle kiss against her forehead. She felt a bit strange, half-naked
and bared to his scrutiny like this, but then again she supposed that there was no part of her Lucien
had not mapped with reverent lips and tender hands, and it could hardly have been the first time he
saw a child nurse, his own or otherwise.

"I think you're marvelous, darling," he told her, settling down on the edge of the bed. "And so is
she."

"And so are you," Jean told him, for he was, and she adored him.
Chapter 46

22 February 1961

Jean had fallen asleep, her head resting against his bicep, her arms loosely cradled around little Sophie. Lucien could not blame her, for the hour was grown very late indeed, and his wife had enjoyed precious little sleep these last few days. It seemed that Sophie had had quite enough to eat but her eyes had not yet closed, and so Lucien scooped her into his arms, allowed Jean to settle back amongst the pillows as he slipped silently from their bed. At the loss of her mother Sophie made a soft sound of discontent, and so Lucien only held her close against his bare chest, swayed gently as he stood there by the side of the bed, smiling down at his sleeping wife.

It was strange, really, to think how much life had changed for them, in the span of a week. Their number grown from two to three, their nights interrupted at irregular intervals for feeding and changing and moments like this, when Sophie did not yet want to sleep and Lucien could not yet bring himself to settle her down in her crib. In many ways it helped that Lucien could see patients at home; though he had cleared his schedule for the previous week and the following fortnight he knew that eventually he would have to return to work, and when he did he liked the thought of being close to hand, slipping out of the surgery whenever he liked to hold his child, kiss his wife, enjoy the delights of their new family. Oh, Matthew and the police would come calling, eventually, the way they always did, but so far there had been nothing so pressing as to require his attention, and in his heart he hoped for peace. Murder and mysteries would always intrigue him, but he did not want to spend more time out of the house than was necessary, not when he had a miracle of his own to marvel at, right here in this room.

This room that had been his mother's, once, a safe haven for her as it was now for him. This room that was redolent with the soft scents of Jean's perfume and talcum powder and the vase of fresh flowers on the sidetable, this room where Jean's jewelry and cosmetics sat neatly arrayed on the dressing table, where she slept peacefully in the bed they shared, where a corner had been dedicated to Sophie, everything she could ever need folded and stacked and organized with Jean's characteristic sort of order. Lucien delighted in this room now, just as he had done when he was small, though for different reasons. His family was here, now, alive and happy, and he could not have been more content.

Sophie, on the other hand, did not seem to share his sense of peace, and so he walked, carefully, quietly, padding out of the room on bare feet dressed in nothing but his sleeping pants. Jean needed to rest, and he knew that if she woke she would try to take over from him in that fussy way she had. It wasn't that Jean didn't trust him with the baby, he knew, it was simply that Jean was accustomed to doing everything herself, and it would take time for her to realize that she didn't have to, any more. He didn't want to press the point with her, to push back against the many differences in their upbringing and perspectives, and so he set about a quiet sort of revolution, stepping in without a word whenever he could, trying to anticipate his wife's needs and support her, even when she insisted that she did not need help.

It was a daunting task, for Lucien knew very little about the running of a house. He could wash a dish, and place it in the correct cabinet - with some direction - could scramble a pan of eggs and fry a plate of bacon and brew a cup of tea, but the many other details that kept the Blake house afloat eluded him. Jean controlled the books, and always had done, for personal expenses as well as the surgery, and she did the shopping, planned meals for each day in advance so that there would be no surprises, even when guests came to call. These tasks required, to his mind, a special sort of magic that Lucien did not possess, but Jean was tired, so desperately tired, and though her joy at Sophie’s
arrival had not yet faded he knew all too well the way a new baby could wear on a mother. He did not want that for Jean, and so he was resolved to step in where he could.

And this, pacing slowly, silently through the darkened house with his child in his arms, watching her eyes droop sleepily, feeling the warmth of her against his skin, this he could do, and gladly, as often as was needed. This was an area where Lucien Blake had rather a lot of practice. In Singapore his family had been well-off indeed, and they had hired an au pair to assist Mei Lin, but still he recalled the sun-soaked days of Li’s infancy, and all the lessons he had learned. How to hold his child, how to soothe her, the importance of savoring every moment with her that he could, these things he had learned, these experiences etched into the very bones of him so that it all came back to him now without a moment’s hesitation.

He loitered a moment in the sitting room; if he could have he would have gone to the piano and played a one-handed tune to lull Sophie into sleep, or perhaps laid her down to rest atop his knees while he sang for her, but it was late, and Jean was sleeping, and so was Matthew, come to think of it.

Or perhaps not, for in the very next moment he heard the soft sound of a footfall behind him, and turned to see Matthew approaching, dressed in dark pajamas and leaning heavily on his cane.

"Did I wake you?" Lucien asked him hoarsely, trying to disturb neither wife nor child, nor the sense of calm that had fallen over this night. It reminded him, in some ways, of a snowy Christmas spent in Edinburgh, the hush, the stillness, the very air seeming to whisper of impending joy and love and laughter, not yet arrived and yet rushing inexorably forward.

Matthew shook his head and kept walking until he and Lucien were standing side by side, Lucien swaying softly, Matthew holding steady, both of them gazing at the empty fireplace. It was a warm night, and no fire was lit, but still they looked, as if one might spring up of its own accord, just to complete the coziness of the scene.

"Couldn't sleep," Matthew said gruffly after a moment. "I was going to make a cuppa, and then I saw you. Thought I'd come say hello."

"Hello, Matthew," Lucien said with a gentle smile. It was wonderful, really, having his friend so close to hand, another adult in the house, someone to talk to, someone to laugh with, knowing that every inch of this house was filled with love, of one kind or another. Matthew was like a brother to him, and had been such to Jean long before Lucien came back to Ballarat, and he was, after all, Sophie's godfather. It would all be made official in a fortnight; Jean had wanted the baptism done quickly, but she had likewise wanted young Christopher and his family in attendance, and so they had chosen a date when they could all celebrate together. Lucien was looking forward to it immensely, introducing Sophie to her brother and her sister-in-law and her niece. And he was, very much, looking forward to long hours spent round the kitchen table, all of them together, laughing and talking while Amelia ran circles around the lot of them. Lucien adored his granddaughters, both of them, with all his heart.

"I've bought a ring," Matthew said suddenly, abruptly, and Lucien turned to stare at him, his mouth hanging open in shock. "Don't even know if she'll want to wear the bloody thing."

"She...you've...for Alice?" Lucien asked, stunned and pleased in equal measure. This was an unexpected turn of events; not that Matthew should do such a thing, that he should want to propose to Alice, who seemed a perfect match for him, but that he should do it now, when Lucien had no idea that his intentions were so committed. For a moment he felt the sting of guilt; he had known, of course, that Matthew and Alice were keeping company, but he had, as always, been so caught up in his own affairs that he had not even thought to ask how they were getting on together.
Matthew grinned, tightly, though his good-humor was short lived. "Well, why not?" he said, somewhat defensively. "Not getting any younger. And she...at your wedding...well. We have an understanding. Might as well make it official."

Lucien laughed, and then turned to embrace his friend very carefully, mindful of the burden he held cradled in his arms.

"That's wonderful, Matthew," he said sincerely, smiling fit to burst.

The tips of Matthew's ears had gone a bit pink, and he shuffled uncomfortably on his feet. "I've still bloody well got to ask her, haven't I?"

"Lucien?" Jean's voice echoed softly, hesitantly from the corridor, and he turned to answer her at once.

"In here, my darling."

She came floating into the room, wrapped once more in his favorite navy robe, though it threatened to swallow her entirely. She was a vision of loveliness, his Jean, even without her usual artifice of makeup and perfectly styled hair. Every inch of her seemed to glow with a happiness she could not hide, and though she still looked a bit tired he did not see the sort of exhaustion that would worry him painted across her face. It seemed to him as if she felt, rather as he did, that there was something special about this night, this moment, that she was as delighted as he to find herself caught in this scene. She came to stand behind him, one small, delicate hand resting against the ropes of scars that scored his back, and he did not tremble when she touched him there as once he might have done. Strange, how for years, nearly two decades, he had hidden this piece of himself from view, and now he did not spare a moment to think of disguising his scars from Jean and Matthew. They were his family, and he loved them, and he knew that he was safe here, with them.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked, though her tone was more amused than chastising.

Lucien smiled, and pressed a kiss against her hair. "Little miss wanted to walk," he answered.

Though she had not been long in the world Sophie had already made her preferences known, and this was one of those things Jean and Lucien had learned about their daughter, that when she was out of sorts a rambling walk through the house in her father's arms was certain to settle her down again.

Jean peered into the bundle of blankets he held, and smiled. "She's asleep," she whispered.

"I might follow her lead. Good night Jean, Lucien," Matthew said, and then he departed, and left the Blakes to stare fondly down at their own private miracle.

"He's going to propose," Lucien whispered conspiratorially.

"He's going to-" Jean started to exclaim, but caught herself, pressing her palm against her lips in a physical attempt to quiet herself. Her eyes were wide with mischief, with merriment, and Lucien fell just that little bit more in love with her then, if such a thing were possible.

"Bought the ring and everything," Lucien told her, grinning.

"Oh," she sighed, "that's wonderful."

And it was, truly. Alice had been such a friend to Jean, he knew, at a time when friends were in short supply, and Matthew had been a steady presence in both their lives for so long now that neither of them could imagine carrying on without him. It was wonderful, to think that these two people whom Jean and Lucien loved so dearly had found a piece of happiness for themselves, together. Things
would change, he knew, once the wheels of matrimony began to turn, but life had been changing rather rapidly all around him for sometime now, and Lucien could hardly object.

"Do you think she'll accept?" Oh, he didn't doubt it, not really, but it did seem a bit...sudden, and a part of him worried that perhaps Matthew had been encouraged by the speed with Lucien himself had fallen into wife and family.

Jean fixed him with a level stare. "You know, Lucien, for someone so clever, you really can be quite thick sometimes."

He laughed, softly, and his wife smiled and slipped her arms around his neck, though she left enough room for little Sophie between them.

"Come back to bed, my love," she whispered, pressing a gentle kiss against his lips. And then she was gone, slipping away from him on silent feet, and he was following after her, bemused and besotted, with his sleeping daughter in his arms. Everything was changing, but he could not help but feel that it was all for the best. For perhaps the very first time life had been kind to Lucien Blake, and he was determined to enjoy it to its fullest. Starting here, starting now, with folding himself into bed with his arms full of Jean while their child slept, calm and content, in the corner of the studio. All was well, and all would be well, and he was at peace.
Chapter 47

Three years later...

"Fantastique, ma petite chérie!" Lucien exclaimed, and Sophie clapped her little hands delightedly, twirling round in her new dress and grinning at the way the crinoline swirled around her feet. She had no need of a new dress, and neither did Jean, but Lucien did so love to spoil his girls, and Jean was not going to discourage him from demonstrating his affection in whatever way he saw fit. The display in the shop window had caught his eye, and then he had been as guileless and sweet as a little boy begging for a treat, determined that Sophie must have this dress. The shopgirl had been delighted with little Sophie, or at least she seemed to be, for in truth Jean understood only the occasional word of the steady stream of French that passed back and forth between Lucien and the young woman who assisted them.

Sophie charmed people everywhere she went, even here in Paris on a bright spring afternoon, with her tumble of soft blonde curls and her wide blue eyes so like her father's. She had been blessed with a disposition as sunny as her smile, laughing often and easily, untroubled by the world, which Jean felt was all for the good. Sophie Anne Blake wanted for nothing, and neither did her mother, for in truth the last three years had been kind to Jean. Young Christopher and Ruby had welcomed a son the previous June, and Jean had been in attendance, had been able to hold little Joseph Thomas Beazley in her arms, to smile down at her grandson's face and feel only a momentary pang of sadness, thinking how he reminded her of her Christopher, his grandfather, a man he would never be able to meet. But then she knew that they had all been blessed, for he had Lucien, to love him, to protect him, just as he loved every other member of their far-flung clan.

Jack remained as distant as ever, though he had at long last settled down in a vaguely permanent sort of way, and periodically responded to his mother's letters, if only in the briefest of terms. It was enough for Jean to know that he was well, that he had a home, that he was, at long last, making a go of an honest life. News from Li's corner of the world was not good, and Lucien was making some headway in his efforts to bring her family from China to Ballarat, and had in fact scheduled some meetings with old contacts in London, where he and Jean would find themselves in just a fortnight's time. Jean whispered her prayers for him each night; there was little else she could do to help on that quest.

Those worries seemed very far away, at present. They were still standing in the little shop, and the young woman was asking Lucien a question while Sophie came to her mother, reaching out to clasp Jean's hand in her own.

"Do you like it, love?" Jean asked. It really was a beautiful dress, and though Sophie would have little need of such a fine piece of clothing once they returned home - where she spent more time romping through the dirt and grass of the back garden than spinning round in frilly dresses - she found she shared Lucien's conviction that it was simply meant to be.

Sophie nodded in answer to the question, though she seemed a bit distracted as she gazed around the shop, trying to take it all in. There were hardly any shops in Ballarat this fine, and Sophie could hardly decide where to look first. Jean knew rather how she felt; though she had long since grown used to the comforts that came with being a doctor's wife Jean still sometimes felt like a farmgirl thrust into a world she hardly understood. Rack after rack of lace and tulle and satin and raw silk stared back at her, and she was suddenly rather self-conscious of the navy dress she wore; it was a particular favorite of hers but she had sewn it herself, and she could not help but feel just a bit out of place.
Lucien, of course, did not feel like a stranger here; he was all smiles as he came to stand beside her, wrapping his arm around her waist and smiling down at her.

"She says Sophie can wear the dress out of the store, if she wants," he told her. "In fact, she was a bit insistent on that point."

For a moment Jean deliberated; it was such a fine dress, hardly the sort of thing she ordinarily would have a chosen for a day dedicated to walking the city streets, but Sophie was happy, and Lucien was happy, and in the end she could not deny either of them when they seemed so happy.

"I think that would be fine, Lucien," Jean answered, and he beamed at her, dropping a quick kiss against the corner of her mouth before he leaned down to whisper conspiratorially in her ear.

"She also says that behind that curtain," he gestured discreetly towards a blue velvet curtain that served to separate one part of the shop from another, "there is an entire room full of delicates that might interest my beautiful wife."

Jean’s cheeks flushed scarlet, and had Sophie not been standing between them she may well have scolded Lucien for his cheek. As it was, however, she could only hiss his name, and he responded with very little contrition.

"Perhaps I should go and pick something out," he said in a tone that would have sounded reasonable, had Jean not understood his salacious intent. "A gift, for my beautiful wife."

For a moment Jean turned the idea over in her mind; a small part of her was embarrassed at the very thought of Lucien disappearing into the back of that shop, of the lovely young woman who hovered just over their shoulders assisting him in picking out something lacy and soft and terribly naughty for her to wear. There was a larger, far more insistent part of her however that longed to indulge him, knowing that whatever he chose would likely have to remain a secret until they returned home to Ballarat, to the privacy of their own bedroom, knowing that the revelation of such a secret after so long a wait would only bring them both delight, in the end.

"All right," she said at last, her heart soaring at the sight of her husband’s brilliant smile. "There’s a cafe across the street. Little miss and I will go and have something to eat, and you can join us when you're finished."

"Bravo, my darling." He punctuated his words with another kiss against her cheek, and then turned to speak to the shop girl in rapid French. In no time at all Sophie's dress had been paid for, the dress she'd worn into the shop neatly packed into a small parcel, and Lucien had disappeared behind that velvet curtain in search of a gift both he and Jean would enjoy immensely, when the time came.

And then she and Sophie were stepping out into the sunshine, hand-in-hand, making their way towards the little cafe. This trip had been years in the making, and now that they were here Jean's every step was light and carefree. It had all been arranged, the travel to Paris, their lodging, the boat that would carry them from Paris to London in two week's time, the train that would take them to the station where Mattie and her fiance would be waiting to greet them. It was the trip Lucien had promised her when he'd first proposed, before they'd learned of Sophie's impending arrival; a whole month in Paris, theater and food and shopping, walking through the museums and the old churches together, and then a jaunt across the Channel to visit the girl who was as good as their own daughter. In the early days of her pregnancy Jean had felt a certain bereavement at the thought that they would never make this dream a reality, but Lucien was nothing if not persistent. They were perhaps a few years behind schedule, but those years had been full of a joy all their own, watching Sophie grow, take her first steps, say her first words. And now they were here, in Paris, in the spring, and Sophie with them, enjoying every moment even if she would likely remember none of it when she was
older. Her parents would remember, and that was enough for Jean.

Though she had not been the most successful student Jean retained enough of the rudimentary French Lucien had tried to teach her to stumble her way through her order at the cafe, a cup of tea for herself and a small glass of water for Sophie, and a pastry for them to share. They sat together at a little booth against the front window, and Sophie kept her face pressed against the glass, watching the people passing with avid fascination.

So much had changed, over the last three years. Christopher would be leaving the army soon, and was making noises about returning home to Ballarat with his family in tow. Lucien was doing his best to help Li's family make the journey to Australia, and deep inside her heart Jean fervently hoped that one day Jack might find his way home to them as well, that she might have all her brood within arms' reach, at last. Alice and Matthew had wed and set up house in a neat little cottage on the outskirts of town, and Charlie had of late been keeping company with a lovely girl whom Jean approved of immensely. And in the thick of it all was Sophie, bright and lovely, a blessing Jean had never dreamed she'd actually receive. Those heady, terrifying days of her pregnancy, when every moment had seemed to carry with it the threat of calamity, had been lost to the fog of time, as all of Jean's fears were disproved, one by one. Their family was happy, and well.

Which was not to say their life was not without its own challenges. Sophie was as headstrong as her mother and as impulsive as her father, and that combination of traits had led to more than a few little scrapes and tantrums. Jean had had plenty of experience with unruly children, however, and they enjoyed more good moments than bad. If Lucien sometimes lost himself in a case he at least made sure to spend every night in their bed, where he belonged, and Jean gave thanks for that small mercy. That one change was to her the most monumental one, for the man he had been when he first returned to Ballarat, charging through town like a bull in a china shop, had given no thought to how his housekeeper might fret when he was not home by dark, when he stayed up all hours drinking or banging on the piano or both. Now, though, it had been months since he'd missed dinner, and every night Jean fell asleep with his arms wrapped around her. She could not ask for anything more.

"Papa!" Sophie cried suddenly, scrambling to stand up on the seat and waving her little arms exuberantly as Lucien strode out of the shop across the street. He must have seen her in the window for he gave a grin and a little wave, and then he was marching purposefully towards them with a parcel of his own tucked beneath his arm. And despite herself Jean shivered, just a little, at the thought of what he might have purchased for her, the pleasure they might both feel when he peeled it from her skin with reverent hands. That was one thing that had not changed with time, the love, the need, the yearning they felt for one another, and Jean gave thanks for that, as well.

In a moment Lucien had entered the cafe, and made his way to their booth.

"There's my girls," he said, leaning over the table to kiss his wife's check before he settled onto the bench across from her. "All right, my darling?"

Jean smiled and reached for his hand, winding their fingers together against the table top.

"Never better," she told him honestly.

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