

Forever, Yours



*Their love was whispered in ink,
sealed in silence, and bound by choice.*

SABRINA WORTH



“Did you hear about the letter?” Maria says as she links her arm through mine. The sun is warm and I’m wearing too many layers in this outfit as it is and I instantly feel far too hot at her touch.

“Letter?” I ask, trying to figure out how to disentangle myself from her without it being rude. The way she has me twisted is making my corset dig into my underarm more than usual.

“Yes! A love letter! It was found in the forest by the bridge.”

I am instantly panicking. I have to keep calm but it’s almost impossible. I can feel my corset, my stockings, every inch of my clothing is rubbing against me, I’m so wretchedly uncomfortable in this heat. I want some distance between her and me, everything about this feather-brained creature is winding me up from her carefully curated curls to the childish skip in her step. It’s driving me mad.

It’s a wonder, an absolute wonder that I keep my mask placid as I unlink my arms, raise my eyebrows in intrigue and whisper: “A love letter! How thrilling! To whom was it addressed?”

Her button nose wrinkles as a broad secretive grin spreads across her doll-like face. “It’s just addressed to *‘my undying love’*.” And she shrieks with laughter, her back bending as if it’s simply the most entertaining thing since theatre was invented.

I missed one. The realisation slams into me as I mimic her laughter back at her. How did I miss one? Will I be able to read it?

“Oh, Celeste, I am so grateful to have you with me,” I look at my friend in surprise as she gives my arm a squeeze once more. “Sometimes I think I’m.... too much... too spritely. Many women... they look down upon me. Not you.” Her voice perks up a note of joy in her voice. “I’m just so delighted to have someone to speak to who shares my penchant for gossip such as you!”

I force a laugh. “ And I.” I smile walking a few more steps until I can turn the conversation back where it belongs. “ And what of the letter: where is it now?” I ask with a cheeky grin as we continue our slow saunter down the garden path, our feet crunching on the pebbles.

“Oh I think your father has it. He says it’s to find out who it belongs to but I heard that the letter contains some very salacious material and he’s trying to stop it from going around.”

Of course he would take it. Because someone above must hate me for my sins and this is just payment. But, if he has it... there’s a chance I could find it.

"I don't think that's fair," I pout. "It's probably just some.... Old married couple trying to reinvigorate their love."

"Oh Celeste, you are just too naive! It's obviously not a married couple. My bet is that it's some forbidden love like... like... a priest and a serving girl. Or... a married man and his mistress..."

"Maria!" I gasp, my blood running cold at how close she might be getting to the truth. "Your imagination! It's... unbecoming."

She snorts with a cackle, and follows me down the path, that blasted arm linking through mine again. "You won't tell on me will you?"

I soften my expression as much as I can, all the while planning an escape away from this socialisation so I can go and find a letter which is (by all rights) mine.

"Of course not, Maria," I say softly. "Then who would I talk to?"

She wrinkles her perfect little nose once more. "That's true, since you and Felicity stopped keeping company with each other so much, I have really been your only friend. *And as your only friend you must tell me how things are going with the Viscount.* I have heard rumours that he was seen in a jewelers- have his gifts been astounding?"

I feel like I've been slapped. The twists in this conversation making my head spin but I maintain control. "Yes, quite astounding. I will be wearing a necklace he bought me to the ball at the Hartfords' on Saturday"

She squeals in delight on my behalf and I have to school my face into the pleased smile she expects. "I feel a proposal is coming, Celeste!" She stops suddenly in her tracks the doll-like lips opening in a perfect 'o' of surprise. "You're going to be a viscountess!" I can feel people's eyes on me as she squeaks this out in the middle of the city park. My cheeks flush instantly as the peerage turn to stare.

I lower my voice to a whisper "Maria, calm yourself, people are watching. I can't be seen to assume that." She instantly calms by my side, containing her excitement to a subtle tremble on my arm.

"You're going to be a viscountess!!" She whispers back.

"Maybe," I concede with a secret smile, and redirect us to our walk.

There's a comfortable silence as we walk down the path together. She smiles in the sun, humming to herself, oblivious to the absolute turmoil going on in my body.

My Undying Love,

Twelve days. Twelve endless days since I last beheld you, since my arms last encircled you, since my lips last dared to whisper your name against your skin. And yet, though I have drawn breath each day, it feels as though I have not lived a moment since our parting. The air itself refuses to sustain me; I exist only in a state of suspended torment, neither truly alive nor granted the mercy of death. How cruel it is that the world continues undisturbed, the sun rising, the stars burning, as though my heart had not been torn asunder. Do they not know? Does the universe itself not grieve?

Twelve days, and still, our tree stands bare... its branches, once a canopy to our whispered secrets, now only a cruel monument to absence. Daily, more than daily, I check for a letter, a whisper of you and yet daily my heart breaks as the tree divulges not even a suggestion of you. I have become unmoored, drifting endlessly toward the shore of your memory, yet never quite reaching it.

I beg of you: speak to me. Let your voice, even in reproach, be the balm to my suffering. Look upon me, if only with indifference, that I might know I still exist in some corner of your world. Deny me no longer the smallest proof that I have not been forgotten, that I have not been cast into the abyss of your disregard.

Please, my love, tell me what lingers in your heart, even if it is not I.

Forever,

Yours.

I clutch the twice stolen letter in my trembling fingertips as I read it through for the third time. The ticking of the carriage clock fills the air with serenity as I feel the words meant only for my eyes. It's a painful thought. You have written these beautiful, longing words... so private.... So love filled... and they have been so abused by the eyes of others. An ache begins in my chest at the thought of the desperation behind the words in my hands.

The love of mine, meant only for me, taken by foul minds. Judged with hatred and tainted by their assumptions of who we are.

Please, my love... the plea on the page is a dagger through the heart I thought was broken. How could I ever think I could live without these words, without you, my beautiful wonderful soul.

Our tree has been tainted, stolen from us. I cannot leave a much needed reply there. The only available option is for us to meet.

Daily... I check for a letter.

The words spring off the page as I read through once more, the elegant penmanship a caress upon my pounding heart. I close my eyes and pray that you don't check when someone is watching- now that your love has been read by obtuse eyes. I can't let you know. But I can stay close.

I read the words meant only for me one last time, my thumb caressing the page on which your heart was poured making a silent promise to you through the ink that I will be there tomorrow when you come for me. One last time and I place it tenderly back in my father's desk, locking the drawer exactly as I found it.

The carriage clock strikes one and I begin my ascent to my chambers once more, the ghosts the only witness to my late night trespass.

When I wake the following morning, I feel as though not a moment has passed since my bare feet padded along the carpeted floor. My mind has been obsessing while my body went through the motions of sleeping. It has been forming a plan, which floods over me as the morning sunlight teases my eyelids.

I cannot reply in ink. Therefore I shall reply in presence.

I send word through my maid to the Viscount that it is such a lovely day and I would like to change our tea to an afternoon picnic. I dress for the outdoors and make my way to our tree.

Daily you said. I cannot send you a reply at risk of it being found. However, today in place of a letter would be me... and the Viscount. Which posed issues not yet considered but, if it was the only way I could warn you not to leave more letters then that is what it would have to be.

I walk through the grassy meadow towards the tree that has concealed our love affair for months. It looms as if lit by the hand of God Himself. I find a spot close by to see the tree and anyone who comes near.

I settle on a blanket with a book in my hand, my maid settling herself on a nearby bench with a basket of prepared food and drinks for my afternoon with the Viscount.

My heart thunders in my chest as I stare at the page of *Jane Eyre*, unseeingly staring at the words as they swoop and swirl round the page like the turmoil happening in my soul. Every iota of my soul is on high alert for any sign of you. Any crunch of footfall, any rustle of leaves, any caress of air against my skin it's as if my body yearns for you still.

I cannot allow this to continue.

My brain is logical and correctly assumes the strong, confident strides behind me are not you. My heart however threatens to leap out of my chest and run to you, it takes seeing the Viscount crossing the meadow towards me for my heart to sink.

He is not wholly unhandsome in features. His hair comes in perfect waves, which he periodically smoothes back out of his startling green eyes. His jaw is strong and square and his lips are the thing of gossip columns all over the city. The very lips that pull into a perfect

smile as he sees me. Which I mimic, standing to greet him. He strides towards me looking every bit like a hero from my novels.

We have been courting for the better part of a year, having met during his visit to my father's country estate over the winter. All the signs that he will propose are there, clearly visible to anyone with eyes. His family had invited mine to dine the weekend past and the presents had become more frequent. Maria was quite right, I am going to be the Viscountess and no amount of soft words or pleas from attention from you is going to change that.

There is a soft crack of twigs on the ground and I jerk around to see if it's you. It's not, it's my maid getting our picnic ready.

The Viscount's laughter rolled from his chest as he reached me, "Timorous today, my dearest?" he asks in a voice like aged whisky as he bows from his waist, ever the gentleman I should be craving.

"My lord, I had begun to think you had forgotten me." I curtsy with every bashful batting of eyelashes befitting this moment. I am a deceiver wrapped in silk, the guilt of it twists in my stomach like a knot of pulsating snakes.

"I could never forget you, my dearest."

My dearest. The term of endearment once thrilled me, drove me wild with longing. I remember the first time he used it, it made me make a noise which resembled a mouse of excitement.

And then there was you. With your *My undying love*, your *my immortal heart*, your *My longing made flesh*... Your whispered words tore unwilling feelings from my lifeless heart like drawing blood from stone. Your murmured promises captured kingdoms and stitched my very soul together when I didn't even know it was lacking.

"My dearest?" Now his repeated, base platitudes make my lip curl.

"Yes?" I say, blinking into the sunlight at him as Jess lays out a splendid picnic that she'd boasted to me this very morning was a husband trap. Which is what I need. A husband.

For you can never be mine.

"You are away with the fairies, my pet."

I suppress a shudder at the word he throws at me like it will have me burning with longing when it only makes me think of the hounds.

"My apologies. I was just thinking of my book."

The Viscount takes my hand, bowing at the waist to press a gentle, fleeting kiss to my glove. I can feel his warmth through the material, the caress of his lips. It feels like a weak mimic of you.

"My sweet, delicate flower. You owe me no apologies. You have all the gentle sensibilities of your sex," he says. Removing the words, one would be forgiven for thinking he were whispering sweet nothings in my ear but those unfeeling words of superciliousness leave a sour taste behind my fixed smile.

"Shall we sit?" I ask, gesturing to the picnic. Jess was right. She had worked very hard to curate the perfect husband trap. I almost hated her for it. Hard boiled eggs and steak and kidney pies, fresh cherries and apricots, seed cake and lemonade.

The Viscount's eyes travel hungrily over the assortment and he sinks to one knee to help me onto the blanket and pillows beneath the parasole, I shift and settle into the perfect position to watch for you.

"Miss Celeste, this looks incredible," he says as I reach a gloved hand for the fine china my mother will murder me for taking.

"I have the finest maid in the country." I say sweetly. That much is true. My eyes scan the treeline, for any hint of your approach. There's a movement, a flash of blue- your favourite colour- through the trees.

"I wonder, does she take credit for your beauty, your grace, or merely the privilege of assisting them?"

It takes me a moment for me to hear the saccharine words for the attention I'm giving the trees.

"Oh, my lord is too kind," I say sweetly.

He takes a bite of a pie at the same time I do- my eyes still searching the treeline, *I was sure I saw...* - and the picnic falls into what could have been misconstrued as comfortable silence. But I jolt nearly sloshing lemonade when a body moves through the treeline headed straight for our tree.

"Isn't that your stable boy- what's his name?" the Viscount asks but before I can answer he shouts "Boy! Here."

I could die with embarrassment. I have always made sure to treat those who treat me well with respect and kindness and the way the Viscount hollars so brusquely, makes my very skin crawl.

"You are the stable boy for the Darlington family are you not?" The Viscount says, before taking a mouthful of strawberry tarte and completely missing the beautiful rose Jessica has made of the berries on top. Hours of loving work swallowed in a gulp.

"I am." I feel the sky blue eyes on me, but I busy myself with appreciating the rose topped tarte.

"Yes... yes I thought so." I have never seen a high born man speak with his mouth full but here... now... this one does and it is repugnant. "How is the Darlington Estate?"

I sigh. He's trying to poach my fathers stable hand in my presence.

"Miss Celeste," calls a familiar voice and my heart lurches- Is it you?

I turn and see a woman walking across the meadow towards us, her eyes snagging on the man by my side. The Viscount throws her a glance and turns back to the stable hand, uninterested in my friends.

"Miss Felicity" I call back a note of relief in my voice and rise from the blanket with great difficulty in my corset, my soon-to-be fiance doing nothing to help. "A pleasure to see you."

I stand mere inches from you and my heart flutters in my chest.

"The pleasure is mine. It has been a long time since we last spoke." Your voice is a velvet caress.

You are here. *Twelve endless days since I last beheld you...* and your heart still beats in time with mine. I can see it on the flush apples of your cheeks. Your dark eyes concealing secrets of stolen moments, your plump lips, the vessel of every whispered promise that once made my very soul quake. Yes, here you are. And I am still yours.

I nod in agreement as the conversation between the menfolk ceases and the stable hand walks away. The Viscount looks vaguely interested in our conversation and I will have to be careful.

"A long time." I say after a pause. "I frequently come for walks in these parts. But the footfall has greatly increased since a letter was found in a tree. It was quite the scandal, so I hear."

Your long dark eyelashes flutter and lower in response. I wish there had been a better way to tell you. God above, I wish there had been a way to tell you in private, with my arms around you, my face in your hair, my voice in a whisper.

Your eyebrows raise, and you manage so well to keep a hold on your faculties. Your gentle lips twitch at the thought of someone else's eyes on your words. *Those* words.

Does the universe itself not grieve?

My heart does a flip at the memory, a difficult lump forming at the base of my throat and I wet my lips with my tongue, watching as your eyes gravitate towards the movement. I have to hold back a whimper of desire.

"Miss Fairchild," the Viscount stands, quickly. I know he is eager to be accepted by my oldest friend but the burn I feel in my chest as he bows politely your way is indescribable. "You have missed a delightful luncheon. Perhaps you would join us for the last of the tarts?"

My eyes flicker to you. *Oh, God, please. Say no.*

Whether it's God or you that listens, you simply incline your head in thanks and make your excuses.

"It has been a pleasure to see you, Miss Celeste," your soft lyrical purr scrapes like daggers down my heart. "I should like to call on you soon."

I smile politely, my eyes glittering with unspent shame and grief. I want nothing more than to be called upon by you. To taste treats from your fingers. To feel loved by your arms. To experience pleasure only you can give me.

"I will see you at the Hartford's ball on Saturday?" I say pointedly dismissing your suggestions.

I can feel the Viscount's eyes dancing between us, one then the other, as if absorbing some kind of puzzle.

"You shall," you answer and your long neck bends in a polite goodbye.

With the dismissal my only love walks away. I allow myself one moment only of grief, not long enough for even a single tear to fall. One moment heartbroken as I watch you walk from me.

And then I turn and offer one bright, beautiful smile to the man who shall be my husband.

I ready myself for the ball at the Hartfords as my mother prattles on in my ear. The Viscount asked for my father's permission today and it's all she can talk about.

He will propose tonight.

Tonight my future will be sealed closed.

My corset is tightened by my mother herself, overseeing every moment of my preparation to become viscountess, tying the knot tight behind my spine. I'm given no time to get used to the new placement of my breathing however, as the world goes dark inside a tent of silk and lace dropped from above me.

My dress is a pure ivory, made in a hurry by the modiste who asked triple her usual price to make the gown in two days.

I had not wanted white. I had wanted to wear the blue in the wardrobe. Celeste blue, they call it. Colour, joy and freedom. And yet I wear white, innocence, purity, untouched.

As they fasten the lie behind my back, I look at the full effect in the mirror. The white makes me look pink in the complexion, and yet they powdered more upon my face. My hair is piled in elegant, sapphire dripping knots on top of the crown of my head. Sapphires glitter at my throat, wrists and upon the bust of white. I sparkle like a trophy.

"You look most spectacular, my dear," my mother announces as if it were an accomplishment of her own, and the maids murmur their agreement. "Let us go and show your father."

I step with her towards the door and take extra care not to move too quickly on the stairs I used to slide down as a child. I do not want to jostle the gems about my person.

My father waits at the bottom of the stairs, his stern face broken into a smile only I get to see. My father loves me. He wants only the best for me. And he has found me the best man money can buy.

"Ah, my dearest, you are a wonder." He takes my hand in his and kisses my knuckles. "Are you ready?"

I nod, the feeling of sickness rising in my stomach. I turn to my chambermaid to take my gloves and she gives my hand a squeeze.

"He already knows how perfect you are, miss. All he needs now is a 'yes'," she whispers so that only I can hear her petulance.

I try to say thank you, but my mouth will not open. I simply smile, for fear I may vomit all over the white in which they dressed me.

My Viscount is waiting at the bottom of the ballroom stairs. I see him as I begin my descent into his arms. His eyes light up with something which can only be described as hunger as they set upon my person.

My father walks beside me on the stairs, my skirts gathered in my hands, the back singing kisses down the carpet.

And that's when I see you. Wearing Celeste blue at the back of the room. Your eyes fixed not on my body but sinking into my eyes. Your eyes sparkle with approval and I wish I were adorned for you and not for him.

For every step I take down the stairs, even though it brings me closer, sends me further from your arms. And all too soon it is his I meet.

I tear my eyes from you as my body dips a curtsy to the man who will be my husband.

"My dearest you look impeccable," he simpers in a voice designed to make me swoon. "Do you need time to settle or may I have this first dance?"

The room is hot and suddenly overcrowded as I look up into his eyes, hot and burdened by bodies which cluster in the space moving pretence around the dancefloor.

I remember myself before it becomes impolite and nod an agreement and he leads me to the dancefloor.

He folds himself around me with a grip reserved for reverence and begins to move us to the music.

My Viscount is strong, his body muscular beneath the clothes that obscure him, and my fingers rest in the crevices they make. He is kind, and smiles at me as he dances me around the room. He is rich and boasts so from every stitch of fabric upon his person.

And yet, my Viscount cannot dance.

Perhaps one day, he may tolerate my teasing him about it, in a year or so when we have been whisked away by love in the privacy of our own estate. Perhaps when I am heavy with his child he shall let me jest with him.

That may last a few years until he tires of my face. Until my body is worn with the effect of his heirs. Then will he tolerate me at all?

All too soon he say something that I must have agreed with because he starts guiding me to the side of the room. Closer, I realise with a sudden shock of lightning, to you. I look up at him, but he doesn't see you. He sees a colleague or a friend of some kind and is guiding me over to him.

I see you though. I see your soft smile on your plump lips and I see your delicate fingers as you caress the door on your way onto the balcony.

My own lips make their excuses before I have time to understand what I am doing. My feet follow yours. My fingers reaching for you.

I come out into the garden, and see you standing at the edge of the rose garden, waiting for me. Trusting me that, no matter my words or my pleas for enough, that I would still come before you even needed to call.

The smell of the roses meets my nose as I follow you into the walled garden, open enough that we could not be accused of abandoning the ball, closed enough that crunching footsteps on the gravel would alert us to someone's presence before they arrived.

"Celeste," you whisper, gathering my hands in yours. My name upon your lips sends a shiver down my spine. "You look ridiculous."

My eyes jump to yours in shock and surprise as a laugh is ripped from my mourning heart.

"So I've been told." I laugh still louder, even as my eyes fill with tears.

"It's true," your words are warmer now, as you step closer in the moonlight, removing a glove to wipe a tear so it cannot begin its journey down my cheek. "Quite absurd."

My chin trembles as I nod. "I know. And you look..."

"Just right," you finish for me as you smooth the skirt of Celeste blue. "I look just as I should."

"Yes," I whisper, another tear escaping. "Just as you should."

Your hand warms me as it winds around the back of my neck, your body pressing into mine to rest our foreheads together.

Our eyes close in unison. The muffled sounds of the party dampening gently as I focus only on the sound of your breathing.

"I'm sorry." I whisper as your words join mine in the cool night air: "I love you."

My eyes open to find your beautiful blue eyes looking back at me intently. "I love you." I reply and the words take my lips to meet yours.

It is everything. Everything and nothing. To feel your kiss.

You are my world and yet you have no place in it.

You are air and yet you steal it from me.

And in your kiss I find myself, and lose the world around us.

We should have heard his expensive boots crushing the path beneath them, we should have heard his gasp. We should have and yet I only become aware of his presence, when I am forcibly ripped from yours.

I stumble back, the hem of my skirt catching under my heel and tearing with an agonising noise.

I do not care for the dress I wore for him, even as I stare up into his eyes. They are no longer kind or hungry for me. Instead they now look at me in disdain, his mouth open in shock.

"So... this is the true you, is it?" He growls his voice heavy in malice. He holds my wrist in his fist so tight I feel it may break.

"Let her go, Viscount. You do not know what you are talking about." You say as you try to pull him from me. "She had something in her eye, I was..."

But the Viscount barks a laugh. "You take me for a fool!" He rounds on you and for the first time since he found us my muscles tense in terror. "Tell me, Miss Fairchild, how long have you been enjoying the bed of my future wife?"

His spittle flies off the malice in his words, and you stumble back for fear for yourself.

"Months, Viscount," I whisper. The first admission I have ever made aloud. "I love her."

His head snaps back to me and he grabs my other wrist to shake me hard enough that I feel sapphires dislodge from my hair and drip onto the ground like tears.

"That is not love, you imbecilic child! You are ill!"

"No," I breathe. "I am only ill when I have to be with you." My voice cracks. "And I am grateful now that you know me. Because even though I may face ridicule and spite. At least I will not have to marry you."

His top lip tightens in a snarl as he leans close enough I can feel his breath upon my lips. "You think this changes that?"

My breath catches.

He cannot mean it.

"You think I am going to let you go now?" His voice rises to a crescendo before the truth of what he is saying crashes about me like percussion "You will marry me, Celeste."

The world begins to spin, I cannot get enough air into my lungs to fully wrap my head around what is happening. I try to pull away but he jerks me into his arms. I can feel every inch of his hardness between us as he presses me close to him.

"Do you think you walk from this, girl?" he snarls, his jaw clenching spittle hitting my face from how close he has invaded my space. I try to pull back, but he intensifies his hold upon me once again.

"You belong to me, Celeste. You were mine the moment I laid eyes on you and this changes *nothing!*" He shouts the final word before his voice returns to a quiet so dangerous I would think it had edges. "You are mine. In the eyes of every person who matters in that room, you are mine."

"Stop!" You shout from behind him, but I hear the crack in your voice, the weakness that betrays your desperation. "Leave her!"

He releases an arm from around me to lash out and I hear you tumble to the floor, before he squeezes me tighter than any corset ever has.

"You will marry me, Celeste," he repeats his voice dangerously low. "You will be my wife and you will smile about it. I will *not* be embarrassed by a woman."

I stare at the pure hatred in his face with open mouthed shock. He gives me another rigid shake to startle me. "Is that understood!"

"Yes!" I gasp and he lets me go with so much suddenness I go crashing to the gravel at his boots.

He seems somewhat mollified now I have agreed, making a noise of satisfaction as he looks down at us both.

I cannot bear to look at you. Yet still, you reach for me across the ground.

"I suppose you are still pure, at least," he mutters as though he were talking of the weather. It hadn't occurred to me yet that this might be the case. I am still pure. I am still ready to be his wife.

I gasp in air as I start to sob, tears that have been building this whole day finally trickling down my cheeks. Grief for you, for the life we might have had. Gratitude for the love I was able to experience. Shame for myself that I couldn't fit the mould they left for me. Fear for us both for the future that awaits us.

The future crunches the gravel between my fingers and crouches down to look at me, lifting my chin with a gentle finger until I'm forced to meet his eyes. "Shh now, dear wife. You can keep your plaything."

I gasp, my brow furrowing for the second time tonight, I swallow.

"What?" You mutter behind him, finally getting to your feet and looking down upon us both. "Say what it is you are proposing, Viscount."

I have to admire your courage and your gaul in this moment. You are stronger than any man I have ever seen. Your blue dress is soiled from mud and your cheek red from his strike that sent you into it and yet you look down on him as though he were your inferior.

As he always has been to me.

He chuckles at your attitude and straightens leaving me alone on the floor. "You can have her, Miss Fairchild. You may continue to bed my wife. But she *will* bear my heirs. And no-one will find out about our agreement."

Your hands wrap around my arms to lift me to my feet and brush me off, saying dismissively "And why would you do that?"

The Viscount simply shrugs. "I will of course, be enjoying the company of others myself. I'd rather not have to deal with a wife who is hysterical with some ridiculous notion of lost *love*. If you can keep her quiet and obedient, then I will gladly offer my house as refuge to my wife's spinster friend." He spits out the words as though they are an insult and not the one thing you have wanted to be your whole life.

He leans in his eyes dark.

"But hear this, ladies. Celeste is to be my wife. And you... just some little private indulgence. So I will have obedience from you both and you, *wife* will bear me an heir within the year or I will throw you both in the madhouse."

He shoots me a look of disgust, his upper lip curling. "I will see you at the wedding."

And with that he turns and storms from the scene, his coat tails whipping around the corner.

My knees give out, and you catch me, guiding me to the bench. You stroke my hair. I sob through the agony.

"There, my love," you whisper soothingly. "Celeste, it's okay. Look at me." I raise watery eyes to meet yours as you smile softly as a reward. "There you are."

"I'm so sorry, Felicity," I choke. "I'm so sorry."

You wrap your arms around me and I sink into your body once more, so soft and different to the one that held me last. *What have I done? What have I agreed to? I have sold us both.*

"No," you say firmly. "This... this is the best it could be. It will be hard, my love. But think about it thus: We never have to part again."

I shake my head. "We exist only at his command."

"Let him command. I have survived far worse than a nobleman's cruelty."

I look up at you, searching for the first time for something I'd never have guessed existed within you: strength. More strength than me, than the Viscount... perhaps even more than my father. You have no strength of your own, none given to you by status, gender or wealth and yet- yet here you stand, a sword wrapped in silk.

You only need reason to wield it.

Will I be your reason to find your strength? Or will I be your downfall. The question sends chills through my body like jumping into a frozen lake.

"He will make us bend to his will... I won't be the reason you hurt-" I cry out but you interrupt with a soft coo of calm.

"Oh sweet. Didn't you hear him? He wants his own conquests. He probably has a dozen or so littered about the city. He will barely be around." You wipe my tears and kiss my cheeks, your warmth bursting like bubbles on my skin. "It may take some time to settle, but the only thing that matters is that I will be with you. We will be together. Whatever he throws at us: we can get through with our fingers entwined." You curl your fingers through mine.

"You really believe this can work?" I whisper.

You smile, realising I'm coming around to my fate. "I really do. It's not fair, Celeste. But it's something."

And you kiss me once more, until I'm gasping for air, desperate to feel you but knowing I cannot.

I let you hold me as I settle with the agreement I have made on our behalf. My life stretches in front of me a never ending path of predictable disdain: owned by a man who may do with me as he pleases.

I am to be his wife, his vessel, his lie.

Selfish as it may be, I reach for your hand, taking your willing sacrifice with need. I have realised that the only thing worse facing hell- is facing it alone.

Our future is uncertain, as murky as the morality of the man who now keeps us. And yet, of one thing I am certain: we shall return to the tree that kept our secret as often as we can. We shall seek refuge hidden in its leaves for stolen moments that may span a lifetime. And of the words we whisper, two will remain always- the truth of who we are:

"Forever yours."