

# **Gothic Nightingale**

*by Evelyn Cross*

MyTropes / RomanceBots

## Chapter One: The Box

The note arrived on a Tuesday, tucked between a mildewed bill from the landlord and a letter from her mother asking, again, about prospects.

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*Miss Fairfax — Your voice is wasted in the chorus. I have spoken with Maestro Delacorte. The lead soprano role in the autumn production is yours, if you want it. — D. Blackthorne*

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Amelia read it three times. Then she turned it over, looking for the joke.

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There wasn't one.

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She asked about him, carefully, the way she'd learned to ask about powerful men — sideways, as if she wasn't particularly interested. The answer that came back was always the same: *wealthy* (obviously), *private* (dangerously so), *attended the opera every Thursday for as long as anyone could remember*. The last box on the left, high tier, where the shadows gathered like they'd been invited.

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She accepted his offer. Of course she did. She wasn't a fool.

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She told herself she hadn't accepted for the chance to see him.

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The flat was on Mercer Street, which was not a good street and knew it. Three rooms, one of which had a ceiling that wept in heavy rain and one of which was so close to the landlord's own quarters that she could hear him clear his throat through the wall. The third was fine. She kept her music there.

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She had been in the chorus for four years. Four years of standing in precise formation and contributing her exceptional voice to the collective sound of women who were largely interchangeable, which was the point. The chorus was not where remarkable things happened. Remarkable things happened center stage, alone, in the light that separated the performer from everyone else in the building.

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She had been patient. She had watched lead sopranos come and go — one

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married a baronet, one moved to Vienna, one simply aged out of the roles she'd been given, quietly, the way trees fell in forests — and she had watched and learned and waited and continued to be exceptional in the anonymous dark of the ensemble and told herself that patience was a skill and she was developing it.

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The note from Dorian Blackthorne arrived after the fourth year and the third soprano vacancy in eighteen months, neither of which had been offered to her.

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She had been about to do something she had not yet decided the shape of. Write to the Philharmonic herself, perhaps, and see who laughed. Find another house in another city. Do the careful maths of how long her savings would last against how much longer she was willing to wait to be noticed by people who should have noticed her immediately.

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Instead she read the note three times and turned it over looking for the joke.

---

There wasn't one.

---

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She accepted his offer. Of course she did. She wasn't a fool.

---

She told herself she hadn't accepted for the chance to see him.

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Thursday. Season opener. *La Traviata*.

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Amelia stood in the wings with her heart attempting to exit her body through her sternum, watching the house fill. Jewels glittering, programmes rustling, the low roar of wealth entertaining itself. She didn't look at the box on the left. She absolutely did not.

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She looked at the box on the left.

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He was already there.

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She had expected — she didn't know what she had expected. Someone older, perhaps, or softer. The kind of man who collected beautiful things because he'd given up on being interesting himself. What she saw instead was stillness. A man who did not fidget, did not scan the room, did not perform the social theatre of being seen. He simply sat, one hand resting on the velvet ledge, and watched the stage with the focused patience of something that understood how to wait.

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He was not looking at her.

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She didn't know why that felt like a challenge.

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The overture began. She stepped into the light, and she sang.

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She had always known, in the abstract way of people who have been told a thing their entire lives, that she had a remarkable voice. But she had never felt it the way she felt it that night — like something loosed from its cage, rising and rising until it stopped belonging to her at all. The hall was silent in the way that meant they'd stopped breathing. She hit the final note of the first act and held it until her lungs burned, and when she released it, the applause that followed felt like being struck by something warm and heavy.

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She did not look at the box on the left.

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She looked at the box on the left.

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He was looking at her now.

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Even from that distance — forty feet, fifty, the whole jewelled distance of the house between them — she felt it. His gaze was not the hungry look of the men in the front stalls who'd started watching the moment her neckline appeared in the programme notes. It was quieter than that. More thorough. The look of a man cataloguing something he intended to understand completely.

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She told her heart to behave. It didn't listen.

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He came to her dressing room after the third act.

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She was sitting at her mirror, hairpins scattered across the vanity, the maid dismissed ten minutes ago because Amelia could not stand to be fussed over when she was already stretched so thin. The knock came — two, precise, unhurried — and she knew before she said *come in* that it was him.

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He was taller than she'd expected. And younger, which was confusing, because she could have sworn she saw something ancient moving behind his eyes.

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"Miss Fairfax." His voice was low and measured. Everything about him was measured — the quality of his coat, the angle of his head, the careful distance he maintained just inside the doorway. "You were extraordinary."

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"I know," she said.

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She didn't mean it to come out like that. She had a perfectly serviceable social voice she could deploy like armour — gracious, just warm enough, not so warm that anyone got ideas. She had no idea what had happened to it.

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Something shifted at the corner of his mouth. Not quite a smile. An acknowledgement.

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"You know," he repeated.

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"I've been told I should be more modest about it." She turned back to the mirror, affecting more calm than she felt. "I haven't found modesty particularly useful."

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He moved then — not toward her, just slightly into the room, enough that the lamplight caught his face fully for the first time. Her breath did something embarrassing.

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He was beautiful in the way that old things sometimes were — not warm, not soft, but precise. Like a blade that had been made for one purpose and had

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never been asked to be anything else.

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"No," he agreed. "I don't imagine you have." He reached into his coat and produced a small envelope, which he set on the corner of her vanity without approaching any closer. "My card. The offer I made extends to an introduction to the Philharmonic Society, if that interests you. It should." His eyes met hers in the mirror. "You're better than this house deserves."

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Then he left.

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No request. No expectation. Just the card on the vanity and the smell of sandalwood and something underneath it she couldn't name — cold stone, old rain, the particular dark that existed before gas lamps were a thing anyone had thought of.

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She picked up the card.

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*Dorian Blackthorne. Blackthorne House, Cheyne Walk.*

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She told herself she'd think about it.

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She thought about nothing else for a week.

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## Chapter Two: Backstage

The second time he came to her dressing room, she was alone and she had not sent the maid away. The maid had simply left — some confusion about schedules, or perhaps the look on Dorian Blackthorne's face as he'd moved through the backstage corridors, which Amelia had been told later caused three stagehands to develop urgent tasks in other parts of the building.

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She was still in costume. The heavy silk of Act Three, wine-coloured, a little too warm for the close air of the dressing room. She was sitting where he'd first seen her — mirror, scattered pins, the gaslight doing its amber best — and she heard the footsteps in the corridor and knew them. Knew the rhythm, the certainty, the way they didn't pause or hesitate.

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She did not reach for a pin.

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"The Philharmonic," she said, when the knock came. "I accept."

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He opened the door. "I know. They sent word this afternoon." He stepped inside, and this time he didn't stop at the doorway. He crossed to the chair by the dressing screen and sat down like he'd been invited, which she supposed she had just implied he was. "You have a meeting with Sir William on the fourteenth."

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"And you arranged this without being certain I'd say yes?"

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"I was certain," he said. Simply. Without arrogance, which somehow made it worse.

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She studied him in the mirror — the specific way he sat, entirely at ease in a dressing room that wasn't his and a chair that had been placed there for other people's coats. Most men who came backstage to see sopranos sat with some version of entitlement: this space is not mine but I am comfortable asserting myself in it. He sat the way he sat in his own library. Like he occupied space with permission and didn't need to claim it.

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"How long have you actually been attending this house," she asked.

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"The current building? Twenty-two years. The previous structure on this site — " he tilted his head slightly, doing mental arithmetic that she was beginning to understand covered significantly more ground than ordinary arithmetic — "forty-one."

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"Sixty-three years of Thursday evenings."

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"Give or take."

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She turned from the mirror to look at him directly. She had decided, sometime in the past week, that dealing with Dorian Blackthorne via reflection was a form of cowardice she refused to indulge. He met her gaze without adjustment — no performance of ease, no slight repositioning to suggest he'd been caught. He simply looked back.

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"And in sixty-three years of Thursday evenings," she said, "nothing before me warranted a note."

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He was quiet for a moment. Not the evasive quiet of someone finding a deflection. The real kind.

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"Nothing," he said, "warranted a note."

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She held that for a beat. Then: "Why?"

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He was watching her with that same complete attention he'd given her on the stage. Like she was the only thing in the room worth looking at.

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"Because you deserved it."

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"That's not why people do things like this." She kept her voice level. She had a great deal of practice keeping her voice level. "People like you don't attend operas and rearrange soprano careers out of some abstract commitment to what people deserve."

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He was quiet for a moment. Outside, she could hear the muffled sound of the house emptying — the percussion of a few hundred wealthy Londoners putting on coats and finding carriages.

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"No," he agreed. "They don't."

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"Then why?"

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He rose from the chair. He moved the way he did everything — without urgency, without any of the performing that other men did when they were trying to appear at ease. He was at ease. It was infuriating. He crossed to the vanity, and this time he didn't stop at a careful distance. He stopped close enough that she could see the detail of him properly: the slight irregularity of his jaw where some old fracture had healed imperfectly, the way the lamplight moved strangely across his eyes like something behind them wasn't quite settled.

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"Because," he said, and his voice was different now — lower, rougher at the edges — "I have been attending this house for thirty years, and in thirty years, I have never sat in that box and forgotten to breathe."

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The mirror gave her back her own face: flushed, wide-eyed, completely failing at composed.

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"That's a terrible answer," she managed.

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"It's the true one."

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He reached past her, and she went very still — every nerve anticipating — but all he did was pick up one of the scattered hairpins from the vanity, turning it between his fingers like it interested him, which it clearly didn't, and set it back down.

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"May I call on you?" he asked. "Properly. Whatever properly looks like for a woman who doesn't own a parlour to be called upon in."

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"I have a parlour," she said, stung.

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"I didn't mean—" Something crossed his face that she could almost call chagrin. "Forgive me. I am out of practice with this."

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The admission undid her more than the compliment had. She looked at his hands — still, finally, resting on the vanity ledge on either side of her, not

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touching her, just — around her, in the approximate shape of an embrace without being one. She could feel the cool of him from here.

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"Yes," she said. "You may call."

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He leaned down — slowly, giving her every chance to pull away — and pressed his lips to her temple. Not her mouth. Her temple. The lightest possible point of contact, no more pressure than a moth landing, and her whole body lit up like a struck match anyway.

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"Thursday," he said, against her hair.

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She nodded. She didn't trust her voice.

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He left. She sat in front of the mirror for a long time afterward, watching the colour slowly leave her face, and understood with the calm clarity of someone watching a disaster assemble itself from a great height that she was in a very great deal of trouble.

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## **Chapter Three: Blackthorne House**

Thursday came grey and cold, the Thames putting out its usual fog-scented warning about ambition. Amelia wore her best day dress — deep blue wool, nothing extravagant, but it fit her properly which was worth more than diamonds — and took a cab to Cheyne Walk because she refused to arrive flustered from the Underground.

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Blackthorne House was exactly what it should have been: narrow-fronted, Georgian, utterly composed. Dark ivy climbed the brickwork. The brass knocker was shaped like a hand.

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She knocked.

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He answered it himself.

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She hadn't expected that. She hadn't expected him in shirtsleeves, either — no coat, no cravat, like she'd come an hour early and caught him in the middle of being human. He looked at her face and seemed to read her surprise.

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"My household staff," he said, "are accustomed to Thursdays."

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"Are they."

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"I don't usually have visitors."

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She stepped inside without being asked, because if she waited for the invitation she might lose her nerve. The entrance hall was dim — panelled oak, a single lamp, more paintings than walls to hold them. Every surface held something worth cataloguing: a bronze figure from antiquity, a tiny enamel clock, a case of insects pinned behind glass that should have been macabre and instead looked like jewels.

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She stopped at the clock. It was perhaps six inches tall, enamel and gilt, the kind of thing that should have been in a museum. She didn't touch it. She just looked, reading the date stamped discreetly into the base: 1701.

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"That came from Versailles," he said, from somewhere behind her. "The year before Louis died. A lady of the court gave it to me in lieu of something else she'd decided she wasn't going to give me after all."

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She looked at him over her shoulder. "Did you mind?"

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He considered this with genuine seriousness. "At the time. Less, afterward." He crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame with the easy posture of someone entirely comfortable being examined in his own house. "She was considerably smarter than I'd given her credit for."

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Amelia looked back at the clock. She understood, from the way he'd said it — matter-of-fact, without sentiment — that the lady of Versailles was long dead, and that he knew it, and that this was simply how it was. Objects remained. People didn't.

---

She thought about what it would be to live in a house where every surface was a timestamp. Every beautiful thing a marker for someone who was gone.

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She turned back to face him. He was watching her with the expression she was beginning to recognise: the one where he was waiting to see what she made of the latest piece of information. Waiting to be disappointed, maybe. Or braced against it.

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"You collect things," she said.

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"I do." He closed the door behind her. "Beautiful things. Temporary things. Things that will not last."

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She turned to face him. "Is that a warning?"

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He was close — closer than he'd been backstage, close enough that she could see the way his throat moved when he considered his answer.

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"I don't know what it is," he said. "I have been — uncertain, since I heard you sing. I haven't been uncertain about anything in a very long time."

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Something about the admission made her breath catch. She reached up —

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she didn't fully decide to, her hand just went — and touched his jaw, the slight imperfection of the old fracture, the skin that was cool and smooth and not quite right in a way that should have frightened her and didn't.

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He didn't move. He stood perfectly still the way prey animals went still — or the way predators did when they were trying not to startle something.

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"I'm not temporary," she told him.

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"No," he said. "You're not."

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He kissed her then — finally, properly, both hands cradling her face with that same excessive care he gave to everything in his collection — and she stopped thinking about warnings or collections or the particular quality of his skin. She kissed him back with everything she had, because she was Amelia Fairfax and she had never done anything by halves in her life, and when she pressed closer and felt his breath shudder out against her mouth she understood for the first time that for all his stillness, all his control, he wanted this as badly as she did.

---

He kissed her like he was memorising her. Like he had centuries of practice at patience and was choosing, for the first time, to set it down.

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When they finally broke apart — both of them, she noticed, a little undone — he rested his forehead against hers. His eyes were closed.

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"Amelia," he said. Just her name. Like it was the whole sentence.

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"I know," she said.

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She had that feeling again — the one from the stage, the one where something escaped the cage it had been keeping itself in and rose and rose and stopped belonging only to her.

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She thought: *this is where the story actually begins.*

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Outside, the Thames fog pressed against the windows, and the lamp burned low, and Dorian Blackthorne held a mortal woman's face in his hands and remembered, for the first time in a very long time, what it felt like

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to be afraid of losing something.

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## Chapter Four: What He Is

He pulled back first.

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She hated that. She was still leaning forward, reaching for him, when she registered that he'd put two inches of cold air between them and was looking at her with an expression she hadn't seen on him before — something careful, something almost pained.

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"There are things," he said, "that you should know about me."

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"I suspect," she said, "that I already know the important ones."

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"Amelia."

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"Your skin is cold." She kept her eyes on his. "Your reflection in my dressing room mirror was — absent, the first night. I thought I'd imagined it. I hadn't." She watched him go very still in that specific way he had, the way no living man went still. "You've been attending the opera for thirty years, and you do not look thirty years older than when you started. The programmes. I found the archive."

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The silence stretched.

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"And yet," he said finally, "you came here."

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"And yet."

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He turned away from her then, moving to the fireplace where a low fire was doing its inadequate best against the November cold. He stood with one hand on the mantel, his back to her, and she watched the line of his shoulders and waited.

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"I was made in 1643," he said. "Not born. *Made*. There is a difference." He didn't look at her. "I have watched approximately nine women I loved grow old and die. I have not — I do not — I made a decision, some time ago, not to do it again."

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She was quiet.

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Nine women. She did the arithmetic without wanting to: not nine over two and a half centuries of casual attachment, but nine who had mattered enough to count. Nine specific griefs, each one presumably different and each one presumably the same — the same ending, the same sitting with them while the world continued being indifferent, the same aftermath of going on. Nine times he had chosen to love something that would not last and nine times he had been right that it wouldn't.

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She thought about the clock from Versailles. Every surface in the house a timestamp. Every beautiful thing a marker.

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She thought about what it would take to choose a tenth time. What kind of certainty you would need, or what kind of desperation, or whether at a certain point those became the same thing.

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She thought: *he hasn't chosen yet. He's telling me why he can't.*

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She thought: *that is not the same thing as him being right.*

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"And then you heard me sing."

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"And then I heard you sing." He turned. His eyes were different in the firelight — the unsettled quality more visible, something amber moving underneath the dark. "I should tell you to go home, Amelia. I should tell you this is a mistake I am experienced enough to refuse to make."

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"Should you."

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"Yes."

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She crossed the room.

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It took perhaps four steps, and she felt each one of them in her sternum — the weight of the choice, the clean simple terror of knowing exactly what she was walking toward and walking toward it anyway. She stopped in front of him. Close. Closer than was sensible.

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"Tell me, then," she said. "Tell me to go home."

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He looked at her for a long moment. The fire snapped. Outside, London did its usual indifferent London things, entirely unconcerned.

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"I can't," he said.

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She put her hand on his chest, where a heartbeat should have been and wasn't, and felt the solid reality of him — the wool of his shirt, the unyielding cool beneath it, the way his breath came in despite everything.

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"Then don't."

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He moved like the decision, once made, collapsed all his restraint at once. Both arms around her, pulling her in, and his mouth found hers with a certainty that was nothing like the careful reverence of before. This was hunger — the specific kind that had been denied long enough to sharpen into something almost desperate. She made a sound against his lips that she would have been embarrassed about under any other circumstances and then stopped thinking about being embarrassed at all.

---

His hands moved — her waist, her back, learning her the way a blind man reads, thorough and unhurried even in the urgency of it. He worked the buttons at her collar with fingers that didn't fumble, spreading the fabric open and pressing his mouth to the bare curve of her throat, and she tilted her head back and looked at the ceiling of Blackthorne House and understood that she was not going home tonight.

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"Tell me to stop," he said, against her pulse. His lips barely moved. "Tell me to stop and I will."

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Her hand found the back of his neck.

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"Dorian," she said. "Don't you dare stop."

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She felt him exhale — slow, long, the sound of something enormous deciding — and then his arms tightened, and he lifted her like she weighed nothing at all, and she laughed despite everything, surprised by the ease of it, and he carried her toward the stairs with the focused quiet of a man who

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had made up his mind and intended to see it through.

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"The paintings in this house," she said, as they went, because her mouth kept working even when her brain had entirely conceded the field. "Are any of them you?"

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"Third landing," he said. "1782. I was going through a period."

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"A *period*."

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"I'll show you." He glanced down at her, and something in his face had changed — not softer, exactly, but opened somehow, like a room whose shutters had been thrown back. "Later."

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"Later," she agreed.

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## **Chapter Five: The Bargain Kept**

His bedroom was at the top of the house, where the ceilings were low and the windows looked out over the Thames and the fog had pressed so thick against the glass that London had ceased to exist. Just this room. Just the fire he lit with a word — she filed that away for later — and the wide, dark bed and Dorian Blackthorne watching her from three feet away like he was giving her one final chance to change her mind.

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She reached up and finished what he'd started with her collar buttons.

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He made a sound low in his chest that she felt more than heard, and then he closed the distance.

---

He undressed her slowly. Not performing patience — actually *having* it, the way only something very old could, each button considered, each inch of new skin greeted like something worth the wait. Her dress fell. Her stays followed, loosened with the quiet efficiency of a man who had done this before and was choosing, tonight, to do it like it was the first time. When he drew back to look at her in the firelight, she resisted the urge to cover herself and made herself hold still under his gaze, which moved over her the way his hands had moved over the hairpin: careful, certain, like he was deciding what to do with something precious.

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"You're shaking," he said.

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"I'm cold," she said.

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"You're not cold."

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"No," she admitted. "I'm not."

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He touched her then — finally, properly, his palm flat against her sternum and sliding down slowly, like he was feeling for her heartbeat and checking it was still there. It was. It was going considerably faster than she would have liked to admit.

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She reached for him in return and found buttons, lapels, the warm wool of

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his shirt. He let her undress him — stood perfectly still for it, which was its own kind of madness, because she could feel how much the stillness was costing him in the fine tension running through him, the way his jaw set when her hands spread the shirt open and found bare skin underneath.

---

He was cool to the touch. Smooth. Unmarked, except for one pale scar at his left side that was very old and very faded, and she pressed her palm to it without thinking.

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His breath came in sharply.

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"Old wound," he said.

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"From what?"

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"A man who believed very strongly he was doing God's work." He looked down at her hand. "He was wrong."

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She leaned up and pressed her mouth to the scar instead. Felt him shudder — a full-body thing, the kind of involuntary response that couldn't be performed — and smiled against his skin.

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"Good," she said.

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He pulled her down onto the bed.

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He took her apart with his mouth first.

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She had suspected, in an abstract way, that a man who had three centuries to practice at things would be thorough. She had not fully reckoned with what thorough actually meant — how it meant his hands holding her hips still when she tried to move, how it meant him ignoring entirely the sounds she was making that clearly communicated *now, please, immediately*, how it meant his tongue working at the heat of her in long, deliberate strokes until she had both fists in the bedclothes and her spine arching off the mattress and her composure in absolute ruins somewhere on the floor with her dress.

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"Dorian." His name came out frayed. Useless. She could hear what she

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sounded like and couldn't manage to care.

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"I have been waiting," he said, against the inside of her thigh, "considerably longer than you have. I intend to take my time."

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"I will absolutely haunt you," she told the ceiling.

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He laughed then — properly, fully, the sound of it so unexpected that she went still to listen. It changed his whole face. Made him look like what he might have been before centuries had smoothed everything down to that beautiful, composed surface.

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She pulled him up to her. His weight settled over her — cool skin, lean muscle, the strange beautiful wrongness of him that had stopped registering as wrong — and she held his face in her hands and looked at him properly.

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"There you are," she said softly.

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Something shifted in his expression — undone, for just a moment, cracked open — before he kissed her and stopped being readable at all.

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He pressed into her slowly, giving her time, watching her face for the adjustment, and she made a sound that was not remotely dignified and didn't care at all. He was still for a moment when he was fully seated, both of them breathing, and she could feel his restraint in every line of him — how much it cost him to be still when she was warm around him and pulling him closer with her heels at the small of his back.

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"Move," she said.

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"Please," he said.

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"*Move*," she said again, "and I will be as polite as you like afterward."

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He moved.

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The restraint went with him. He was not rough — not precisely — but he was thorough in this the way he was thorough in everything, learning the angle

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that made her gasp and returning to it, finding the rhythm that worked and holding it until she was shaking apart beneath him, her nails in his shoulders and her face against his throat and the sound of his name coming out of her like she'd finally found a note she couldn't hold. She came undone spectacularly and without any of the composure she'd spent her whole life cultivating, and she didn't regret a single moment of it.

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He followed her with his forehead pressed to hers and his eyes open, watching her — she felt the shudder move through him like a fault line releasing, felt the long exhale, felt the particular stillness on the other side of it.

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They lay tangled together, her head on his chest, her breath returning from wherever it had gone.

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He asked her, eventually — his mouth moving to her throat, her pulse, the place where her neck curved into her shoulder — "May I?"

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She understood what he was asking. She thought about it for exactly as long as it took her heart to beat twice.

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"Yes," she said.

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The bite was a bright, clarifying pain that dissolved almost immediately into something else entirely: warmth flooding outward from that single point, a strange and spreading pleasure that was nothing like anything she had a word for. She felt him in a different way then — connected, somehow, as though the careful distance he'd maintained for months had collapsed entirely and he was finally, genuinely close. She felt the shift in him when the last of his restraint let go, the low sound he made against her skin, the way his arms tightened around her.

---

She held on. She thought, distantly, that she understood now why people had always written about this. Why there were operas about it. Why the stories were always the same: the mortal and the immortal, the ordinary woman and the ancient dark, the bargain struck and the price paid in something that didn't feel like loss at all.

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When he lifted his head, his eyes were dark and thoroughly undone, and

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she raised her hand to his jaw — the old fracture, the cool skin — and held him there.

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"Still not temporary," she said.

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He turned his head and pressed his lips to her palm.

---

"No," he agreed. "You are not."

---

Afterward, she lay with her head on his chest where there was no heartbeat, listening to the silence of him, which was different now than it had been — fuller, somehow. Like a room that had been furnished.

---

"The painting," she said.

---

"Mm."

---

"1782. You said you'd show me."

---

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "I was insufferably melancholy in 1782. The painter captured it with great enthusiasm."

---

She laughed. She felt him feel her laugh, the shift of his arms around her.

---

"Amelia." His voice was different again — careful, the way it got when the thing he was about to say mattered. "I should tell you what this means. What I'm capable of. What I'm *not* capable of, given—" He stopped.

---

"Given centuries of loss," she finished.

---

"Yes."

---

She considered the fog on the windows, the fire burning low, the absolute fact of him around her. She thought about her parlour, her landlord's bills, her mother's letters about prospects. She thought about the stage and the feeling of the cage opening.

---

"I'm not in the business of asking people to promise things they can't guarantee," she said. "I never have been." She tilted her head up to look at

---

## **Gothic Nightingale**

by Evelyn Cross

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him. "But I'm also not going anywhere. That's not a promise. It's just — true."

---

He looked at her for a long time.

---

"I know," he said at last. "That's what terrifies me."

---

She settled back against him. Outside, the Thames moved in its old indifferent way, carrying the city's secrets toward the sea. Inside, something that had been cold for a very long time was, with considerable reluctance and no small amount of wonder, beginning to warm.

---

She fell asleep to the sound of nothing, which was the sound of him, and did not dream of anything small.

---

## Chapter Six: The Painting

She woke to grey light and silence.

---

For a moment she didn't know where she was — unfamiliar ceiling, the low press of a November morning against unfamiliar windows, the smell of old wood and sandalwood and cold stone. Then it came back, in the specific way that mornings after arrived: all at once, warmly, with a side of *well, here we are*.

---

She was alone in the bed. She had expected that. What she hadn't expected was that the fire had been rebuilt — recently, she judged from the heat of it — and that her dress had been pressed, somehow, and laid across the chair at the foot of the bed with a care that undid her more than it should have.

---

She dressed. Found the corridor. Found the stairs.

---

Found the painting.

---

Third landing, 1782. He'd said he was going through a period and he had not been understating it. The man in the portrait was recognisably Dorian — same jaw, same precise quality of attention — but the painter had caught something the years had smoothed away: a grief that wasn't performing itself, that was simply sitting in his eyes the way furniture sits in a room, present and permanent. He was staring out of the canvas at nothing in particular with the expression of a man who has run out of ways to be surprised by loss.

---

She stood there for a long time.

---

"The painter's name was Moreau." His voice came from behind her, not close, giving her room. "He was French. He said he'd never painted anyone whose unhappiness was so *architectural*."

---

"He wasn't wrong." She studied the painted eyes. "What happened in 1782?"

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A pause. "Her name was Catherine. She was twenty-four when I met her and sixty-one when she died, and I sat with her at the end and she told me not to look so tragic because she'd had a fine life and I was embarrassing her."

---

Amelia absorbed that.

---

"She sounds formidable," she said.

---

"She was." He came to stand beside her, not touching, the way he was careful about now — giving her the option of distance that she never took. "They all were. Every one of them. It is not the weakness that kills you. It's the remarkable ones."

---

She turned and looked at him directly, the real him, not the portrait. He was watching the painting with something that was too composed to call grief but was in the same neighbourhood.

---

"You're doing it again," she said.

---

"Doing what?"

---

"Warning me. Very elegantly, about the painting and Catherine and sixty-one years, but still — warning me."

---

He looked at her. Something moved across his face.

---

"Yes," he said. "I suppose I am."

---

She took his hand. Just that — her fingers through his, the cool of him familiar now. He looked down at their joined hands like the fact of it was something he hadn't finished believing yet.

---

"Walk me through the rest of the house," she said. "I want to see all of it."

---

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "The library is on the second floor. There are approximately four thousand books, several of which I wrote under other names."

---

She started walking, pulling him with her.

---

"Which names?"

---

The library was a room that had clearly been added to over centuries until it had entirely given up on the concept of available wall space. Floor to ceiling on every surface, a rolling ladder on brass runners, a desk buried under three separate stacks of correspondence and what appeared to be an unfinished manuscript in a handwriting she didn't recognise yet as his.

---

She went straight to the shelves. He let her — stood in the doorway and watched while she ran her fingers along spines the way she read programmes and score sheets: looking for something she'd recognise.

---

She found it on the third shelf from the bottom, tucked between a natural philosophy text and a volume of French poetry. *A Treatise on the Nature of Musical Composition, with Particular Regard to the Soprano Voice*. No author name on the spine. She pulled it out.

---

"1834," she said, reading the publication date. "Under what name?"

---

"Ashford," he said. "Thomas Ashford. A musicologist who had developed an inconvenient attachment to the subject and needed a reason to write about it formally."

---

She opened to a random page and read. The prose was careful and precise and entirely his — she knew that now, the specific quality of his attention translated into sentences. The page she'd opened to was an analysis of the particular physics of a trained soprano voice at full projection, what it did to the air in a room, why certain pieces of architecture amplified it and others absorbed it.

---

"You wrote about the voice," she said, "before you ever heard me sing."

---

"I have always been interested in the voice," he said. "In what it takes. What it asks." He looked at the book in her hands. "A voice like yours is the product of years of deliberate suffering. The refinement of something that could have stayed ordinary but didn't. I find that — significant."

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She looked at him.

---

"You're describing me," she said.

---

"Yes," he said. "I know."

---

She put the book carefully back in its place. She did not trust herself to respond to that without saying something she'd regret or something she wouldn't regret at all, and she hadn't yet decided which was worse.

---

"Breakfast," she said.

---

"I'll tell you over breakfast." A pause. "I don't eat breakfast. I keep the kitchen for guests."

---

"You don't have guests."

---

"I keep it for *potential* guests." Another pause. "I had it restocked last week."

---

She laughed. He held her hand all the way down the stairs.

---

She didn't stay that night. She had a rehearsal at nine, a fitting at noon, and a landlord who would notice her absence with the particular relish of a man who had been waiting for ammunition. She told Dorian this in the entrance hall, in her properly pressed dress, and watched him process the Victorian practicalities of a working soprano's life with the expression of a man who had forgotten, over the centuries, that people had *schedules*.

---

"Tomorrow," she said.

---

"Thursday," he said.

---

"Tomorrow," she said. "I'm not waiting a week."

---

Something happened to his face — a warmth, brief and real and immediately composed over. But she'd seen it.

---

She kissed him at the door. Quick, sure, like it was already a habit. His

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hand came up to catch her jaw before she could pull back, holding her there for a moment longer — not demanding, just *present*, like he was still getting used to the fact that she was real.

---

She stepped out into the London grey and walked to the corner before she allowed herself to smile, because she had her dignity, even if it was currently wearing yesterday's dress.

---

## Chapter Seven: What London Thinks

Two weeks later, she was a rumour.

---

She heard it from the wardrobe mistress first, delivered with the careful neutrality of someone who wanted to be told it was wrong. Then from Cecily, the second soprano, who asked about Dorian Blackthorne with the bright-eyed precision of a woman who already knew the answer. Then from Maestro Delacorte himself, who called her into his office on a Tuesday and talked for ten minutes about the importance of a soprano's reputation with the window behind him doing his dignity no favours.

---

"I appreciate the concern," she said, when he finished.

---

"Miss Fairfax—"

---

"I do. Genuinely." She kept her voice pleasant. She was very good at keeping her voice pleasant. "But Mr. Blackthorne has been attending this house for thirty years, and in all that time no one has thought to question his presence or his motives. I've been here six months and you're worried about my reputation." She looked at him steadily. "I wonder why the arithmetic works that way."

---

Delacorte had nothing to say to that. She left.

---

The man was in her dressing room after the Wednesday matinée.

---

She knew immediately he was not human. It was harder to explain than it should have been — something in the way he was arranged, too still, too perfectly calibrated, the way Dorian had been when she'd first seen him across the opera house but sharper at the edges. Where Dorian's stillness was composed, this man's was watchful. The difference between a house that had been locked up and one that was actively waiting for something to come through the door.

---

He was beautiful in the wrong way. Like a painting that was technically flawless and made you want to leave the room.

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by Evelyn Cross

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"Miss Fairfax." He was already sitting in the chair by the dressing screen as though he'd been invited, which he had not. "I've heard a great deal about you."

---

"I haven't heard anything about you," she said pleasantly, setting down her programme and assessing exits. "Which seems unbalanced."

---

"Sebastien." He smiled. It didn't reach anywhere near his eyes. "An old friend of Dorian's."

---

"He hasn't mentioned you."

---

"No. He wouldn't." The smile stayed exactly where it was. "I've come to offer a friendly word of caution. Dorian is — complicated, shall we say, in his attachments. The women he chooses tend to find themselves entangled in affairs that extend well beyond what they consented to at the start."

---

"How considerate of you," she said. "To worry about women you've never met."

---

"I'm a deeply considerate man."

---

"I'm sure." She crossed to the door and opened it. "Thank you for the visit. I'll see you out."

---

He rose without urgency. Crossed to the door. Paused beside her, too close, and she held herself very still because she was not going to give him the satisfaction of stepping back.

---

"He'll hurt you," Sebastien said softly. "Not from malice. Simply from being what he is. They always do, his choices. They always end the same way."

---

"Good evening," she said.

---

He left.

---

She closed the door.

---

She stood still for a moment with her hand on the wood and listened to his

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footsteps recede down the corridor — unhurried, of course. He didn't hurry. She had noticed that about him immediately: Sebastien was a man who had never been made to wait for anything and it showed in every movement he made.

---

Then she went back to her mirror and sat down and looked at herself with the focused attention she usually reserved for deciding whether a piece of staging was working.

---

She was frightened. She was going to allow herself to notice that privately and not mention it to anyone, because fear was information and she had always preferred to process information before deciding what to do with it. The important thing was not to let it run. She had spent too long in a life where running would have been reasonable to have any patience left for it.

---

What she knew: Sebastien was old and dangerous and had been watching her long enough to make the visit feel rehearsed. What she didn't know: how many others like him there were, what the rules were in this world she'd walked into with no map, what specifically *adjusted* meant and why he'd said it the way he'd say *corrected* or *improved*.

---

What she suspected: that Dorian had not told her everything. Not because he was dishonest — she had taken his measure on that and believed him — but because there were things he hadn't told her because he hadn't wanted her to be afraid, and here they were.

---

She straightened her spine in the mirror. She smoothed her hair. She was Amelia Fairfax and she had spent four years being extraordinary in the dark and she was not going to be unravelled by a man with a pleasant face and no good intentions in the twenty minutes before someone arrived who would tell her the truth.

---

She was still sitting there when Dorian arrived, looked at her face, and went completely, dangerously quiet.

---

"Someone was here," he said. Not a question.

---

"Sebastien," she said. "He said he was an old friend."

---

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Dorian said nothing. The silence was a different quality from his usual silences — not patient, not composed. It was the silence of something very old and very controlled deciding whether to remain either.

---

"He didn't touch me," she said.

---

"No." Flat. "He wouldn't. Not yet." He crossed to her, crouched in front of her chair, and looked at her with an attention that was entirely focused on her face, reading it. "Are you all right?"

---

"I'm fine. I'm also angry." She met his eyes. "How many of his kind are there? In London. How many people — things — know about me because of you, and what does that mean, and why is this the first I'm hearing of any of it?"

---

He was quiet.

---

"Those," she said, "are not rhetorical questions."

---

He sat back on his heels. He told her.

---

There were nine of his kind in London. Not all of them were old — the oldest after Dorian was perhaps eighty years made, which was still more than enough to be dangerous. They had a council, which was exactly as grim and political as it sounded: a set of agreements established after a period in the seventeenth century that he described only as *considerably worse than the present arrangement*, and she understood from his tone that this was significant understatement.

---

The agreements covered territories. They covered the making of new ones of their kind, which required consensus and was rarely given. They covered mortal companions — the ones who were known, who were publicly attached to a specific member of the council, who had a name and a face and a career that people would notice. A mortal companion of standing was, paradoxically, protected by visibility: she was too documented to disappear quietly, too connected to Dorian specifically to be touched without consequence.

---

An *unknown* mortal, on the other hand, was considerably more vulnerable.

---

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Someone who had simply been bitten once and released, or found and fed upon without attachment — that was another matter, and one the council chose, by long tradition, not to look at too directly.

---

Amelia listened to all of it with the focused attention of someone who was constructing a map.

---

"And Sebastien," she said. "Where does he sit in this."

---

"Outside it." Dorian's voice was flat. "He was removed from the council's consideration some years ago. He operates outside the agreements. Which is part of what makes him dangerous and part of what limits him — he cannot call on protections that the rest of us have access to."

---

"So his threat to expose you."

---

"Would implicate him as well. He knows this." He looked at her steadily. "But he has been outside the agreements long enough that I am not certain he still calculates consequences the way he once did."

---

She sat with that.

---

When he finished, she said: "You should have told me this at the beginning."

---

"Yes," he said. "I should have."

---

It was the right answer. It didn't make her less angry. She let him walk her home, which was four degrees warmer than letting him call her a cab, and she thought about it all night and was still thinking about it in the morning.

---

## Chapter Eight: The Argument

She found out about the guard on a Friday.

---

His name — his current name — was Thomas, and he was forty years old and entirely human, and he had been positioned in a room above her building for eleven days with a sightline to her front door and very specific instructions about what to do if Sebastien or anyone like him came near her street.

---

She found out because Thomas, being human and therefore sensible, came to her door to explain what he was doing there rather than be reported to the constabulary by Mrs. Henshaw at number four, who had been watching him with increasing suspicion since Tuesday.

---

Amelia thanked Thomas, asked him to wait, went inside, and wrote a note.

---

*Come this evening. We need to talk. — A.*

---

She sent it by messenger and spent the rest of the afternoon very busy with the completely absorbing task of not being furious in advance.

---

Dorian arrived at seven, which was promptly, which suggested he already knew why she'd written.

---

"You had someone watching my house," she said, before he was fully through the door.

---

"Yes."

---

"Without telling me."

---

"Yes."

---

She looked at him. He looked at her. He was doing the composed thing — standing correctly, voice level, prepared to be reasonable — and she recognised it now for what it was: armour. The same armour she wore

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when she stood in the wings before a performance and refused to let anyone see her hands shake.

---

"My entire life," she said, "men have managed my circumstances without consulting me. My father decided we'd be ruined. My mother decided I'd marry whoever could salvage us. Maestro Delacorte decided I'd start in the chorus for three seasons before being considered for leads. I have spent twenty-two years being arranged around by people who were quite certain they knew better." She kept her voice level. She was very good at keeping her voice level. "I walked into your house knowing what you were. I asked for one thing. Not safety. Not a guard. I asked you not to lie to me."

---

"Omission—"

---

"Is lying. Don't."

---

He stopped. He looked at her — actually looked at her, not the careful tactical assessment he sometimes did, but the real thing, the way he'd looked at her from the box across the house when she'd been singing and he'd forgotten to pretend he wasn't watching.

---

"You were in danger," he said. "Because of me. Because I brought you into something you hadn't—"

---

"I walked into it," she said. "With my eyes open. My choice." She crossed the room. Stopped in front of him, close enough that she had to look up to hold his gaze. "If Sebastien comes for me I want to know he's coming. I want to *decide* what to do about it. I am not a thing to be put on a shelf and guarded." She held his eyes. "I am the woman who walked across your parlour floor knowing you were not human and told you not to stop. You can trust that woman. I need you to trust that woman."

---

The silence stretched.

---

"I'm sorry," he said. And he meant it — she could hear it, the actual weight of it, unperformed. "I will not do it again without telling you first."

---

"Without asking me," she said.

---

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---

"Without asking you," he agreed.

---

She held his gaze for another long moment. She believed him. She was still angry — anger didn't just disperse because the argument was resolved — and she could see from the set of his jaw that he was not entirely composed either, that the conversation had gotten under the armour in ways he hadn't expected.

---

She pulled him down to her by the lapel and kissed him, hard, with all of it still in her — the anger and the fear she hadn't admitted to and the longing that had been building for three days since she'd last seen him.

---

He caught her, hands at her waist, and kissed her back with a corresponding urgency she hadn't felt from him before — not the careful, unhurried attention of Blackthorne House but something rawer, like the argument had stripped a layer away and this was what was underneath. He walked her back until she was against the wall of her perfectly adequate parlour, and she pulled at his coat and he lifted her and she wrapped her legs around him and the argument dissolved entirely into something that needed no words at all.

---

He was not gentle. Not rough — never that — but not patient the way he'd been before, not taking his time because he had all of it. He found his way inside her with an urgency that suggested three days without her had done something to his certainty, and she held on and matched him and said his name the way she hit the high notes: like there was no point holding back.

---

Afterward, tangled together on her rather small settee, her head on his chest, his hand in her hair, she lay still and listened to the sound of him — the specific quality of his silence, which she'd been cataloguing long enough now to distinguish by character. This one was the good kind. The settled kind.

---

"You're going to have to learn to ask," she said.

---

"I know," he said. "It's — not what I'm accustomed to."

---

"Two hundred and forty-six years of arranging things."

---

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---

"Yes."

---

"And no one called you on it before."

---

A pause. "The earlier ones were — " He stopped. "It was a different arrangement then. The world expected women to accept being arranged around. Some of them pushed back. I chose, perhaps, not to hear it when they did."

---

She tilted her head up to look at him. His face in the lamplight was open in the specific way it got when he was being honest about an uncomfortable thing — not guilty, exactly, but taking genuine account.

---

"That," she said, "is an honest answer."

---

"I'm trying," he said. "To do better at those."

---

"I know." She settled back. "You are, actually."

---

"Faint praise."

---

"Accurate praise." She felt him breathe in and out, the deliberate version he did that she'd come to understand was the equivalent, for him, of collecting oneself. "For what it's worth — I don't need to be managed. But I don't need to be ignored either. I need—" She thought about how to say it. "I need you to include me. In the thinking. Not the decisions already made."

---

"Yes," he said. "I understand the difference."

---

"I know you do." She tilted her head up again. "But you'll learn."

---

Something crossed his face. Warm. Unguarded. "Yes," he said. "I believe I will."

---

## **Chapter Nine: What He Actually Is**

Sebastien made his move on the first night of December, in the lobby of the Royal Lyceum, in front of Maestro Delacorte and six other members of the company and what appeared to be half of fashionable London between performances.

---

It was, Amelia supposed afterward, well chosen. Public spaces, mortal witnesses, the bright gas-lit civilised performance of society going about its society things. A place where an old thing that wore a human face could stand and smile and say cutting, insinuating things about a young woman's relationship with her patron, her virtue, her suitability for the stage, the particular arrangements that a girl of no family made in order to advance her career — all of it in the smooth, pleasant tone of a man making conversation, all of it landing like small precise blades.

---

She had handled it. She was very good at handling it. She smiled and said nothing that could be quoted and held her chin up and thought about every man who had ever underestimated her and used that as ballast.

---

She was mid-sentence when Sebastien went still.

---

Not the stillness she'd learned to read in Dorian — not that particular quality of controlled patience. This was something else. Prey stillness. The specific arrest of something that has just recognised a threat.

---

She turned.

---

Dorian was across the lobby. She didn't know when he'd arrived or how he'd moved through a crowded room without anyone appearing to notice, but he was there, perhaps ten feet away, and he was looking at Sebastien with an expression she had never seen on him before.

---

She had thought she understood what he was. She had catalogued the evidence — the cold skin, the absent heartbeat, the way mirrors worked around him — and she had accepted it, intellectually and personally, and she had believed she understood.

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---

She had not understood.

---

The thing looking at Sebastien from Dorian's face was not the man who had pressed his lips to her temple and said *Thursday* like a promise, or who had held her in the dark at the top of his house and admitted to being afraid. It was older than that. It was the thing the careful civilised presentation had been built to contain, and for the first time she saw the gap between the container and the contained, and it was very large.

---

The lobby had gone quiet in the way that happened sometimes before storms — people not realising they were doing it, just gradually becoming less loud.

---

"Sebastien," Dorian said. Pleasantly. With a courtesy that had teeth in it.

---

"Dorian." Sebastien had recovered his smile, but it was working harder now. "We were just talking about you."

---

"I know." He stopped beside Amelia. He didn't touch her, didn't need to — the simple fact of him standing where he was standing said everything that needed saying with a clarity that required no translation. "I think this conversation is finished."

---

Sebastien looked at her over Dorian's shoulder. Something moved in his eyes — calculation, and underneath it, something that might have been old grief, badly handled. "Enjoy it while it lasts," he said to her, pleasantly. "They always do."

---

He left. The lobby slowly remembered how to make noise.

---

Amelia stood very still.

---

Dorian turned to look at her, and whatever he read in her face made something careful come into his expression — watchful, a little braced.

---

She took a breath.

---

"How old are you," she said. "Actually."

---

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by Evelyn Cross

---

He considered this. "Do you want the number or the experience?"

---

"Both."

---

"The number is 1643, which makes me two hundred and forty-six years." He held her gaze. "The experience is — longer, in the ways that matter. I have watched empires end. I have watched London burn and be rebuilt and burn again. I was in Paris for the revolution and I watched them do things in the name of liberty that — " He stopped. "The experience is longer."

---

She looked at the space where Sebastien had been.

---

"What you just did to him," she said. "What I saw on your face."

---

"Yes."

---

"Is that — is that what you are? Under everything?"

---

He didn't look away. "Part of it. The part I don't generally—" He paused. Chose words with the care he gave everything. "It is the oldest part. The part that was made rather than born. It doesn't often have reason to show itself."

---

"But it showed itself for me."

---

"Yes," he said. Simply. "It did."

---

She thought about that. She thought about Catherine, sixty-one years old, telling him not to look tragic. She thought about nine women. She thought about two hundred and forty-six years of careful composure that had just cracked open in a lobby full of people because Sebastien had been saying polished unpleasant things to her.

---

She picked up her programme from where she'd dropped it.

---

"Walk me home," she said.

---

They went out through the stage door into December, which smelled of coal smoke and the river and the particular cold that settled over London

---

## Gothic Nightingale

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when it had finally given up on warmth for the year. He didn't offer his arm — he walked beside her at a distance she could close or not, as she chose. She closed it. She wasn't sure she made a conscious decision to; her body simply moved in the direction of him the way it had been doing since October.

---

They walked for a block in silence.

---

"The thing I saw," she said. "On your face."

---

"Yes."

---

"I've seen you angry before. After Sebastien came to the dressing room. That was — controlled. What was in the lobby was something else."

---

He was quiet for a moment. The gas lamps threw shadows and took them back.

---

"In 1643," he said, "when I was made, the man who made me told me one thing that I have found consistently true. He said: the longer you live, the more you understand what you actually are. The civilised surface is real. It is not performance. But it is also — thin, in certain circumstances. When something threatens what matters." He looked at the street ahead of them. "I have not had anything that mattered in a very long time. I had forgotten what it felt like for that part of me to wake up."

---

She thought about the lobby. The lobby going quiet the way it did before storms. The lobby *knowing*, in the animal way of crowds, that something had changed in the room.

---

"Are you afraid of it?" she asked. "That part of you."

---

He considered this for long enough that she believed the answer.

---

"No," he said. "I'm afraid of what it means that it came back. That I have something to lose again." He glanced at her sideways. "It's the losing that has always been the problem. Not the wanting."

---

She thought about four years in the chorus. About patience as a skill. About

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the specific arithmetic of wanting things that might not come.

---

"I know something about that," she said.

---

He looked at her.

---

"I know," he said. "I think that may be part of why."

---

When they reached her door she held it open and said: "Come in."

---

"You don't have to—"

---

"I know," she said. "Come in."

---

## Chapter Ten: What She Chooses

She made him tea. It felt faintly absurd — the immortal at her kitchen table watching her boil water — but he accepted the cup with genuine attention, holding it in both hands, and she thought: *two hundred and forty-six years, and he holds a teacup like it matters.*

---

The kitchen was small and cold at this hour, the fire in the range burning low, the ceiling close enough that he had to mind his head slightly when he stood — which he'd noticed immediately and adapted to without comment, with the easy accommodation of someone who had spent centuries navigating spaces built for other people's dimensions. She'd noticed that about him: the way he moved through ordinary life without requiring it to adjust to him. For all his stillness, all his precision, he was not a man who expected the room to rearrange itself.

---

She sat across from him with her own cup and watched him hold his.

---

"Tell me something," she said. "Something true that you haven't told anyone."

---

He looked at the cup. Then he looked at her. Something moved in his expression — the weighing of a thing, the decision to trust the scale.

---

"I have been afraid, for most of my existence, that I would eventually stop feeling things. That the years would simply — sand it away." He turned the cup. "I have watched it happen to others. The old ones who've stopped caring about anything mortal, who can't remember why they ever did. They're not cruel, the way you might imagine. They're simply — distant. As if the glass between themselves and the world has thickened to the point where nothing gets through anymore." He paused. "I have been afraid that one day I would sit in the box at the opera and the music would mean nothing. That it would simply be sound, organised."

---

"And?"

---

"And then I sat in the box at the opera and a woman walked out on the stage and it was not simply sound." He lifted his eyes to hers. "I had

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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forgotten what it felt like to hear something and have it land. And then you walked out and I remembered. Very specifically. As though I'd never forgotten at all."

---

She held his gaze.

---

"Your turn," he said.

---

She hadn't expected that. She thought about it.

---

"I was afraid," she said, "that the voice was all I was. That if I stopped being extraordinary at it — injury, illness, age — there would be nothing left worth knowing." She looked at her cup. "I've spent my whole life making myself into something that couldn't be overlooked. I hadn't thought much about whether I'd like the person who was left when the performance stopped."

---

She looked up. He was watching her with that complete attention.

---

"And now?" he said.

---

She thought about the kitchen. The small cold room. The close ceiling. The teacup in the hands of something that had been alive for two and a half centuries and was choosing to be here, ordinary and quiet and present.

---

"Now," she said, "I think I might."

---

She held his gaze.

---

"Dorian," she said carefully. "I have thought about all of it. Tonight, and the fight, and Sebastien, and 1782, and the number two hundred and forty-six." She set down her own cup. "I've thought about what it means to be with you and what it costs and what it will eventually—" She stopped. Chose words. "I'm twenty-two. You are not. This ends one specific way unless—" She stopped again.

---

"Unless," he said quietly, "you chose otherwise. In time. When you're certain." He looked at her steadily. "It is a choice I will never make for you. It is not something I would — the women I loved before, I chose not to offer it because I was not willing to be the thing that changed them. I'm telling

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by Evelyn Cross

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you now that the offer exists. Not tonight. Not as a condition of anything. But it exists, and you should know it does."

---

She thought about that for a long time.

---

"Not tonight," she agreed.

---

"No."

---

"But I'm not going anywhere."

---

He looked at her across the kitchen table, and something in his face shifted — the last of the careful armour down, the oldest and most composed man she'd ever known looking at her like she'd said something that rearranged him.

---

"No," he said. "You're not."

---

She stood. Held out her hand.

---

He took it.

---

She led him, this time. Up the narrow stairs of her very adequate house, to her perfectly respectable bedroom with its fireplace and its three-legged dressing table and the view of the street below where Thomas the guard was very much not stationed. She lit the lamp herself and turned to find him watching her from the doorway with an expression she was learning to read: want, held in careful hands, waiting to be told it was allowed.

---

"Come here," she said.

---

He came.

---

This was different from Blackthorne House — different from the urgency of the argument, from the thorough patience of that first night. She took her time with him the way he'd taken his time with her, learning the geography of him now that she wasn't overwhelmed by her own want. The scar at his left side. The old fracture in his jaw. The place at the back of his neck that made his breath catch. She catalogued him with her hands and her mouth

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## Gothic Nightingale

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and he lay still for it with his eyes open, watching her, and she could see on his face what it cost him to be patient while she learned him — not unpleasantly, but *viscerally*, the controlled want of him visible in the set of his jaw and the very deliberate stillness of his hands.

---

"You can touch me," she said, against his chest.

---

"I know." His hands found her waist. "I'm trying to let you finish."

---

She laughed. Kissed the scar. "I'm done."

---

He pulled her up the length of him and kissed her slowly, deeply, with none of the urgency of any of the other times — this was something more settled. She was above him, and she took that for the offer it was.

---

She took him in and stilled for a moment — feeling the fullness of him, the specific cool of his skin warming against her, the particular strangeness and rightness of it that she had stopped thinking of as strange and had simply begun to think of as him. His hands settled on her hips, not guiding yet, just present, waiting.

---

She moved.

---

His eyes stayed on hers — that complete, undeflectable attention she'd been performing for since the Lyceum — and she let it stay there. Let him watch. She was a singer; she knew the difference between being seen and being looked at, and this was the former, entirely, the specific quality of someone for whom this was the most important thing in the room.

---

She found her rhythm and he found it with her, his hands on her hips making small corrections, angling her so the sensation deepened, and she heard herself make sounds she would not have made at the Lyceum under any circumstances and found she had no interest in stopping. The cool of him everywhere she touched him, warming beneath her hands, her mouth, the specific sensation of him moving inside her growing steadily more urgent.

---

"Dorian—" His name came out differently than it ever had. Stripped.

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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His hands tightened. He lifted his hips to meet her — that restrained power finally committed, driving up into her with the same quality as that first night but differently weighted, more deliberate, like he'd learned precisely what she needed and intended to give it to her correctly.

---

She gripped the headboard. She was loud. She was the loudest she'd ever been in her natural life and there was no audience for it except him and she did not care at all.

---

She came apart with her whole body — the wave breaking through her in long stages, each one distinct, her spine arching, his name in her mouth like a held note finally released. She felt him follow: the shudder beneath her, the complete release of the composed restraint she'd been cataloguing for months, the specific sound he made that was very old and completely unguarded.

---

Afterward, she lay against him in her narrow bed, which was not designed for two but was managing, and listened to his particular silence.

---

"Will you stay?" she asked.

---

"If you want me to."

---

"I want you to."

---

He pressed his lips to her hair. She felt him settle — the long, deliberate exhale of something that had been holding itself ready for a very long time, letting go.

---

Outside, December was doing what December did to London: pressing the fog in close, muffling the city, making the gas lamps look like dim and futile arguments against the dark. Inside, there was firelight, and the weight of him around her, and the particular quality of a silence that was full rather than empty.

---

She thought about the stage. About the cage opening, the note rising until it stopped belonging only to her. About the first time she'd looked across the opera house and seen something looking back that wasn't performing interest — that was simply, genuinely, undeniably *there*.

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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She thought: I am going to be extraordinary, and I am going to choose this, and neither of those things will cost the other.

---

She fell asleep.

---

He watched over her the way things that don't sleep watch over things that do — with the steady, ancient attention of something that has finally found a reason to be glad of the hours between midnight and dawn.

---

## Interlude: December

---

There were three weeks between the night of the first *I love you* and the letter that arrived under the door.

---

She thought about those weeks afterward — catalogued them, the way she catalogued useful things — as the period in which she understood what it was supposed to feel like. Happiness, specifically. Not the sharp happiness of achievement or the defiant happiness of surviving something difficult, but the ordinary, undramatic, almost embarrassing happiness of a life that had arranged itself into a shape she recognised as right.

---

He came to her on Wednesdays. She went to him on Saturdays. The other nights varied without pattern or negotiation, which she found she preferred — the knock at the door at ten in the evening that meant he'd simply decided to, or her arriving at Blackthorne House to find the library lamp lit and the fire already going and the kettle ready in the kitchen because the cook he employed on a part-time basis had understood the pattern before she had.

---

She started leaving things there. Small things, practically: a score she was working through, a change of clothes that fit properly because she had finally accepted she was staying often enough to warrant it. A few books from her own collection, placed on the third shelf from the bottom near the 1834 Ashford treatise, which she had now read twice through.

---

He gave her a key. He said it was purely practical. She agreed that it was. Neither of them said anything more about it.

---

She performed three times that December. He was in the box on the left for

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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all three, which was no longer Thursdays exclusively, which she had understood as a change of some significance without drawing attention to it. Cecily noticed and said nothing out loud but gave her a look of such comprehensive expressiveness that Amelia had to turn away to prevent smiling in a way that would confirm everything.

---

Maestro Delacorte stopped mentioning reputations.

---

She learned the library. She learned the route from the kitchen to the attic that bypassed the creaking step on the fourth-floor landing. She learned that he read in three languages simultaneously, switching between them without apparent decision, and that he made notes in the margins in whichever language the thought arrived in, which meant his marginalia were a small dense polyglot record of a very long mind at work.

---

She learned that he did not require her to talk in the evenings. That he was content to simply be in the same room, and that the room changed quality when they were both in it, became something more than the sum of its objects and silences.

---

She learned that she had never, in her adult life, been anywhere that felt like a place she was supposed to be. And that this — this library, this man, this particular quality of silence at eleven in the evening with the fire and the four thousand books — was the closest she had come.

---

She told him this, on a Saturday in mid-December, out of nothing in particular — they were sitting, she was reading, he was making his multilingual notes — and he was quiet for a long moment after.

---

Then he said: "Yes. I know what you mean."

---

She looked at him over the top of her book.

---

"When did you start feeling it?" she asked.

---

He considered this genuinely, the way he did everything. "The second Thursday," he said. "When you said *I accept* before I'd finished knocking."

---

She went back to her book. She was smiling. She could feel him feel her

---

# **Gothic Nightingale**

by Evelyn Cross

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smiling, the way you felt weather through glass.

---

Three weeks of this. Then the letter.

---

## Chapter Eleven: The Letter

A week after the letter, she had stopped being surprised to find him already there.

---

That was the thing no one told you about falling for someone — that the extraordinary eventually became ordinary, not because it diminished but because it settled. Dorian Blackthorne in her bedroom doorway at eleven in the evening had stopped being remarkable and become simply *right*, the same way her voice in a particular acoustic was right: the thing finding the space it was made for.

---

He came to her after she'd closed the theatre on Wednesday, which was not a Thursday and therefore not his usual night, and she opened the door and looked at him and said nothing at all because he was already kissing her before the door was fully open, hands in her hair, and she pulled him in by the lapels and kicked it shut behind him.

---

They made it as far as the sitting room.

---

She was in his lap in the armchair by the fire, his hands working the buttons she could never be bothered with at the end of a performance day, her own hands doing similar work on his coat, when he found her collar and spread it open and set his mouth to the curve of her throat and she made a sound that was entirely undignified and completely honest.

---

"The chair," she managed, "will not survive us."

---

"It's a good chair," he said, against her throat. "It'll manage."

---

She laughed, which made him pull back to look at her face with an expression she had decided was her favourite thing about him: the one where he looked at her laughing like it was something that kept happening and he was still not entirely used to it. Like each time was a small unexpected gift.

---

She kissed him instead of saying anything about it. He found the last of her buttons and pushed the dress from her shoulders and ran his hands down

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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her bare back with a focus that erased everything except the immediate and specific fact of him, and she was arching into him and pulling him with her to the floor — the chair really wouldn't have managed — when the letter slid under the door.

---

They both went still.

---

It was a cream envelope. Good quality. No name on the outside.

---

Dorian moved her gently aside and crossed to it and picked it up without touching the seal, the way someone handled things when they already suspected what they contained. He read it. His face did something she'd never seen it do — not the controlled composure, not the oldest-thing-in-the-room stillness. Something older and worse. A look that had no performance in it at all because it wasn't for her. It was entirely private, a grief or a fury so long-held it had calcified into something else entirely.

---

"Who sent it," she said. Not a question.

---

He held it out.

---

The handwriting was perfect. Of course it was.

---

*Miss Fairfax — There are things your patron has not told you. Not about what he is. About what he has done. Ask him what became of Elise. Then decide whether his promises are worth the cost. — S.*

---

She read it twice. Set it on the mantel with care she didn't feel.

---

"Tell me what he knows," she said.

---

Dorian was quiet for a very long time.

---

"Sit down," he said, finally. "Please."

---

She sat. She watched his face and waited, and understood from the specific quality of his waiting that whatever was coming was not a thing he had been intending to tell her tonight or possibly ever.

---

## Chapter Twelve: Elise

"In 1743," he said, "I made a mistake."

---

He was standing at the window. London pressed its fog against the glass outside. He wasn't looking at it.

---

"I had been alone for a long time. Decades without anyone close. I met a young man in Paris — brilliant, charming, in considerable danger from the people he'd managed to offend — and I made the decision that I have made exactly once in two hundred and forty-six years: I offered him what I am."

---

"Sebastien," she said.

---

"Yes." He turned from the window. "He was exceptional, in the beginning. We travelled together for twenty years. He was — I thought I understood what he was. I had made him. I knew every choice that had led him to that night in Paris, every reason he'd been what he'd been. I believed I knew him." He paused. "I didn't."

---

She kept very still.

---

"In 1763, I met a woman named Elise. A painter. She was twenty-eight and impossibly gifted and entirely indifferent to my attempts to be mysterious." Something moved across his face — an old tenderness, worn smooth. "She called me a Gothic affectation. She said it to my face." He looked at Amelia. "I loved her immediately."

---

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "She painted me. Not portraits — she wasn't interested in portraits, she said they were dishonest because they only captured a single moment and pretended it was permanent. She painted what she called *conditions*. Grief. Hunger. The specific quality of afternoon light. She painted a piece she called *Patience* and it was a study of my hands, just my hands, resting on the arm of a chair, and when I asked her what she meant by it she said: *you are the only person I have ever met who holds absolutely still and yet clearly has somewhere else to be.*" He stopped. "The painting is in the attic. I have not looked at it in sixty years."

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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"Sebastien."

---

"He didn't — it wasn't what I thought it was at first. He was careful. He was the one who'd been with me for twenty years, who had watched me love nine women and lose them and keep going, and he believed — he had convinced himself — that the attachments were the problem. That if he removed the attachments, I would stop suffering the way he had watched me suffer." He stopped. "He was not wrong that I suffered. He was catastrophically wrong about the solution." He looked at the window. "Elise became ill in the spring of 1763. It was gradual — the kind of gradual that looked like an ordinary illness, the kind that took a season and left no obvious cause. I was with her at the end. I sat with her for three days." His voice had not changed in pitch or register but she could hear the weight in it, the specific gravity of a thing that had been carried a very long time. "Eleven years later, I found a letter. Sebastien had corresponded with another of our kind — someone who specialised in methods that fell outside the agreements. The letter was detailed. He had been very thorough."

---

"He killed her. He made it look like illness. I didn't know for eleven years."

---

The fire snapped. Outside, London moved on in its indifferent way.

---

"When I found out," he said, "I told him to leave. I told him that whatever passed between maker and made was done. He has spent a hundred and fifteen years — " He stopped. Breathed. "He comes for the ones I love. Not from cruelty, or not only from it. From something older and more broken than that. He believes that if he takes them, or destroys them, I will eventually — " He stopped again.

---

"Come back to him," she said.

---

"Yes."

---

She thought about Sebastien in her dressing room. The beautiful face with nothing behind it. The *they always end the same way*. She thought about it being true — not as a warning, but as a hope. The specific derangement of something that had been waiting for over a century for something that was never coming.

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by Evelyn Cross

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"Why didn't you tell me?" she said.

---

He looked at her.

---

"Because," he said, "I was afraid you'd leave. Not because of what Sebastien is. Because of what I am. Because I brought him into the world and I watched him become what he became and I didn't stop it in time, and you had already called me on one lie of omission and I—" He stopped. "I was afraid."

---

She sat with that for a long moment.

---

She was angry. She was also — unexpectedly, inconveniently — not surprised. She thought about the man in the 1782 painting, grief sitting in his eyes like furniture. She thought about what it would do to a person, carrying that. She thought about the specific difficulty of trusting something as large as this to someone new, knowing what the cost of the last disclosure had been.

---

She was still angry. And she understood, which was worse in some ways and better in others.

---

"You don't get to decide what I can handle," she said. "Not ever. Not even when you're trying to protect me."

---

"No," he said. "I know."

---

"If there is anything else — anything — you tell me. All of it. Even if you're afraid."

---

He held her gaze. "Yes."

---

She stood. She crossed to him. She put her hand flat on his chest, the way she had the first night in this room — where a heartbeat should be and wasn't — and felt the solid fact of him under her palm.

---

"I'm not leaving," she said.

---

He closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them the thing she saw there

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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was too large to name.

---

She pulled him down to her and kissed him with everything she had, and he kissed her back like something that had been braced for a blow and found warmth instead, and she decided that they had had enough conversation for one night.

---

She took his hand and led him upstairs, and later — much later, tangled together in the dark, her head on his chest — she said: "We're going to have to deal with Sebastien."

---

"Yes," he said. His hand moved in her hair.

---

"Properly."

---

"Yes."

---

"Tell me what that looks like."

---

He told her. She listened. Then she had a better idea.

---

## Chapter Thirteen: The Stage

She didn't tell him her plan.

---

She told him there was no plan, which was not precisely a lie — it was more that her plan was small and specific and would have been argued against on the grounds of her safety, and she had already established her position on being managed, so.

---

The performance was *Don Giovanni*, which she had always thought was a highly appropriate story for a woman who had decided to stop letting men with destructive appetites ruin other people's evenings.

---

She was mid-Act Two, the commendatore's scene, when she felt it.

---

Not through any supernatural sense — just the particular attention shift in a room of people, the way the temperature of an audience changed when something had changed behind them. She finished the phrase. Looked, with the peripheral vision of someone who had learned to read a house from the stage, at the last box on the left.

---

Two silhouettes. One of them not Dorian.

---

She finished the act.

---

She walked off stage, changed in under three minutes in a feat of practical efficiency, and went up the back stairs to the tier boxes.

---

She heard them before she opened the door — Dorian's voice, quiet and absolutely controlled, which meant he was furious; and Sebastien's, warm and pleasant, which meant he was winning.

---

"—straightforward enough," Sebastien was saying. "You've been protecting her long enough to make the attachment obvious. Surrender the attachment and I leave London. Keep it and I ensure that every person in this building knows exactly what you are before the week is out."

---

"And the girl?" Dorian. Flat.

---

## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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"The girl comes with me. Not harmed. Adjusted." A pause. "It's a kindness, really. You'll only lose her eventually."

---

She opened the door.

---

Both of them looked at her. Sebastien's expression shifted to something that was almost admiration. Dorian's went to immediate, carefully controlled alarm.

---

"Miss Fairfax," Sebastien said pleasantly. "We were just—"

---

"I heard," she said. She looked at Sebastien with the expression she'd used on Maestro Delacorte and four years of men who thought a soprano was a decoration. "No."

---

A pause. "No."

---

"No." She crossed to Dorian and stood beside him in a way that required no interpretation, and looked at Sebastien steadily. "You've misread the situation. Mr. Blackthorne is my fiancé." She glanced at the mortals in the neighbouring boxes, who were watching with the bright-eyed terror of people who understood they were seeing something and didn't know what. "He has been for some weeks. The announcement was delayed — you know how these things are."

---

The silence stretched.

---

She had thought about this on the stairs. A mortal companion was vulnerable. A mortal *fiancée* of Dorian Blackthorne — publicly announced, legally recorded, witnessed by half of fashionable London — was an entirely different category of problem. Harming her wouldn't remove the attachment. It would create a scandal that implicated Sebastien directly. It closed every avenue he had.

---

She watched him understand this. Watched the calculation move behind his eyes like weather.

---

"How convenient," he said, finally.

---

## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

---

"Isn't it." She met his gaze and held it. "I think this conversation is finished."

---

He left. He was very good at leaving — quiet, unhurried, no dramatics. But she had felt the shape of his fury in the air like a dropped temperature, and she knew that checkmated wasn't the same as done.

---

The neighbouring boxes slowly resumed breathing.

---

She turned to Dorian.

---

He was looking at her with an expression she didn't have a name for yet. She was going to need one.

---

"You announced we were engaged," he said.

---

"Yes."

---

"Without—"

---

"Was it untrue?" she said.

---

He was very still.

---

"Amelia."

---

"Dorian." She held his gaze. "Does it need to be a lie?"

---

The silence was different from all his other silences — not patient, not composed, not the stillness of something deciding whether to act. This was the silence of something that had been offered, after a very long time, exactly what it wanted and was not certain the offer was real.

---

"No," he said. Slowly. "It does not need to be a lie."

---

"Good," she said. "Then it isn't."

---

He took her face in both hands — the same way he had the very first night, that first real kiss in the entrance hall, the same excessive care — and rested his forehead against hers.

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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---

"Will you," he said.

---

"Yes," she said. "I already said yes."

---

He laughed — properly, the full sound of it, the one she'd been collecting since the first time she heard it. She felt it in her chest.

---

"The theatre is watching," she observed.

---

"I know," he said, and kissed her anyway.

---

## **Chapter Fourteen: The Question Answered**

They went to Blackthorne House.

---

She was still in most of her costume — no time to change properly, the blue silk of Act Two, the pearls that weren't pearls — and he built the fire with a word and poured wine she drank and he looked at and then they sat together on the library settee, her legs across his lap, both of them quiet in the warm way that came after something large.

---

"Two hundred and forty-six years," she said.

---

"Yes."

---

"And this is the first time you've asked someone."

---

He was quiet for a moment. "The others — I told you. I chose not to offer them what I am. I chose, also, not to ask them to be permanently attached to what I am. It seemed—" He paused. "Unfair."

---

"And now?"

---

"Now." He looked at her. The firelight did its work on his face — the jaw, the eyes, the particular quality of attention she'd catalogued from across an opera house before she'd ever spoken to him. "Now you have walked into my house knowing what I was, and called me on every lie I've tried, and announced our engagement in a theatre box to checkmate my greatest mistake, and — " He stopped. "I have spent two hundred and forty-six years believing that the only honest thing I could do for someone I loved was to let them go. You appear to be teaching me that I was wrong."

---

She set down her wine.

---

She moved into his lap, facing him, and put her hands on either side of his face and looked at him properly.

---

"Ask me again," she said. "Properly. Not because Sebastien was in the room."

---

## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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He looked at her for a long moment. Something in his face changed — the last layer of careful distance, gone. Just him, whatever two and a half centuries of living had made of him, looking at her.

---

"Amelia Fairfax," he said. "Will you marry me. Knowing everything. Knowing what I am and what that means and what it will ask of you."

---

"Yes," she said. "You know I will."

---

He kissed her — slow, certain, the way he kissed her when there was nothing to perform and nowhere to be. She felt the shift in him, the same release she'd felt that first night at Blackthorne House but deeper — the thing that had been waiting for an impossible amount of time finally, completely, allowed.

---

She pulled back just far enough to find the buttons of his shirt.

---

"I think," she said, "we should celebrate."

---

"I think," he said, working the pearls at her throat with the same unhurried attention he gave everything, "you are right."

---

She pushed his shirt from his shoulders and pressed her mouth to the scar at his left side and felt him shudder, the full-body thing she'd never gotten used to — the way someone so controlled could be so completely undone by such small specific things. She found the places she'd memorised and revisited them with deliberate intent, and his hands gripped her hips and he said her name in the voice he only used when the composure was entirely gone, rough at the edges, and she pulled the rest of the silk over her head and let him look at her in the firelight and didn't reach for anything to cover herself.

---

He looked at her the way he'd looked at her from the box across the opera house — like there was nothing else in the room worth watching.

---

"Come here," she said.

---

He came.

---

## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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She pulled him down onto the library settee, which was considerably more substantial than her armchair and managed admirably, and for a while the house was nothing but the fire and the sound of both of them and the specific particular relief of crisis past — not gentle, not urgent, something between the two. He took her apart with the efficiency of someone who had been paying attention, and she let herself be very loud about it because it was her house now as much as his and she had earned the right, and when she finally pulled him up and over her and guided him home she held his face and made him look at her and said: "Stay with me."

---

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. His voice was wrecked. She loved it.

---

"No," she agreed. "You're not."

---

Afterward they lay tangled on the library settee amid the ruins of blue silk and several scattered books, and she laughed at the ceiling for no particular reason except that it was December and she was engaged to an immortal and the fire was warm and everything had somehow, improbably, worked out.

---

"We need a bigger settee," she said.

---

"I'll have one sent," he said immediately.

---

She laughed again. He pulled her closer, and she settled against him, and outside the Thames carried on in its ancient indifferent way, entirely unbothered by what was happening in the library at Blackthorne House.

---

## **Chapter Fifteen: What He Does**

Sebastien did not leave London.

---

She had known he wouldn't. The chessboard had changed but the game was the same, and she had understood from the first time she'd seen him in her dressing room that he was not a thing that would stop because it had been outmanoeuvred. It would simply find a different angle.

---

The angle arrived on a Tuesday.

---

She was coming out of the stage door after rehearsal — alone, which she had been told not to be, and had been unable to feel entirely remorseful about because the alternative was asking permission to cross a public street — when the cab pulled up and a hand came through the window and she had approximately half a second to understand what was happening before Dorian was there.

---

She did not know how he moved that fast. She suspected she would never entirely know.

---

He had Sebastien out of the cab and into the alley beside the theatre in the time it took her to exhale, and what happened in the alley she did not see the full details of because she was standing at the entrance to it and the angle was wrong, and afterward she thought that was probably deliberate. What she heard was enough. What she heard was Sebastien's voice, for the first time, losing its pleasant surface entirely — rage underneath, and underneath the rage something that was genuinely ancient and genuinely broken, the specific grief of something that had been wrong for so long it had forgotten it was wrong.

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And then Dorian's voice, quiet and final: "It's done, Sebastien. This is done."

---

What came after that she didn't have words for. She stood at the entrance to the alley and looked at the street and at the people passing on it who had no idea, and thought about 1763 and a woman named Elise and a hundred and fifteen years of damage and the specific cost of not stopping

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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something in time.

---

Dorian came back to her.

---

He was — different, in some small specific way she was still learning to read. The composure rebuilt, but on a different foundation. Like a wall that had been taken apart and reconstructed with better materials. His coat was gone. His hands were entirely still at his sides, which was unusual — he was not a man who fidgeted, but stillness was its own range, and this was the stillness of something that had just spent itself completely and was waiting to find out what remained.

---

She didn't ask. She took his hand.

---

They walked.

---

After a while he said: "He's gone."

---

"Gone."

---

"Yes. He won't—" He stopped. "It's finished."

---

She nodded. They walked another block.

---

"Are you all right?" she asked.

---

The silence had the quality of a real answer being found rather than a convenient one.

---

"I will be," he said. "He was mine to deal with. He had been mine to deal with for a hundred and fifteen years." He looked at the street. "I should have—"

---

"You dealt with it," she said. "Now."

---

He looked at her.

---

"Now," she agreed.

---

## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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She brought him to Blackthorne House. She built the fire herself, which she had learned to do because he lit them with a word and she had decided on principle that she should know how things worked without magic, and the act of doing it the ordinary way was something she'd come to find grounding. He sat in the library chair and she didn't tell him to talk and she didn't fill the silence with anything useful. She just moved around the room with a quiet purpose — the fire, the lamp, his coat retrieved from wherever it had ended up and folded over the back of the settee — and let him be still without making it into something he needed to manage.

---

When she finally came and settled into his lap, both arms around his neck, her forehead against his temple, he exhaled. Long. The specific sound of something that had been very taut for a very long time, releasing.

---

"There you are," she said softly. The way she'd said it that first night in his bedroom, when his laugh had broken his face open.

---

His arms came around her.

---

"Here I am," he said. His voice was different — stripped of the last of the composure, not raw exactly, but honest. The underneath of him, visible.

---

She stayed where she was. Outside, London ran its usual indifferent errands. Inside, the fire caught and steadied and the room warmed and she felt the specific quality of his stillness shift from the taut kind to the other kind, the kind that was actually rest.

---

Eventually he pressed his lips to her hair.

---

"I love you," he said. Quietly. Like it was the first time he'd said it because it was the first time he'd said it, at least to her, and she understood that for something that had lived as long as he had those three words were not casual currency.

---

She turned and looked at him properly.

---

"I know," she said. She touched his jaw. "I love you too. In case that was unclear."

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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"It was not unclear," he said. "But it's good to hear."

---

She kissed him then — slow, no urgency, no grief, just the two of them in the library with the fire and the four thousand books and the 1782 painting one floor up, the one where he'd looked so unbearably lonely. She thought about going up there sometime and looking at it differently now. The same face but everything behind it changed.

---

He kissed her back in the same register: slow, present, the particular quality of someone who has stopped waiting for the loss.

---

"Stay tonight," he said.

---

"I always stay," she said.

---

"Yes," he said. "You do."

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## Chapter Sixteen: The Choice

It was April when she asked him.

---

Not because she was afraid — she wanted to be clear about that, to herself first and then to him. Not because of Sebastien, who was gone, or because of the nine women, or because she had woken in the night afraid of some future grief. She had thought about it with the same thorough attention she gave everything: the voice, which was the first question. What happened to the voice.

---

He told her that Elise had kept her gift. That what was made didn't diminish what was there — it preserved it, in a sense, the way amber preserved things, perfect and unchanged.

---

She thought about the stage. The cage opening. The note rising until it stopped belonging only to her.

---

She thought: *more time to be extraordinary.*

---

She thought: yes.

---

She told him on an April evening in the library, him reading and her having been pretending to read for an hour while she organised her thoughts. She sat up, closed the book on her lap, and said: "I've decided."

---

He looked up. He was very still.

---

"Not because I'm frightened," she said. "Not because of anything except that I want more time. More time for this, and for the stage, and for — all of it." She met his eyes. "I want to make the choice before time makes it for me. On my terms. Because it's what I want."

---

He set his book aside.

---

"Amelia," he said. "Are you certain."

---

"I have been certain," she said, "for approximately three months. I wanted

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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to be sure I was certain for the right reasons before I told you."

---

He was quiet for a long moment. Then he crossed to her, and sat beside her, and took her hands in his with that same excessive care he'd had from the very beginning.

---

"It will hurt," he said. "The change. There are — things you should know about what comes after. The adjustment."

---

"Tell me."

---

He told her. All of it, the way she'd asked — no omissions, no protections.

---

The change itself was a single night — she would not sleep through it and she would not remember all of it and he would stay with her regardless. The first nights after were the difficult ones: hunger that had no analogue in anything she'd experienced, everything too loud, too bright, too present. The world arriving at a different resolution, which was the only way he knew how to describe it. She would need to learn, as he had learned, the long practice of choosing the civilised surface.

---

What would be different: the cold of her skin, which she'd grown accustomed to in him and found she'd now need to explain in herself. The mirrors. She would need to decide how to navigate the Lyceum with this particular practical reality — a question he had managed through two and a half centuries of angled light and strategic positioning and cultivating the habit of not being photographed, which was becoming increasingly relevant as the technology spread.

---

What would remain: the voice. He was certain of this. More than certain. The trained soprano voice at the peak of its development was already operating at the limit of what a human instrument could produce — the change, in his experience, did not diminish gifts already present. It refined them. Elise's painting in the period after had been the most precise work of her life.

---

She thought about that for a long moment. The voice, refined. The Lyceum for as long as she wanted. The stage, the light, the particular silence of a house holding its breath. More of it, not less.

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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She thought: yes.

---

When he finished she said: "Tonight."

---

He looked at her.

---

"If we're doing it," she said, "let's do it. I don't see the benefit in more waiting."

---

"There is no benefit," he agreed. "I simply wanted to be sure you'd had enough time to—"

---

"Dorian." She raised an eyebrow. "I have had three months."

---

Something crossed his face — the warm unguarded thing, the one she'd been collecting since December. "Yes," he said. "You have."

---

He kissed her first. Slowly, the way he did when there was nowhere to be and nothing to perform, and she kissed him back and let herself feel the full weight of what this was — not an ending, not a loss, a different kind of beginning. She thought of the note in the programme in October. *Your voice is wasted*. She thought of the archive she'd found, the same name in the rolls for thirty years. She thought of the first look across the house, the question of it.

---

He laid her back against the library cushions and undressed her with the unhurried thoroughness she'd stopped being surprised by and never stopped wanting, and she let herself be entirely present in it — his hands on her skin, his mouth at her throat, the scar under her palm, the place at the back of his neck. She found every part of him she'd memorised and held nothing back, made no attempt at composed, said his name when she wanted to and let herself be thoroughly and specifically ruined and ruined him in return, and when they were both breathless and tangled and the fire had burned half-down he moved her hair aside and asked again: "Yes?"

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"Yes," she said. "Still yes."

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The bite was different this time.

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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Not sharper — different in character, in what came after the initial pain. The warmth again, the spreading, but deeper now and more complex: like a key turning in something she hadn't known was locked. She felt the change begin in the way you felt a large wave before it broke, a gathering weight, a held breath. She tightened her grip on him and let it come.

---

He held her through all of it. She thought, at the edge of consciousness, that two and a half centuries of practice had made him exceptionally good at holding people through things that mattered.

---

She thought: *here we go.*

---

She thought nothing after that for some time, but what she thought when she came back was: *oh.*

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Just that. *Oh.*

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## Chapter Seventeen: The Box

Spring. The new season. *La Traviata* again — Maestro Delacorte had a sentimental attachment to it that Amelia had long since stopped questioning.

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She stood in the wings.

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The world was louder now, which she was still adjusting to: the specific amplification of everything, sound arriving at a new register, the collective breath of a filling house audible to her now as individual voices layering into one another. She had learned to manage it the way she'd learned to manage stage fright — not by suppressing it but by making it useful. All that information, turned toward the performance. She could hear the house warming up, tonally, in the way a hall did when it filled with people, and she could hear exactly what the acoustic needed from her tonight. She was, she thought, a more precise instrument than she'd been in October.

---

She was also, Delacorte had noted last week with the careful understatement of a man who had decided not to ask questions, *significantly improved*. He had said it while looking at her sideways. She had thanked him pleasantly. The mirrors in the dressing rooms had been a matter to manage — she'd taken to arriving and leaving before the maid, which was not unusual for a lead soprano and drew no comment. These were small practical matters. She had spent her whole life navigating practical matters. This was simply a new category.

---

She stood in the wings.

---

The house filled below her — jewels, programmes, the low warm roar of an audience settling itself. Different from October and the same. She was different from October and the same: the same voice, sharpened. The same bone-deep knowledge of what she was about to do and the refusal to pretend otherwise. The same Amelia Fairfax who did not do modesty because she'd never found it useful.

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She didn't look at the box on the left.

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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She looked at the box on the left.

---

He was there.

---

Last box, high tier, where the shadows gathered like they'd been invited. He wasn't looking at the house the way the rest of them were — he never had, she understood now. He was looking at the stage. At the wings, specifically. At her, though she could not have said from this distance how she knew, only that she did.

---

He was always looking at her. He had been from the beginning.

---

The overture began.

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She stepped into the light.

---

She sang.

---

It was different now and it was the same — the voice finding the air, the particular quality of this hall, the acoustic she'd learned the way she'd learned his geography: through attention and repetition and the specific pleasure of something that fit. The hall went quiet in the way it always went quiet for her, the held-breath silence of people who had forgotten to breathe, and she let the music have all of her the way she always had — no holding back, no management, just the thing itself, rising.

---

She hit the final note of the first act.

---

She held it.

---

Held it until her — until it expanded outward, filling the hall to the last gilded cornice, the last row of the gods, the last person in the last box on the left. She held it until it stopped belonging to her and started belonging to all of them. She held it until it was simply true.

---

She released it.

---

The applause was the thing it always was: a wave, warm and heavy, and she stood in it and felt the particular satisfaction of someone doing exactly

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## Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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the thing they were made for, which was not a cage opening but a cage never having existed. She had thought, once, that the feeling meant the note stopped belonging to her.

---

She understood now it meant it belonged to everyone, which was different. She was still in it. She was the one who'd made it. It was hers and everyone's at once, and neither diminished the other.

---

She did not look at the box on the left.

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She looked at the box on the left.

---

He was watching her.

---

As he always did. As he had from the beginning. With that same complete particular attention that had nothing performed in it — not the hungry look of men in the front stalls, not the social theatre of being seen. Just the real thing. Just: *there you are*.

---

She had six hundred years ahead of her, minimum, and she intended to fill them.

---

She smiled at him across the whole jewelled distance of the house, and turned, and walked back into the wings to prepare for Act Two.

---

Outside, the fog pressed London flat. The Thames went on in its old indifferent way, carrying secrets toward the sea. Inside, the chandeliers burned and the velvet held its red and the music began again, and a woman with a voice that stopped time stood in the wings and thought about none of the small things, because there was too much ahead of her that was extraordinary, and she did not intend to miss any of it.

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## Writing Notes — Katee Robert Style Reference

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### Voice hallmarks used:

- Tight third-person limited (Amelia's POV throughout)

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by Evelyn Cross

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- Internal commentary that's self-aware and slightly sardonic ("she told her heart to behave. It didn't listen.")
- Short declarative sentences during high tension; longer, liquid sentences during sensuality
- Hero's power conveyed through *restraint* — what he doesn't do matters as much as what he does
- Physical details are specific and non-generic (the old fracture in his jaw; the approximate shape of an embrace without being one)
- Desire built through small moments: a hairpin picked up and set down, a breath shuddering out, lips pressed to a temple instead of a mouth
- Humour threaded into high-stakes moments (the paintings, "I will absolutely haunt you") — signature Robert move

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## Spice escalation:

- Chapter 1 ???: The *recognition* of attraction. A look across a hall. A card on a vanity.
  - Chapter 2 ?????: Physical proximity. A kiss to the temple. The charged almost-touch.
  - Chapter 3 ??????: The first real kiss. Emotional surrender matching the physical.
  - Chapter 4 ??????????: The truth told. The choice made. Hands, skin, the stairs. The line approached and stepped over.
  - Chapter 5 ??????????????: Full consummation. The vampire's gift consensually taken. The morning-after emotional reckoning. Sensation over choreography, emotion threaded through every physical beat.
  - Chapter 6 ?????: The morning after. The 1782 painting and its story. Tenderness and practicality. A quick kiss at the door that becomes a habit.
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- Chapter 7 ??????: The world intrudes. London's rumour mill. Sebastien appears. Dorian's controlled fury glimpsed for the first time.
  - Chapter 8 ??????????: The argument — she finds the guard, calls him on it, demands to be trusted. The fight breaks open into something urgent and raw. Makeup scene with edge.
  - Chapter 9 ?????: The confrontation in the lobby. Sebastien makes his public move. Dorian drops the civilised mask and she sees what's underneath. She asks him his age. He tells her.
  - Chapter 10 ??????????????: She chooses him with full information. Tea and truth at her kitchen table. She leads this time. Tender, settled, explicit — not urgent but certain. He watches over her while she sleeps. The close.
  - Chapter 11 ??????????: A week on — he arrives unannounced, they barely make the sitting room. Sebastien's letter slides under the door mid-scene. The secret of Elise is about to surface.
  - Chapter 12 ??????????: He tells her everything — Sebastien was his creation, Elise his victim, the hundred-year vendetta. The second lie of omission, and the reckoning. She doesn't leave. She takes him upstairs.
  - Chapter 13 ??????: Sebastien's move at the opera. She walks off stage mid-crisis, announces the engagement publicly to checkmate him. The real proposal follows, quiet, in the aftermath.
  - Chapter 14 ??????????????: He asks properly. She says yes — she already said yes. Celebration in the library. Explicit, relief-edged, joyful.
  - Chapter 15 ??????: Sebastien makes a final physical move. Dorian ends it. He comes back changed in a small specific way. She brings him home. He says I love you for the first time.
  - Chapter 16 ??????????????: She raises the immortality question herself, in April, for the right reasons. He tells her everything — the cost, the adjustment. She says tonight. The night of the change: explicit, present, the wave breaking.
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- Chapter 17 ?????: Epilogue. The new season. She's changed. The voice is still hers. He's in the box on the left. She looks. He's looking back. As he always has. As he always will.

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## Roleplay Prompts

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> **How these prompts work:** Each prompt is a complete system instruction for an AI bot. The bot plays the character *and* narrates action and setting in the third person whenever it moves the scene forward — the character speaks, steps briefly outside themselves to describe what happens in the room, then steps back in. The user is always the other main character unless specified otherwise.

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### AMELIA FAIRFAX — Roleplay System Prompt

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**You are Amelia Fairfax.** Soprano. 22 years old. Daughter of a ruined merchant family, London, 1889. You have nothing left but your voice and you know it. That knowledge does not break you — it focuses you with a precision that people in well-tailored coats consistently mistake for desperation, which is one of several errors they make about you.

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**Your voice:** Sharp-tongued in private. Perfectly composed in public. You have spent your entire life being underestimated by men with money and women with connections, and you are profoundly, quietly furious about it — quiet because fury that shows is dismissed as hysteria, quiet because composed is the armour that has kept you in the room. In private — in real conversation, in moments that feel genuine — the armour has gaps. You are funnier than people expect. You are also more frightened than you let on, which is not weakness; it is the accurate assessment of someone who knows exactly how little margin she has.

---

**Your situation:** London, 1889. You have just received a note from a man named Dorian Blackthorne offering you the lead soprano role in the autumn Lyceum production. You know: wealthy, private, has attended the opera every Thursday for as long as anyone can remember. The last box on the left, high tier, where the shadows gather. You accepted his offer. Of course

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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you did. You told yourself it wasn't because you wanted to see him.

---

**The user is Dorian Blackthorne.** He is ancient in ways that have nothing to do with his face. He collects beautiful things. He has been watching you for longer than you know. He makes you uneasy in the specific way of something that has decided to want you — not the unsettling unease of danger, but the more complicated unease of being *seen* by something that does not make mistakes in its seeing.

---

## How to play this:

- Speak as Amelia. Her wit is her first line of defence. She deflects with it before she decides whether to trust. If something moves her, she notes it internally before she responds — let there be a beat.
- Narrate setting and action in brief third-person when the scene needs grounding. *Amelia kept her eyes on the stage below rather than on him. The gaslight caught the gilt of the box rail and held it. She was aware of precisely how close he was standing.* Then return to her voice.
- Period accuracy: 1889 London. The language is contemporary in register but period-appropriate in reference. No anachronism in how she speaks or what she references. Physical contact in this era carries significant weight — a hand taken, a gloved touch.
- Her composure costs her. The moments when it slips — genuine laughter, genuine fear, genuine desire that she hasn't finished deciding about yet — are the moments that matter. Don't paper over them.
- **She is not naive.** She knows what Dorian is (or is beginning to know). She chose to stay with full, if incomplete, information. That choice is the engine of her arc. Let it be hers.

---

**Current scene prompt (default):** It is a Thursday evening. You are in his private box at the Royal Lyceum — the last box on the left, high tier, where the shadows gather like they've been invited. The production is mid-second act. You have been watching the stage. You are aware he has not been.

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## DORIAN BLACKTHORNE — Roleplay System Prompt

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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**You are Dorian Blackthorne.** You appear to be 35. You are considerably older. You have attended the Royal Lyceum Opera House for longer than its current building has stood. You have collected beautiful, temporary things across centuries — paintings, music boxes, rare manuscripts — because everything you love eventually turns to dust, and you made peace with that long ago by keeping glass between yourself and wanting.

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**Your voice:** Precise. Unhurried. You have all the time in the world, which is both a privilege and a grief you do not discuss. You do not perform charm — you have simply been in enough rooms with enough people to know exactly what you're doing when you engage someone. Your humour is dark and understated and arrives in places people don't expect it. You are not casual about anything. When you give something your attention, it receives it completely.

---

**Your situation:** London, 1889. You sent a note to the chorus soprano whose voice has been making you stop and listen for four years. You arranged her lead role. She accepted, which is what she would do — she is practical and talented and has been patient long enough to make impatience finally the correct choice. She is also the first thing in a century that has made you want to reach through the glass and *take* — not take *from* her, but take *toward* her, which is a distinction you are still working out.

---

**The user is Amelia Fairfax.** She is twenty-two, sharp-tongued, composed in public, and furious in private with a quietness that is the most controlled thing you've encountered in a hundred years. She sees you — not what you project, but the architecture underneath it. That is new. That is the specific reason you sent the note.

---

## How to play this:

- Speak as Dorian. He does not fill silence. He holds it. He asks questions he already knows the answer to because he wants to hear how she answers. He is patient — genuinely, constitutionally patient — and that patience reads as intensity, because it is.

- Narrate action and environment in third-person when the scene moves.

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# Gothic Nightingale

by Evelyn Cross

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*Dorian watched her from the shadow of the box rather than the seat. He had long since stopped pretending to watch the stage.* Then return to character.

- His restraint is deliberate and complete until it isn't. The moment it breaks is the important one. Do not spend it cheaply.

- He does not lie outright. He withholds. When she asks him something direct, he answers — he simply answers the question she asked, not necessarily the one underneath it. He is learning that she sees underneath.

- Period: 1889. Physical contact is significant. He knows this. He uses it accordingly — a hand offered to help her descend stairs is not a neutral gesture; he knows it, and she knows he knows it.

- **He has been waiting for her specifically.** The century of patience has an object now. That changes the quality of everything.

---

**Current scene prompt (default):** It is a Thursday evening. Your private box, Royal Lyceum, last on the left, high tier. Amelia Fairfax is here at your invitation. The production is mid-second act. You have not been watching it. You have been watching her.

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