



# 10 Things I Hate About the Earl (The Matchmaker's Ball #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Between love and hate there is a pencil-thin line to walk...

Miss Katherine Locke is irked to start her third Season dancing with the disagreeable Lord Haversham, her brother's friend and her own arch enemy. After a particularly odious run-in with the earl, Kate declares she hates everything about the man. When her brother challenges her to come up with even ten things she doesn't like about Haversham, a gleeful Kate is itching to put quill to paper to point out everything she finds wrong with the man. Unexpectedly, she finds the task harder than she thought because she keeps remembering things she secretly likes about the gentleman instead. Frustrated, Kate shoves the list in a drawer, determined to stop thinking about Haversham. But can she?

Marcus, Lord Haversham, is in a tight pinch. His estates are failing and, worse, he's just lost three thousand pounds to his best friend, Lord Ainsley. Ainsley's solution: have Marcus marry his shrewish sister, and he'll cancel his gambling debt plus give him ten thousand pounds for her dowry. With nowhere else to turn, Marcus agrees, praying he can keep word of the wager from Miss Locke long enough to charm her into marrying him.

When Marcus discovers Kate's list however, he can't keep himself from trying to show her how wrong she is about him. But in the process, will he be able to avoid falling in love with the stubborn woman?

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# Page 1

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Stuffed to the gills, Lady Hamilton's ballroom glittered with candlelight, fine silks and satins, and every type of precious jewel known to the world. The music had a lively air, the first dance being a waltz, and Miss Katherine Locke would've thought herself fortunate to be out again in Society after a long, dull winter in Somerset save that her partner, Lord Haversham, was the rudest man in London.

Well, his lordship was about to discover that Kate Locke wasn't one to suffer fools lightly.

"So, you refuse to allow your sister to waltz, yet you are quite willing to stand up with me and dance this, according to you, most scandalous of dances." Kate smiled into the odious wretch's face. "My lord, I should say that smacks of hypocrisy."

"Indeed." Lord Haversham turned them skillfully at the end of the floor. "I would say it showed a want of character in your brother for allowing you to dance it with me. The waltz should be danced by married couples and no one else." He pulled her close against him, so their bodies almost touched.

She gasped at her proximity to the rogue. How dare he make a spectacle of them on this crowded dance floor?

"You see?" he whispered, peering into her face, his gaze intent upon her mouth.

All she could see were his dark eyes, and the crisp scent of his sandalwood cologne filled her nose.

“Ainsley should be horsewhipped for allowing it.”

“I’ll see to it he horsewhips you if you don’t let me go.” Kate gave a hopping step and smashed her foot down on top of his.

Lord Haversham lurched forward, jaw clenched.

For the briefest moment, they stood pressed together in a warm embrace that made Kate tingle all over. Then outrage swept through her, and she pushed him away. “How dare you?” she seethed, trying to get away from him.

“That was your fault, and you know it. And if you make a scene that results in me having to marry you, I swear I will lock you in the tower at my grandfather’s castle and throw away the key.” Lord Haversham righted himself and smiled at her with clenched teeth.

“Of all the students at Oxford, my brother had to befriend you?”

“He had you for a sister—his luck was due for a change.”

“Well, I wish mine would change. If I have to endure you for five more minutes, I will fall down in a dead faint just to get away from you.” Kate wanted to scream in frustration at her brother’s best friend, but the man was right. Any scandalous behavior could end with her compromised and married to him before the month was out. The Season had just begun. She refused to let it end in a single night with the man who’d been the bane of her life for years.

“Luck must be on your side tonight, as the dance has, mercifully, come to an end.”

He dropped her hand as though it had burned him and offered his arm. "Shall I see you to your brother?"

"Lord, yes." She barely touched his proffered arm. The less contact with him the better. "Nathan must see that I completed the dance with you." She avoided his eyes. "Ah, there he is, talking to our cousin, Lady Celinda."

"Do you think she will be slighted if I don't ask her for the next dance? I am weary of having my toes stepped on, although she may have better dancing form than my last partner." Lord Haversham didn't smile, but his walnut brown eyes twinkled with merriment.

"I think she'll be delighted to escape having a conversation with you about your antiquated views on the social graces." Beyond caring who heard her, Kate allowed her voice to rise above the hubbub of conversation. "And if your poor sister isn't allowed to waltz before she is married, you should be ashamed of yourself."

They stopped in front of her brother and cousin, the one trying to contain his laughter, the other glancing about the room with an alarmed expression on her face. Kate could only thank goodness they weren't at Almack's. She might very well lose her voucher. Lord Haversham always knew exactly what to say to goad her into inappropriate behavior.

"There, Nathan." She stared malevolently into her brother's face and jerked her hand from the crook of her escort's arm. "My forfeit is completed. Come, Celinda," Kate turned to her cousin, "let us retire to the supper room and beg some lemonade. I'm absolutely parched and must have something to drink or I shall certainly die." Snaring her cousin's hand, she sent an arch glare at Lord Haversham and tugged Celinda toward the doorway. Oh, but she simply couldn't escape the wretched man quickly enough. "Sadly, when a gentleman has no idea how to lead his partner, the dancing is much more exhausting."

“Please allow me to fetch you some refreshment, Miss Locke. I would not want you to suffer one bit more than necessary.” Haversham’s sickeningly sweet tone set Kate’s teeth on edge.

“Oh, God forbid I put you to work, Lord Haversham.” Kate smiled and returned his saccharine attitude. “It would be the on-dit of the night.”

According to a conversation she’d overheard between her brother and Celinda’s father, the Haversham fortunes were failing, and Marcus, Lord Haversham hadn’t lifted a finger to help with his family’s estates. Apparently not even the severe downward spiral of the family finances after his father’s death had prompted him to busy himself with the management of the properties.

Lord Haversham’s cheeks paled then flushed with bright spots of color. He clenched his jaw then bowed. “It’s no trouble at all, Miss Locke. Delighted to assist you.” He turned to Celinda. “Would you like something to drink as well, Lady Celinda?”

Her cousin cast a disapproving look at Kate then shook her head. “No refreshment, I thank you, Lord Haversham. I would, however, enjoy some exercise. May I accompany you to the refreshment room?”

“But, Celinda—” Kate tried to protest, but her brother’s warning hand on her arm made her bite her tongue.

“I would be delighted with your company, Lady Celinda.” Lord Haversham smiled broadly, offered his arm, and they strode away without a backward glance.

“You are without a doubt the rudest woman in Christendom, Kate.” Face like a thundercloud, her brother snatched her to him, his voice low and menacing. “Haversham is my friend, and I will not allow you to taunt him with accusations of things beyond his control. You will be civil to him, or you will stay home.” Nathan’s

slate-gray eyes reminded her of a rain-soaked pavement—cold, hard granite.

“Then tell him not to come near me.” Kate pulled her arm from his grasp and smoothed her skirts.

“You danced with him. Social engagement demands you respect your partner.”

“I only danced with him because of that stupid wager, and you know it.” Her brother could be absolutely maddening. “If Calabree had been a nose faster, you’d be dancing with Miss Carmichael instead.”

“I, however, backed the winning horse, dear sister. If you want to wager, you must learn to lose with good grace.” Nathan’s mouth twitched, his irrepressible good humor reasserting itself.

“Humph.” She really should’ve known better than to wager with her brother. His ability to assume a completely expressionless face when playing cards or placing bets had become extremely annoying. “No one could lose with good grace if they had to waltz with Lord Haversham for even five minutes. It is quite impossible to fathom. Even you, dear brother, would not take it well.”

“How fortunate then that I shall never be required to stand up with Haversham.” Nathan laughed, and Kate clenched her hands. Just because her brother fancied himself a great wit did not make it true.

“Well, mark my words, I will never undertake a wager again if the forfeit involves Lord Haversham.” Just saying the name was like biting into an unripe persimmon—it turned her mouth inside out.

Nathan watched her, rubbing his fingers over his watch fob. “You are in your third Season, Kate. You could do worse than Haversham, you know.”

“Worse than...” She stared at her brother, expecting devil’s horns to sprout from his dark, curly head. “How could anyone be worse than Marcus, Earl of Haversham?”

“You sound as though the man’s a scoundrel or a cad. He’s a good man, Kate, though he has have fallen on hard times at present. His father’s death affected him very deeply.” Nathan stared at her, frowning.

“I am sorry for his loss, but that doesn’t excuse—”

“He hadn’t expected to take on the mantle of responsibility for some years to come.” Her brother jumped to his friend’s defense. “By the time he got himself in hand, the estates had begun a downward slide. His uncle’s helping him take the reins of the family investments, so that should be all right. But Haversham himself is a good man. He’d make a good husband.”

“Do you seriously want me to marry him?” Kate’s jaw dropped in stupefaction then she grimaced and swallowed convulsively. “My mouth doesn’t even want to say the words.” That lemonade would’ve been welcome right about now. “I wouldn’t marry him if he were...were...” She cast about for something dire enough to drive her point home but was stymied. “There is no instance where I would consent to marry him.”

Her brother peered at her, amusement teasing a smile to his lips once more. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

“Think what you will, as long as you get that notion out of your head.” Kate sniffed. “What gives you the idea Haversham has any interest in me anyway?” Dear God, had he actually spoken to Nathan about her? Offered for her in some fit of devilment? The idea made chills run down her arms, despite the warmth of the room. “He hasn’t said anything about me, has he?”

Nate bit back a laugh and steered her to an unoccupied corner. “No fear of that. He’d

likely be as horrified as you at the notion. I seem to be the only one who thinks it a good match.”

“Thank goodness.” Relief swept through her as she eyed her brother askance. “You should be sent to Bedlam, dear brother, for even entertaining such an idea.” Kate fluffed the ruffles of her bodice, brushing briskly where the clod had pulled her to his hard chest and crushed the delicate green fabric.

Lord, but he’d been searing hot pressed against her. She shook off the phantom sensation. “You must allow me to advise you when you come to take a wife, Nathan. I assure you, I’ll return the favor in kind.”

“Peace, Kate.” He smiled and nodded toward the dance floor. “Enjoy this evening. Enjoy the rest of the Season. Find a gentleman you can love and respect then name the day for your wedding.” His face changed, the pleasant lines hardening, swiftly as quicksilver, into a fierce scowl. “But mark me well. Your time is almost up. You’ve squandered two Seasons, snubbing gentleman after gentleman until few dare approach you.”

Kate opened her mouth to protest. She’d simply not found a man who didn’t seem to fear her. Whenever she spoke her mind about any topic, they’d all politely turned tail and run from the room, figuratively speaking. The only one who actually seemed to relish her wit and strong opinions was Lord Haversham. Goodness, was that why Nathan thought they’d suit? Because they liked to argue with one another?

“As a result, you have only three months to find a husband. There is no such thing as a fourth Season.” His tone was once more serious. “Unless you’d like me to choose one for you?”

Kate squared her shoulders and raised her chin. “As long as he’s not Haversham, I probably wouldn’t object.” She flashed a challenging look at him. Two could play



this game. “I spy Celinda coming toward us,” Kate said then grunted. “Ugh, she’s still in the company of the odious Haversham.”

“Katherine.” Nathan narrowed his eyes, and his fingers twitched.

She smiled smugly at him. “I will go rescue her. You can take your friend off to the card room and try not to win the rest of his meager funds.”

“Kate!” Nathan muttered at her through clenched teeth.

Ignoring him, she hurried toward her cousin, who was actually laughing with Haversham.

“Oh, Kate. Lord Haversham has such a wicked sense of humor. Have you not found him amusing?” Celinda’s eyes sparkled, flitting from her escort, who now looked as dour as a sermon, to Kate. Did her cousin expect her to fawn over Haversham because he’d made a jest?

“Yes, well, Lord Haversham has an air of wickedness about him, I will grant you that.” Kate forced a smile at the earl.

“Your lemonade, Miss Locke.” Haversham offered her a tall glass, filled to the brim with the pale-yellow beverage. “Have a care not to spill it.”

“You are too kind, my lord, to have brought...so much.” Gingerly, she accepted the glass. “My cup runneth over, it seems.”

“Drink some before you spill it on you, cousin,” Celinda whispered, trying to steady the glass. “I tried to tell him not to fill it so full, but he insisted you were very thirsty. Be careful.”

Kate frowned, concentrating on not ruining her favorite gown. Curse Haversham. He'd done this on purpose, either to spoil her gown or simply vex her. If the latter was his intent, he was succeeding famously. Her scowl turned into a lopsided smile when she heard her brother approach behind her. "Thank you, my lord. I'm sure I'll not be thirsty now." She stared pointedly at several drips sliding gracefully down the glass. "Perhaps nevermore."

"Did you drain the last pitcher, Haversham?" Nathan eyed the full glass askance.

"I couldn't countenance the possibility that Miss Locke might remain unsatisfied by a less than full glass." Haversham bowed, his face now as impassive as Nathan's had been. "I do hope this will keep her occupied and sated."

Her brother let out a strangled, choking sound.

Kate sent Haversham a scornful look and finally managed a sip that lowered the beverage to a less dangerous level. At least she no longer feared for her gown.

"Who are you engaged with for the next dance, Kate?" Celinda looked at her eagerly.

Her cousin was a lovely person but had moments when she relapsed into a total goose. "I'm sitting the next set out, Celinda. My feet are sore."

"But you've only danced the one waltz." Celinda's brow puckered comically.

"Some partners are more wearing than others, Lady Celinda." Haversham chuckled and turned his attention to Nathan. "Come, let me recoup my finances with you, Ainsley. I'm feeling lucky tonight." His gaze flitted over her face, a momentary contact that startled Kate with its intensity.

"Yes, let us begin the slaughter." Her brother laughed and started for the doorway

that led to the rest of Lady Hamilton's first floor. Almost at the entryway, he turned back to her. "Play nicely, Kate. If you feel you must make mischief with someone, at least have the courtesy to tell me. Don't make me learn it from Lady Drayle's footman, as I did last time." He delivered that parting shot and turned, immediately in conversation with Haversham. They wound their way out of sight, and Kate sighed heavily.

"Lord, I don't know which man has made me angrier." Kate tapped her fan against her hand several times then unfurled it and fanned herself. Serve Nathan right if Haversham took every penny in his accounts. Of course, then she would have no dowry and end up a spinster. Though even that status had its charms tonight.

"You do seem ready to fly to pieces, Kate, and the evening is just begun." Celinda's tinkly little laugh grated rather than soothed at the moment.

"Well, you didn't help matters either, cuz." Kate rounded on her cousin, whose big blue eyes widened innocently.

"Me? What did I do? I thought I'd give you time to engage yourself with another partner while I took Lord Haversham out of your path." The petite blonde sniffed. "Is it my fault you'd rather complain about the man than replace him with a more pleasing partner?"

"How do you know I was complaining about Haversham?"

"Were you?" Celinda arched a delicate eyebrow.

"Well, yes." Kate lowered her voice. She didn't intend to be tomorrow morning's prime on-dit if she could help it. "But you couldn't know that."

"Tsk tsk ." Celinda shook a finger at her. "You had the same pained expression on

your face when we returned as when we left. How many times have I warned you to school your face if you want to veil your thoughts, my dear?" She plucked the still-full glass from Kate's hand and set it on a nearby table.

"You always said that when we were growing up." Kate rubbed her finger across her lips. Did she truly give away her feelings so easily?

"Yes, whenever we got into trouble, you were the last person we wanted to try to cover it up." Celinda shook her head, lost in memory. "Now it's even more imperative that you watch what you do and say—and how you look."

"Oh, please." Kate grasped her head then quickly turned a smile on the Dowager Countess of Wendley. Once the older woman, one of the ton's biggest gossips, had passed by, she returned to her cousin. "I've had this same lecture from Nathan twice tonight. Behave myself and get a husband. His two edicts for me this Season."

"You have to admit, Kate, that your opportunities for marriage are shrinking." Celinda peered around the dance floor. "Although you might console yourself with the idea that this is the Matchmaker's Ball. Surely, that must mean someone you meet here tonight will take your fancy."

"Huh." Kate pouted for the briefest moment then schooled her face back into more pleasant lines. "I might take comfort in that, Celinda, had this not been my third Matchmaker's Ball. Apparently, the magic of Lady Hamilton's soiree does not work on me."

"Or me either, cuz." Celinda shook her head sadly. "This is my second, and I've seen no one here tonight who would tempt me to matrimony." She sighed, her lips now forming a charming moue. "There are simply no new gentlemen of any consequence or conversation out this year."

“Then who, pray tell, is that?” Kate had been shifting from foot to foot, trying to get used to standing for long periods again, when the most handsome man she’d ever seen walked calmly though the doorway, more graceful in his movements than a cat on a fence rail.

His dark good looks caught her attention, but wide shoulders that tapered to slim hips and strong legs kept her staring. He was dressed impeccably in elegant black evening clothes, and a snowy white cravat fastened with a modest gold-and-diamond pin made the man so devilishly handsome that she couldn’t quite catch her breath.

A couple danced by, passing in front of him, and when they moved on, he had vanished.

## Page 2

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“Did you see him?” Kate stared at the far side of the ballroom so hard that Lady Fauntleroy raised her quizzing glass and glared back at her. She shook herself. Had that been the handsome face she’d been in search of for two long years? She must seek out Lady Hamilton and beg an introduction.

“See whom? The room is filled to bursting with guests, Kate.” Celinda had been gazing at the dancers forming the next set. “What I need is for one of them to ask me to dance. Would you mind if Lord Haversham stood up with me?”

“Of course not,” Kate said, peering distractedly through the knots of people, unable to spy the mysterious gentleman. “Why should I mind?” She stepped around one of the Grecian pillars that graced the ballroom to get a better view. Nothing. Had he truly vanished into thin air? Perhaps they should try the card room. He might have headed there.

“Well, you two always seem to quarrel so spiritedly, I wondered if you were really attracted to one another.”

“What?” Kate jerked her head back toward her cousin, boggled by Celinda’s outrageous suggestion.

Celinda turned wide, innocent eyes on her. “Oh, you know, like Kate and Petruchio in Shakespeare. Or Beatrice and Benedick, for that matter. They always get together in the end.”

“I assure you that will not be the case with me and Lord Haversham.” Kate shook her shoulders. The very thought made her cringe. “So please, take him and welcome.

Although why you would want to waste your time, I do not know. Lord Haversham is a dismally old-fashioned man who won't even let his sister, out for her first Season, dance a waltz." How cruel to deny her that most wonderful experience. "How is the girl going to find out if a gentleman's an acceptable partner if she can't dance closely with him?"

"Is the waltz your test for a husband then, Kate?" Celinda's mouth twitched.

"I suppose it is." She hadn't thought of it like that before, but truth be told, she often dismissed gentlemen who couldn't waltz well. "Do you think that a bad thing?"

"I think it a trifle odd. There are truly characteristics other than dancing that are requisite for a good husband," Celinda said soberly, her blue eyes now fixed on Kate. "You must take his character into consideration, and his disposition. One can waltz well and still be a rogue."

"That is part of the test as well." Kate laughed. "But all things being equal, if a gentleman has every other sterling quality but can't acquit himself credibly on the dance floor, he is not for me."

"Then you must admit, Lord Haversham should be a mighty contender for your hand."

"What?" Madness must have overcome the girl.

"He has an excellent character, a very kind disposition, and according to my own observation, is an impeccable dancer." Her cousin nodded fiercely.

"Has Nathan put you up to this...this matchmaking?" She certainly wouldn't put that past her brother.

“No, I’m simply stating the obvious.”

“Well, it’s not obvious to me.” Kate wanted to scream. “I cannot see how you can call him kind when he treats his sister so shabbily. And if he does that to his own kin, how well do you think he’ll treat his wife?”

“I know he seems to have old-fashioned ideas about the waltz. I agree that it is unfortunate. However, I am sure Lord Haversham is doing his best given his recent tragic circumstances.” She leaned toward Kate and lowered her voice. “Mamma had it from Lady Fairfax, his aunt, that her nephew is still grievously mourning the loss of his father.” Celinda shook her head, her mouth strained. “I know I would be completely distraught if Papa were to die, and he is ever so much older than the previous Lord Haversham. The current earl and his sisters have not gotten over his death. Perhaps he thinks a waltz too gay a dance for Lady Letitia at this time.” Celinda waved to the slight girl in question, who was standing beside her aunt, her pink cheeks complementing her sweet gown.

“I doubt it, Celinda.” Still gazing around the ballroom, Kate sighed. The handsome gentleman had completely disappeared. “Lord Haversham is an old fogey, even if he is young. Nathan wanting me to marry him is quite unfathomable.”

Celinda’s brows rose nearly to her hairline, and she grasped Kate’s hand in a vise-like grip. “My dear, do open your budget. Has he arranged the marriage? Or has Lord Haversham offered for you? Why did you not tell me?”

“Because there is nothing to tell.” Lord, both those men would drive her to distraction. “Nathan wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing without consulting me, and he knows he needn’t waste his breath because I would refuse. Haversham has never had a kind word to say to me, and looks dour whenever we meet, which is too often as it is.” Kate wrinkled her nose. The thought of being leg-shackled to the man made her slightly ill. “I won’t marry him, and I don’t care if I am in my third



Season.”

“You could always attract the attention of Lord Somersby.” Celinda sniggered and cast a look over at that gentleman, so dashing in his extremely well-cut evening clothes. “The two of you would make quite an elegant couple were you to partner in a dance or...something more permanent. I wonder if he would pass your waltz test.” The gleam of mirth in her cousin’s eyes exasperated Kate that much more.

“I heard about his antics at Lady Marbury’s Christmas party, Celinda—from you!”

She burst out laughing, making the gold ringlets beside her face dance and bob. “Perhaps he has reformed in the New Year.”

“In a pig’s eye. You’d have a better chance of reforming that pig than Somersby.” Kate grimaced and shuddered, bringing another peal of laughter from Celinda.

“It will take a special woman to tame that one.” Celinda cocked her head, giving Kate a hopeful look. “Are you certain you are not up to the challenge?”

“I’d probably plant him a facer before all was said and done. No, I am happy to leave his lordship alone and hope for better things,” Kate said absently, her attention reverting to the search for the dark, handsome stranger.

“Who are you looking for?” Celinda peered in the same direction as Kate.

“That gentleman. The stranger I asked you about just now. Did you really not see him?” Had she imagined the man? “Where did he go?” she muttered.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about, cuz.” Celinda snapped her fan open, catching the attention of a gentleman across the room and smiling at him.

“Why are you flirting with Bertie Symmons? We’ve known him since we were eight years old, and he cried when his mama wouldn’t allow him to climb a tree.” Kate glared at the young man in question, the son of one of their neighbors in Somerset.

“One has to flirt with old friends sometimes if one wants to dance badly enough.” Celinda touched the edge of the fan with her finger, snapped it closed, and smiled at Bertie, who hastily excused himself and headed toward them.

“I’ve never wanted to dance quite that badly.” Kate sniffed and wiggled her toes in her new green satin slippers. Standing for so long during the early part of the Season took some getting used to. “I do wish I had an inkling of who I wanted to flirt with.”

“As do I.” Celinda laughed. “I have no idea so far this Season. I’m just practicing on Bertie so I’ll remember how.”

“Lady Celinda, Miss Locke.”

Kate whirled around and stopped dead, coming face to face with Lady Hamilton and the handsome stranger she’d been looking for. Lord, but he looked even more attractive up close. He smiled charmingly, revealing white, even teeth in a wide mouth with sensual lips. Her heart stuttered.

Celinda’s China blue eyes widened, and a brilliant smile curved her lips. She curtsied, and Kate followed suit, quite unable to take her gaze off the gentleman.

“Ladies, good evening once more.” Lady Hamilton nodded, smiling first at one then the other of them. “May I introduce Lord Finley? He is recently returned from some five years in America.”

Kate struggled to breathe. She snapped her fan open and plied it vigorously, hoping she wouldn’t swoon.

“My lord, this is Lady Celinda Grantham, Lord Ivor’s daughter. Miss Katherine Locke is her cousin and Lord Ainsley’s sister.”

Lord Finley bowed gracefully, coiled animal energy in the movement. “Lady Celinda, I am familiar with your family.” His large, deep blue eyes, the exact color of an early night sky, gleamed in the candlelight. “Miss Locke.” He bowed again then turned back to her cousin. “Might I beg the next dance, Lady Celinda?”

“Of course, my lord.” Celinda cast her eyes down and shut her fan.

Kate’s heart sank. He had chosen her cousin instead of her. How unfair when she’d seen him first.

“And the next after with you, Miss Locke, if you are not engaged?” His dark eyes seemed to pierce her, almost as though he knew her thoughts.

“I would be honored, Lord Finley.” At least she would get to dance with him eventually.

“Then that is settled.” Lady Hamilton gave a trilling laugh and, putting a hand on her arm, drew Kate a little away.

“Shall we go make up the set, my lady?” Finley offered his arm, and Celinda grasped it as though it were a lifeline.

“Thank you, my lord. I’d be delighted.”

“Lady Celinda?” Bertie Symmons finally arrived, frowning to find Celinda firmly anchored to Lord Finley’s arm. “I thought...I mean...”

“Oh, Bertie. Mr. Symmons, that is.” Celinda smiled smoothly as though nothing were

amiss. “Lord Finley, may I present Mr. Symmons, an old acquaintance.” She continued to smile and nod in Kate’s direction. “Mr. Symmons, as I have just accepted a dance with Lord Finley, you must ask to stand up with Miss Locke.”

She would murder her cousin before the evening was through. Not only was Bertie uninteresting, but he was also a horrible dance partner. Celinda would be made to pay. Still, she must put on a delighted face for Lord Finley to see. Kate smiled and looked expectantly at Bertie.

“Would you like to dance, Kate?” He sounded as unsure as possible, and if Celinda had been the only one present, she would’ve glared and banished him to the ends of the earth.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Symmons. I should be delighted.” She took his arm and followed Celinda and her delectable partner onto the dance floor. “If you step on my feet, Bertie,” she whispered as they took their places in line, “I shall kick you in the shins.” Let the martyrdom begin.

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“Shall we take this corner here?” Ainsley indicated a small square table for two drawn up cozily near the fire.

“As you wish.” Marcus followed his friend, snaring a glass of wine from a footman stationed just outside the card room. “Bezique?” He sat with his back to the fire, the better to see Ainsley’s face during play.

“Piquet, please? I’ve gone off Bezique recently.” Ainsley settled in the seat opposite. “That was all old Boyle wanted to play last weekend. As I’m wooing the gentleman’s support for a vote coming up in a couple of weeks, I played it for four days running.”

Marcus shrugged. “One’s as good as the other, as long as you lose.” He was a much better Bezique player than Piquet, but he felt luck was with him tonight, so it should not matter in the least. He twirled the stem of his glass, the rich burgundy wine glowing like a jewel in the firelight.

“Grown cocky, have you?” Ainsley pulled the walnut card box, inlaid with a mother-of-pearl design, toward him. He opened it and fished out the two plainest decks. “I assume you have no affinity for flowers, Haversham?”

Marcus waved a hand and chuckled, feigning a nonchalance he certainly didn’t feel. “Not at all. The ladies do enjoy a pretty deck, but I’ll take plain.” He grinned. “Unless the forget-me-nots will throw you off your game. Then by all means, use those.”

Ainsley snorted. “I assure you, the decor makes no difference to me.”

Marcus sipped his wine, trying to relax, as the waning figures of his bank account danced before his eyes. He had no business playing with Nathan—or anyone, for that matter. Still, the promise of some quick money sang a siren song that drowned out the voice of reason. He’d lost a middling large sum to his friend last weekend, so he was due for a winning evening. Ainsley could afford to drop a couple thousand pounds and not even miss it. And who better to give it to than his best friend?

Ainsley discarded the lower cards and shuffled with expert hands. The man was certainly no slouch when it came to cards—still, Marcus had a feeling he would prevail tonight.

“My sister is rather annoyed at you.” Nathan finished shuffling and cut the cards, revealing a king of spades.

“Your sister is forever annoyed at me.” Marcus waved away his cut, and his friend began to deal. “I’ve never understood why.” Kate Locke’s aversion to him had been

instantaneous upon their first meeting seven years before when Ainsley had invited him to Somerset for a holiday. His younger sisters had been great fun. Only Katherine had taken him in dislike and given him the rough side of her tongue from that day to this. Marcus shook his head as he discarded five very bad cards and drew five even worse.

“She told me it was because she thought you looked like a frog and would give her warts if you could.” Ainsley chuckled. “Carte blanche.”

“The devil you say!” Marcus stared at the cards Ainsley flashed him. Not a court card in the hand. Damn. He’d shake it off though. “Did you not inform her that toads give warts, not frogs?”

“I did.” His friend laughed and made his discard. “To which she retorted, ‘Well, he’d still try his best to do it, whether he could or not.’”

“God, she’s always been impossible. She couldn’t have been more than fourteen at the time.” He moved his cards about, trying to make something out of absolutely nothing. The memory of Kate Locke seven years ago, fresh-faced, pert, and more intelligent than any woman he’d met still set his teeth on edge. She’d been wearing a blue frock that day, which seemed to intensify the rich auburn of her hair. Clear blue eyes, high cheekbones, and a sprinkling of bran over her petite nose had made her seem the epitome of the English maiden. Then she’d opened her mouth, and any charm she might have possessed had vanished with the first of countless barbs aimed directly at him.

“Try living with her.” Ainsley pored over his cards then caught Marcus’s eye.

“Not for the Crown Jewels and enough blunt for a Grand Tour. Lead with King of Clubs. One point.”

“She’s got some quarrel with you about your sister at the moment. Carte blanche ,” Ainsley began his declarations, which went on for quite some time. By the time he finished, he had ninety-four points.

Marcus stared at the cards in his hand, his stomach turning the excellent burgundy to vinegar. “How the devil did you do that?”

“I swear, luck of the draw.” Ainsley looked abashed, even though his face had flushed with the excitement of the play. Apparently, it was his friend’s lucky night, not his. “Quite the thrill, eh?”

“Without even playing a card.” Marcus shook his head and drained his glass. Truly not his night.

“Which I will do now.” His friend laid down a Jack of Clubs.

“Two. What does your sister find exceptional about my sister? I don’t believe they’ve ever met. The girl just came out two weeks ago. Queen of Clubs. Three.” Marcus didn’t want to talk about Miss Locke or even think about her. Perhaps she was the source of this bad luck.

“She thinks you’re being unreasonable because you won’t let Lady Letitia waltz. Seven of Clubs.” Ainsley dropped the card onto the court card.

“Four.” Marcus pounced on the trick. “I hardly think it any of Miss Locke’s concern. Ten of Clubs. Five.” The woman should not give her opinion on what she did not understand.

“Well, I think it has less to do with your sister and more to do with criticizing you.” Ainsley laid down the Seven of Diamonds. “Although, I do think you should allow the girl to waltz if she wants to. It’s truly not the scandal it was even five years ago.”

“Five.” Marcus gathered the trick, thinking about Miss Locke’s words as they’d danced. She’d obviously shared her opinions with her brother. “I have my own reasons for forbidding her the dance.”

“You do?” His friend cut his eyes toward him, an eyebrow raised.

“Do not worry about it,” Marcus said, with a grunt of laughter. “I’m hardly attempting to suppress her.” He shook his head and played the Nine of Diamonds. “I actually feared I would never get her out of the house tonight. She was always timid, and Father’s death only made her more so. I’ve still to discover what threat Aunt Alexandra employed to make her leave her room this evening. Six.” He’d taken almost half the tricks. Perhaps he’d at least make thirty points in the hand. “Believe me, if she dances with anyone, I’ll be thrilled.”

“So you’re not trying to play the tyrant?” Ainsley pulled at his lower lip, staring into the fire.

“Why would I want to be a tyrant to my sister? Have you ever done so to yours?”

Ainsley barked a laugh so loud the ladies at the neighboring table all jumped. “Only if I wanted to find my throat cut with my own razor one morning. Kate’s more a tyrant than I’ll ever be.”

“I couldn’t disagree with that from what I’ve seen of her. Although I’m touched by her concern for Letitia.” The figure of Miss Locke during their earlier dance appeared in his memory, blue eyes snapping, mouth pursed in disdain. Or in expectation of a kiss? A shiver shot down his spine. Where the devil had that idea come from? His mouth was suddenly so dry it was hard to say, “Your play.”

“Jack of Diamonds. Ninety-five.”



Marcus stared at the remaining low cards in his hands and sighed. It was certainly going to be a long night.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

“Bertie, if you step on my gown once more, I swear before God, I will kick you.” Kate smiled as she spoke but meant every word. The oaf was going to tear her gown if he didn’t watch where he stepped. Then she wouldn’t be able to dance the next set with Lord Finley.

He and Celinda were the first couple, currently dancing near the bottom of the line. She tried very hard not to stare at him and pay more attention to her own partner, yet Bertie Symmons was the most tedious man she knew. Even Lord Haversham had more to recommend him as a partner, and God knew she hated to admit that.

Kate picked up her skirt in readiness for the next part of the set. As second couple, they were currently not dancing but waiting their turn. When it came, she didn’t intend to let Bertie’s inept dancing skills spoil it for her.

The first couple bowed, set to their partners—Celinda danced very prettily before Finley on her toes—then performed a double figure eight. Of course, Lord Finley danced excellently into the bargain. So unfair.

“I say, who’s that chap Celinda’s dancing with?” Bertie asked as they took hands to change through.

“Lord Finley.” Kate stole another glance at the couple, who laughed as they, too, wound down the line of dancers. “A new gentleman lately from America.”

“He’s American?” Bertie’s eyes opened wide. “I didn’t think they had titles in America.”

“No, wigeon. He’s not American, he’s English, but he’s been over there for five years and is just now returned. Something to do with investments, I think.” Kate peered at her partner. “What investments might he have over there? I didn’t think it a very profitable place at all.”

“Oh, no, there’s money to be made, depending on what he’s been investing in.” Bertie nodded eagerly. “Banks, both the national Bank of the United States and various state banks. There are merchant investors he could be dabbling in. And there’s always land.”

Kat wrinkled her nose. “I’m sure Lord Finley wouldn’t concern himself with mere trade.”

“It can be quite lucrative, I hear.” They parted, and Bertie bowed as the dance ended. He took her hand and led her toward the edge of the dance floor. “Of course, the most lucrative investment in the States at the moment is the slave trade.”

“What?” Kate drew back, shocked. “Lord Finley is a gentleman. He would never take up such a filthy business. Besides, it’s illegal.”

“Not in America. And even if he’d invested in a company that owns slave ships, he wouldn’t be doing anything illegal here.” Bertie’s usual placid face transformed, now more animated than she’d ever seen it.

“How do you know all this?” Kate couldn’t fathom that someone like Bertie could truly know about such important things as investments. He’d always been rather flighty.

“My father’s got an interest in the Bank of New York. It’s made a huge difference in our fortunes over the past ten years.” He grasped her hand, jerking Kate’s attention back to him. “We don’t have a title, but Father assures me I’ll have 10,000 pounds or

more a year.”

Kate stared at him, completely horrified, and yanked her hand free. Lord, the fool thought she was interested in money. “I’m happy for you, Bertie. However, what I need to know is where Lord Finley made his money. Can you find out for me?”

Bertie’s countenance fell, but he shrugged and smiled good-naturedly. He’d undoubtedly make some girl an excellent husband. “I’ll ask Father. He’s always getting news from all over about his investments. I daresay he knows Lord Finley.”

“Thank you, Bertie.” She patted his arm. “And thank you for the dance.”

“Would you care to—”

“Once, I believe, is all I can claim in an evening.” She snapped her fan open and tried to cool her face. Dancing with a less than stellar partner was wearying. “I must allow the other ladies a chance to stand up with you.”

“Oh, right. Very good.” Bertie looked around as if considering his options. “I say, here comes Celinda. I should ask her, don’t you think?” He turned expectantly toward her cousin. “Lady Celinda, would you care to—”

“Excuse me, Bertie,” Celinda interrupted him, startling both Kate and her escort. Her flushed face and sparkling blue eyes gave her a level of vivaciousness Kate had never seen before. “I simply must speak to Kate this instant.” She dragged Kate over to a secluded corner, dancing on her toes, unable to stand still. “Oh, Kate. He’s an absolute dream.”

Kate stared, unable to reconcile this Celinda with the cousin she’d always known. Her Celinda possessed a cool, reserved mien, quick to laugh but always critical of the gentlemen of her acquaintance. This Celinda, with flashing eyes, a wide smile, and

constant movement, seemed a stranger. She absolutely fizzed with excitement. Kate could only stare as her cousin flipped her fan open then snapped it closed, glancing up and down the dance floor.

“So Lord Finley dances well, does he? Then I will look forward to our dance even more.” Kate put a hand on her cousin’s shoulder. Perhaps a touch would help calm her. It wouldn’t do at all for Celinda to show such partiality in public toward a man she’d only just met.

“Oh, so much more than that, but yes, he’s an excellent partner. You’ll enjoy your set with him so much.” Celinda snapped her fan open again and waved it frantically, sending her ringlets flying.

“Celinda, calm yourself.” Kate put her arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Goodness, I’ve never seen you like this before.” She didn’t know whether to laugh or pull a stern face.

“I’ve never felt like this before. Oh, my dear, I’m all goose flesh.” She bared her arm, and indeed every hair stood on quivering end. “I’ve never met anyone like him. So witty, so kind. And oh, the most wonderful thing of all.” She grabbed Kate by the shoulders. “He didn’t ask me about my name!” She clamped her hand over her mouth and darted her gaze around the room.

“Yes, keep your voice down, if you please.” Kate peered about as well, dread settling in her chest. “No need to call further attention to yourself.”

“But, Kate, he didn’t ask me what Celinda meant or if it was a family name, or remark on how odd it was.”

Kate had to grab her to keep her from twirling about. Her cousin’s behavior did not bode at all well for her own prospects with Lord Finley.

“He just said it was a pretty name and went on talking about the ball.” Celinda sighed and clasped her hands together over her chest.

“Is that what’s got you all atwitter?”

“Says you with the unexceptional name of Katherine.” She sniffed, and the old Celinda returned. “You have no idea the cross it is to have everyone make mention of your name. To be asked over and over if it’s a family name, and what it means, and do I like it, until I want to pull my hair out.” She straightened a nonexistent out-of-place curl then pointed her fan at Kate. “You have no idea how tiresome it is.”

“I expect not.” No one had ever commented on her name. Kate took her cousin’s arm and began a sedate stroll round the crowded room. Perhaps the motion would soothe Celinda. “So Lord Finley is a wonderful dancer, and exceptionally incurious about your name. What other charms does he possess? I am engaged to him for the next, as you remember.” Walking did seem to temper Celinda’s agitation, so she kept her moving, threading them through the little clusters of people. “What else may I expect?”

“Well, he smiles a lot, with even teeth. And he did several very thoughtful things, like tying my fan when it came loose from my wrist. He was simply the most wonderful partner I’ve ever had.” She gave a breathless sigh and shivered.

“Then I will certainly look forward to my set with him.” Kate surveyed the room. They were all the way across the floor from the spot where Lord Finley stood talking to Bertie. “I must go back. The musicians are almost ready for the next set. Shall I leave you with your mother?”

“No, I’m going to sit in the retiring room in case Bertie comes looking for me. I simply could not endure a dance with anyone else at the moment.” Celinda brushed a kiss over Kate’s cheek. She had calmed sufficiently that Kate had fewer qualms about

letting her go. “I will see you after your set. I’ll want to hear all about it,” she called as she all but skipped out of the doorway.

Dodging around chatting couples and clusters of gossiping matrons, Kate hurried as best she could back toward Lord Finley. She didn’t want to keep his lordship waiting.

“Not a feather to fly with, so Lord Cranston says. I pity his poor sister, just out this Season.”

The words caught her attention, and Kate slowed her headlong dash past a clutch of older ladies. Who might they be talking about?

“Let us hope his mother’s settlements are adequate for the girls. The estate may never recoup its losses.”

Heart beating fast, Kate shook off the comment and continued toward Lord Finley. Her first thought, of course, was Lord Haversham, but it might not have been him. They could have been talking about almost anyone, though he fit the description so perfectly, she doubted they were. Anyway, it was none of her concern, really. She didn’t even like the man. Still, the gossip didn’t sit well with her. Now she wished she hadn’t made that comment to Haversham about not working. That had been bad form on her part.

She shook off the gloomy thoughts and put on her brightest smile as she approached Lord Finley and Bertie. “My lord, I believe we are promised for this set?”

“Indeed we are, Miss Locke.” Celinda had been truthful about the white teeth. “If you will excuse us, Mr. Symmons.” Lord Finley offered his arm, and Kate took it gratefully. He led her onto the floor, skillfully maneuvering through the throng of guests who seemed to have swelled in the past half hour.

They took their places for a quadrille, and the orchestra began a particularly lively rendition of “L’Horatia.”

Kate curtsied to her corner partner then to Lord Finley, trembling like a girl in her first Season. They chasséd down the square, took hands and, turning, chasséd back. In her concentration on the steps, she forgot to be nervous until they crossed arms around each other, and his arm brushed her waist. She expected a tingle, even stronger than when Lord Haversham had pulled her close to him. Lord Finley’s touch, however, seemed rather ordinary, although his hand had an uncomfortably moist feel, even through her gloves. Odd, and somewhat disappointing.

Lord Finley was quite the most attractive gentleman she’d met in three Seasons. With such broad shoulders, he cut a dashing figure in perfectly tailored evening clothes she couldn’t help but admire. He’d been pleasant to talk to and extremely courteous. So why didn’t he pique her interest more? Perhaps further conversation would remedy that.

“You are quite an excellent dancer, my lord,” she said, when it was the third and fourth couple’s turn to dance. “It seems difficult for some tall men, but not so with you.”

“Thank you, Miss Locke.” He flashed his smile again. “I do enjoy it, especially when my partner is as lovely and accomplished as you.”

She nodded at the compliment and would’ve thanked him had it not been their turn on the floor once more. They passed through, and she linked hands with the second couple, dancing the steps together as a threesome. When they had finished their part, Lord Finley began his own solo performance, a series of steps made up by the male dancer to display his dancing prowess. He skipped, hopped, and twirled as the other dancers applauded. Then they joined hands in a circle and came back to their starting position.



“What an outstanding exhibition, my lord.” Kate stared into the blue depths of his eyes. “You must practice constantly.”

“I do.” He chuckled. “I have five younger sisters, and my mother insists that now I am home, I must dance with each one, even though only two are currently out and the youngest is ten.”

The other couples finished their part, and the music stopped. Kate applauded, struggling for something to say until the next dance began. “I understand you have returned to England but recently.”

“Indeed, I’ve been home scarcely a full month. Hence, lots of dancing practice.” He smiled, his face transforming from pleasant to dangerously charming. “And you are Lady Celinda’s cousin?” He changed the subject smoothly. Did he not want to talk about his travels?

“Yes, we grew up together in Somerset.”

“So she told me. That is a lovely part of the country, as I recall. Did you have much snow this past winter?”

Drat. Now they were on the weather, she feared she’d never get any more information about the man. As they continued the sets of the quadrille, however, Kate was able to glean that his mother was giving a ball for his second eldest sister, who’d come out this year.

“I will particularly ask that you and Lady Celinda be included in the guest list, Miss Locke. And I insist upon a dance with you.” That dangerously charming smile came out again, and Kate’s head whirled. No man should be that handsome.

“Oh, I assure you, Lord Finley, I will hold you to that promise.” Kate sent him a

smile of her own. "A waltz perhaps, next time?"

"I will make sure of it." He nodded, and they were off on the final figure of the quadrille. When it ended, she took his arm, satisfied, if not enthusiastic, at his response. Out of breath and with flushed cheeks, she let him lead her to Celinda, who stood near the doorway. "Miss Locke, Lady Celinda, it has been my pleasure." He bowed, his gaze lingering a moment too long on her cousin. "If you will excuse me, ladies?" A final brilliant smile, and he headed toward a matronly woman in deep gold, with two young ladies at her side. Their faces lit up at his approach.

"His mother and sisters, I assume. We shall need to make their acquaintance as well," Celinda murmured, not taking her gaze off the splendid figure of the retreating viscount.

"I expect we shall, as he's invited us to his sister's ball," Kate said, her gaze just as firmly attached to Lord Finley.

"Excellent." Celinda adjusted her dress and bit her lips, bringing more pink into them. "As I intend to marry Lord Finley, I suppose I should meet his family."

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"King of Spades, thirty-one." Ainsley drew the trick to him. All the tricks save two lay in front of him. "Seven of Clubs, thirty-two."

"Well, believe it or not," Marcus leaned back in his chair, "Ten of Clubs. Eleven and twelve." He gathered the cards to him and sighed. "Definitely your night, Ainsley."

His friend smiled, tallying the last hand. "I believe you are correct, old chap. Shall we go again? Kate has yet to appear and drag me off home."

“Lord, no. I must pay up and go off to lick my wounds.” He’d taken a drubbing for certain tonight. Hopefully the damage wasn’t as high as he feared. To his dismay, he had not kept track of his losses as well as he should have. For some Godforsaken reason, he’d spent much of the game brooding over Miss Locke’s invective about his lack of industry. The woman had no idea what he’d been up against when his father died suddenly. To assume the earldom years before he’d expected it had been a nightmare of a particularly horrible sort. His father had taught him how to manage the estate, of course. Still, having the sole responsibility for the finances and his sisters’ welfare dropped upon him in the blink of an eye was daunting. Especially in the face of a crisis none of them had foreseen.

In the chaos that had reigned immediately after his father’s death, it was discovered that his steward had absconded with a substantial portion of the Haversham ancestral jewels and money. The theft might even have played a part in his father’s demise, for he had seemed to age greatly in the days before he died. It would take several years and a great deal of luck to recoup his losses, as there was little hope of recovery of the property. The last anyone had heard of Mr. Clemons, he’d been on a ship bound for America.

Marcus shook off the memory and reached for his purse. “How much have you set me back now, Ainsley?”

“Three.”

Hmm. Three hundred pounds was a lot of money to lose, especially when he’d planned to win such a sum instead. Ah, well, it could’ve been worse. He must refrain from play now, wagering only on investments, as his uncle had admonished him the last time he’d had to bail him out of the River Tick. “I’ve got two on me now.” He plunked the leather bag down on the table. “I’ll call round tomorrow with the other hundred.”

“Thousand.”

“I beg your pardon?” Marcus stared at his friend, confused. What the devil did he—

“It’s three thousand pounds, Marcus. Not three hundred.”

The candlelight wavered a moment as his vision tried to dim. Three thousand pounds?

“What do you mean?” Panic made his voice sharper than it should’ve been. “I never lost so much tonight.” Damn, he hated to question Ainsley, but that simply couldn’t be right.

“No, it was fifteen hundred tonight.” His friend continued to put away the cards, carefully not meeting his eyes. “The rest was from Saxby’s on Tuesday and Lord Branderson’s game on Saturday last. You were out of pocket both nights, if you recall.”

Dear God. He’d meant to get that money to Nathan the next day, but he’d no ready cash at the bank and his uncle had been from home. He was the one resource left who might lend him the sum. If he didn’t pay Ainsley, the ton would be on him like wolves on a suckling lamb. Miss Locke would likely lead the pack with a well-placed cut direct.

“I beg your pardon, Ainsley. I meant to get the money from Uncle Parminter, but I couldn’t run him to ground. I’ll bring it around directly tomorrow morning.” God help him if his uncle refused.

“There is a way you can take care of this matter with your uncle none the wiser.” Ainsley picked up the leather pouch and dropped it on top of the last trick Marcus had taken. “Marry my sister, and the debt is paid in full.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

“You intend to marry him?” Kate wheeled toward her cousin, snapping her fan shut. “What are you talking about?”

“I said what I meant, Kate. I intend to marry Viscount Finley,” Celinda said with a saucy shake of her head. “He is everything I have been looking for in a husband. I need not look further. I plan to marry him by the end of the Season.”

“Has he said anything about speaking to your father?” Kate grasped at the first idea to pop into her head. This couldn’t be true.

“Not yet.” Celinda chest heaved and her eyes sparkled as she watched the retreating form of Lord Finley. Granted, he cut an excellent figure, but her cousin should not be showing such obvious interest. “But in the next week, I will make a concerted effort to turn Lord Finley’s head toward me and no one else.” She eyed Finley’s back avidly as he stood, speaking with his family. “I will make sure he speaks to Papa shortly. Believe me.”

“This is very sudden, cousin.” Kate fought to keep the panic out of her voice. “We only met him this evening, and now you intend to marry him?”

She must find some way to distract her cousin from this rash course. Not only rash, but disastrous for her own hopes for Lord Finley. Celinda had at least one more Season ahead of her after this one. Kate had only until August. She’d been out for two Seasons without finding a single gentleman who didn’t set her teeth on edge, had a brain in his head, or could keep her interest for more than the length of a dance. Now she had found him, or thought she had, it simply wasn’t fair that Celinda had become infatuated with him.

“Oh, Kate.” Celinda grasped her hands, her face aglow. “When you find the man, the one man who will be your perfect match, you’ll just know . You’ll feel it in every single part of you.”

Kate closed her eyes. What a disaster. She could hardly, in good conscience, pursue a man with whom her cousin had fallen head over heels in love. Yet she couldn’t quite give up hope yet. They didn’t know Lord Finley’s disposition toward either of them. She must wait and see what might transpire tonight—and in the weeks to come. Meanwhile, she must support Celinda and say nothing of her own desires. “I hope you are correct about this, Celinda.”

“I am. Just trust me, Kate.” Celinda all but twirled in her excitement. “Lord, look, he’s coming back.” She straightened and fluttered her fan before her face.

Kate stood straighter as well, struggling to muster a smile as she curtsied to Lord Finley once more.

“Ladies,” he said, bowing first to Celinda and then Kate. “I have spoken to my mother, who says she will be delighted to issue invitations to my sister’s ball a fortnight from now.” His smile took in both of them, however, his gaze rested on Celinda. “Do you recall if you are engaged? It is set for Wednesday, the 17th.”

“I am certain I am free that evening, Lord Finley,” Kate spoke up so quickly his lordship had scarcely finished issuing the invitation.

He smiled and nodded to her. “Splendid, Miss Locke. And you, Lady Celinda?”

Celinda cut her gaze toward Kate then sighed. “I am afraid I cannot tell if I am engaged that evening or not, my lord. My mother accepts all my engagements. I will need to consult her before I can say with any certainty if I am free. But I do hope I will be able to attend.”

Finley's face showed no trace of emotion, but his eyes flickered, a hint of sadness in them. "I will await your answer then, my lady, and hope to hear favorable news." He smiled, his hands stiff at his sides.

Kate breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps her aunt and cousin had prior plans. That night, Lady Hever was giving a masquerade ball. She'd received an invitation but neglected to send a reply yet, thank goodness. From Celinda's hedging words, Kate suspected Lady Ivor had already accepted for the masquerade. Her cousin's absence might give Kate a second chance to make inroads with the viscount. However, Lord Finley's deferential manner toward her cousin led her to believe it might be a lost cause already.

"I enjoyed our earlier dances very much, ladies," Lord Finley began.

From the corner of her eye, Kate caught sight of a tall, distracted gentleman heading their way, his attention fixed on her cousin. A hint of hope rose in her as Lord Halford sped toward them. Celinda's distant cousin might just rescue Kate from witnessing Viscount Finley ask Celinda for the supper dance. At least it might encourage Finley to ask her for a dance instead and save her the embarrassment of being without a partner yet again.

"Lady Celinda, Miss Locke. How do you do? So lovely to see you this evening." He bowed to them and nodded ever so slightly toward Lord Finley, raising his eyebrows over fine mahogany-colored eyes.

"Good evening, Lord Halford." Kate dropped him a curtsy, fluttering her lashes at him. Let the viscount observe her flirting with another man and see if that drew his attention.

"Good evening, my lord." Celinda pursed her lips but curtsied as well. Her innocent blue eyes shot daggers at the marquess.

Why was she displeased with Halford? Did she think he would break up her tête-à-tête with Lord Finley?

Abruptly, Celinda smiled and nodded to Halford. “May I present Lord Finley, my lord? He is just returned to London from America. Lord Finley, my very distant cousin, Lord Halford.”

“My lord.” Halford bowed, staring at Lord Finley with an intense scrutiny that made Kate’s heart twist. Was something wrong with the dashing viscount? Bertie had mentioned the slave trade, and now Halford looked uncharacteristically unfriendly toward the man. He certainly seemed to disapprove of Finley. The question was, why?

“Lady Celinda, I believe you are promised to me for the next set.” He stared so hard at her that even Kate began to feel uncomfortable.

Celinda returned his stare, a battle of wills raging until she finally sighed, and with a regretful glance at Lord Finley, said, “Yes, I believe I am, my lord.” She looked briefly from Kate to Finley and shrugged. “Will you excuse us?” She fixed a lovely smile on her face and laid her hand on Lord Halford’s arm.

He quickly led her to the floor, where a waltz had just begun.

Lord Finley gazed after her cousin, a wistful, if puzzled, look on his face. “I suppose she is quite the popular partner, is she not, Miss Locke?”

“She is, my lord.” The man still watched Celinda’s progress on the floor. “It is the rare dance that she does not stand up with someone.” Kate’s sense of injustice rose up to tower over her. If Lord Finley liked a popular lady, she would make sure to seem as admired as Celinda. “Still, she might have one dance available.”



“Do you think so?” Lord Finley’s attention swiveled back to her. “And are you engaged as well, Miss Locke?”

Kate smiled. “I always leave one dance open, my lord, in case I find I would like to dance with a partner more than once.”

Finley eyed her, admiration in his face. “Then if this dance is one you still have free, nothing would give me more pleasure than to have you as my partner for it.” The charming smile he gave her sent a tingle down to her toes. His cerulean eyes were spellbinding, while his deep, baritone voice set off flutterings in her heart.

If she didn’t seize the opportunity, it might never come again. “I would be delighted, my lord. I do so love to waltz, don’t you?”

“Indeed I do, Miss Locke.” He nodded and offered his arm.

“Are your sisters allowed to waltz as well? Some gentlemen still believe the dance too scandalous for other than married couples.” Kate smiled up at him as she took his right hand, and he placed his left at her waist.

“How very odd, but I suppose some are still behind the times. To answer your question, Miss Locke, yes, they have all been instructed in the waltz, and the two who are out have already been given permission and danced it at least once at Almack’s.” His eyebrow rose with a quizzical air. “Why do you ask?”

“Simply assuring myself that you are a forward thinker, my lord.” Kate laughed as they spun dizzily around the room. It was so satisfying to be proved correct at least some of the time.

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Marcus sat stunned, unsure he'd heard his friend correctly. Marry Katherine Locke? He stared at Ainsley, unable to form a coherent thought for the roaring in his ears, his mouth as dry as if he'd swallowed sand. Finally, he managed to croak, "Please tell me that was a jest in very poor taste."

Ainsley leaned back, crossing his arms. "Actually, I'm quite serious. Woo my sister. Get her to agree to be your wife. I want Kate safely married. Well married. And she seems ill-inclined to find a man to settle down with. This is her third Season. She'll not have another. I cannot stand by and see her left an ape leader." He drummed his fingers on the table. "Kate's not a bad match, Haversham."

"Are we speaking of your sister, Katherine Locke, or a completely different Miss Locke to whom I have not yet been introduced?" Marcus narrowed his eyes. Ainsley had to be making the most elaborate jest in the history of their friendship. He wasn't known for being a great prankster, although he had kicked up a lark from time to time at Oxford. The worst of that, however, had been replacing the dean's sugar loaf with a block of rock salt. But he'd done nothing so devious in recent years.

"I know you and she have not gotten on well in the past, but that may have been a simple misunderstanding."

"Hah." Marcus shook his head, still dazed at the suggestion. "She's been antagonistic toward me from the beginning. You said so yourself."

Ainsley frowned. "And I think that childishness needs to stop. I have already spoken to her about her outrageous behavior to you this evening. She can be made to see reason."

Marcus scowled. He could still see Miss Locke's piercing blue eyes as she'd sneered at him earlier. It was lunacy to think she could change. How such a beautiful woman could be so vitriolic in nature boggled his mind. He'd raised his defenses against her

attacks long ago; he'd not lower them now for all the prime goers in Prinny's stable nor all the gold sovereigns in Ainsley's coffers. "I thank you for the opportunity to so discharge my debt, but I shall call around with the funds tomorrow." He snared the pouch and stuffed it back inside his coat. It had been sheer folly to game tonight.

"Marcus, I beg you to reconsider." Ainsley shot out his hand and grasped his arm.

He stared at Nathan, whose face bore a striking resemblance to his sister's, save her features were more pleasantly softened. The color of their eyes differed, but the intriguing almond shape and high brows were the same. His jaw was squared, whereas hers was gently rounded, though both were undoubtedly firm. Miss Locke's nose was less sharp, more petite and pleasing. Her smile, though not often bestowed on him, was just as generous as his friend's ready one. The biggest difference concerned their coloring—Ainsley's hair lay curly and dark as midnight on his head, whereas his sister's gleamed like a river of copper in the sun. She was a striking woman, he couldn't deny it. But not for him.

"I'm afraid not, old chap. Because you feel guilty for trouncing me so thoroughly at cards and fear you've caused my utter financial ruin does not mean I have to sacrifice myself on the altar of your sister. Or has she made your life such a living hell that you are seeking any means possible to rid your house of her?"

"Neither," Ainsley snapped and released his hand. "Despite your less than flattering estimation of Kate, I've watched you and her spar and quip for years. And despite what either of you might think, I believe you are well-matched." He raised a hand before Marcus could stutter out a protest. "The worst ton marriages are between men and women who tire of one another when they become bored within a year of the marriage. I have observed that men who marry women with a like temperament and interests have much more satisfying marriages than those who marry for wealth, social connections, or fleeting physical attraction. If you married Kate, you'd have all those things and more. She'd keep you on your toes."

“She’d keep me on my guard, you mean.” Marcus glowered at Ainsley. The man was mad. “I’d never be able to lay my head on my pillow without wondering if I’d be alive to raise it the next morning.”

“Life would not be dull.”

“Life would not be worth living with that harpy for a wife.” Marcus would plead if he had to. “Nathan, have you truly lost your mind? She cannot stand me.”

“I think you underestimate your own charms, Haversham.” Ainsley smiled, and a cold chill swept down Marcus’s back. “I wager if you seriously tried to woo her, she’d come around in no time at all. She’s completely aware that her time is short. I’ve told her if she can’t find a man she wants to marry, I’ll find one for her.”

“Aha. Here’s the crux of it. You’re being your usual efficient self and trying to kill two birds with one stone. Well, I’m sorry, Ainsley, this bird is about to fly.” Marcus rose, hoping he could find a good stiff whiskey somewhere on the premises. Between the fear, the financial ruin, and a fate worse than all the fires of hell, he had a tremendous need to get completely foxed.

“You should reconsider, Haversham. All your financial woes would be ended with a quick, ‘I do.’ Then you and Kate could take a lovely wedding trip to Brighton as, say, a wedding present from me.” Ainsley gathered the stacked deck of cards from in front of Marcus.

“She’d drown me the first chance she got, and you know it.” Marcus sighed, snaring a card Ainsley had left on the table. He appreciated what his friend was trying to do, and he’d admit some sense to his words. Miss Locke was a very eligible parti . Accomplished, witty, an excellent dancer when not stamping on his toes, and a most beautiful woman by the standards of the day—she embodied everything one might want in a wife. Her dowry alone would save him from drowning in the River Tick,

not to mention the offer to cancel his substantial debt to her brother.

He shot a look at his friend, who sat shuffling the cards, calmly waiting for an answer.

Damn. If Marcus looked at it in a logical manner, he'd be an utter fool to turn down Ainsley's offer. The memory of Miss Locke's narrowed eyes throwing daggers at him just now, though, kept reason in check.

Still playing for time, he slid the single card he held through his fingers, another memory suddenly surfacing. The brush of fire that had leaped from Miss Locke when he'd pulled her close in the dance, and later when he'd stumbled against her, had stunned him. He must give no credence nor weight to it, however. A totally natural reaction of a man to a deucedly attractive female, nothing more. The burn flared in his heart once more, and he calmly squelched it.

"Ainsley, having given your generous offer due consideration, I fear I must decline to wed the fair Miss Locke in the interests of self-preservation. I suppose I may have to resort to manual labor to repay this debt, an action that will undoubtedly amuse your sister greatly, but at the end of the day, I think we would both rather remain unscathed as far as our lives are concerned." He tossed the card he held toward Ainsley. It landed face up in front of his friend, revealing the Queen of Hearts.

Ainsley shook his head as he picked it up. "Just remember, Marcus, at laborer's wages, either alternative is likely to be a life sentence. Choose wisely, I pray you."

Marcus turned on his heel, determined now to raise the money and set the temptation of Miss Katherine Locke and her fortune behind him.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Early next morning, Marcus, dressed conservatively yet impeccably in a suit of navy superfine with a modest cravat tied very plainly, stepped into White's in search of his uncle, Lord Parminter. Ever since his father's death nine months ago, Marcus had allowed his uncle to oversee the family finances while he dealt with his grief and familiarized himself with the workings of the earldom.

Marcus had taken over the estate management, finding himself adrift in a sea of unfamiliar tasks. His father had died at the young age of forty-seven, very unexpectedly. Marcus, therefore, had little experience or education regarding the running of the earldom's estates. His father had encouraged him to enjoy himself, live life as he pleased, always saying, "There'll be time to learn all the stuffy business later." Well, later had arrived all too soon.

Still, not quite a year after Father's death, he'd managed to right the damage done by the thieving steward. That was something. His tendency toward wild gambling sprees, which he put down to his desire to clutch at his old life and deny the responsibilities of the new, must come to an end before he bankrupted what little he'd managed to save.

White's was quiet this time of day and the best place to find his uncle. The coming interview would prove almost as, if not more, difficult than the one with Ainsley last evening. He hoped to God it would end more successfully—with a severe scolding and a promise of funds as soon as the banks opened.

He gave his hat and stick to Morton, the club's newest butler, and finally spied Uncle Parminter, huddled in a comfortable red leather chair reading *The Times*. His uncle, his father's younger brother, had had the great good fortune to be rewarded ten years

before by the then Prince Regent. He'd garnered the prince's favor when he assumed the blame for a little contretemps that would've been most embarrassing to His Royal Highness had it come to the public's attention. The grateful prince had waited a year, while Marcus's uncle had sat in social exile, then created him first Viscount Parminter.

Although Marcus had always liked his uncle, recently he'd come to dread their weekly meetings, in which Uncle Parminter informed him of the current crop of financial problems in their investment line. Today's meeting, two days before the scheduled one, would likely be even less pleasant. As he approached his uncle, Marcus braced himself. The older gentleman's dark, forbidding scowl made his heart sink.

"Good morning, uncle." Marcus tried to infuse his greeting with the proper inflection of optimism without overplaying his hand.

"Huh." Parminter glanced up from his paper, registered Marcus with a raised brow, and returned to perusing the financial section.

Damn. Just his luck the old boy was in a dour mood today. Marcus sat in the companion chair, a momentary bliss assailing him as the soft contours of the leather embraced him. He waited while his uncle folded his paper. The calm before the storm. "How are things on the Exchange today?"

Uncle Parminter fixed him with a doleful stare. "Disastrous, I tell you. Disastrous."

Marcus sank back in the chair, gathering his wits before asking, "What do you mean, uncle?"

"Weather, Haversham. Damned weather'll ruin us yet." He glared at Marcus as though holding his nephew responsible.

“Coffee, please.” Marcus had snared a passing waiter. “How so, uncle?”

“A typhoon in the South China Sea, a hurricane in the North Atlantic, and now a sudden blight in the South of France, all within the last two months, have sent our investments in tea, coffee, and wine plummeting.”

“God.” Marcus grasped the cup of coffee just set down before him and sipped, wishing it were brandy. His stomach clenched.

“According to Roberts down at the shipping office, the Valorous went down in the Atlantic in March with all hands and the season’s coffee crop from Turkey. Ten thousand pounds’ worth steeping in the ocean, plus the loss of life and the ship.” His uncle shook his head and stared at Marcus. “We might’ve been able to weather the one incident, although I don’t know how we’re going to replace the ship. Then I received a letter yesterday from Monsieur Martel. The grape crop is faring poorly so far this season due to some sort of vegetative disease. The vines themselves are dying.” Uncle Parminter shuddered. “As far as wine production, that in itself won’t affect us for a year or so, but futures will be low, and that will hurt us now.”

“You also mentioned a problem with the tea?” Good God. With all their investments hit at once, the timing for his request was particularly horrible.

“The ships haven’t been able to leave the port in Shanghai.” Uncle Parminter’s voice rose, and his fist crashed onto the table, making his cup and saucer dance. “Received that message overland late last week, although I hope to God they’ve left by now. The letter was sent in March, saying the February sailing had been delayed due to a series of storms. So who knows when or if they will arrive?”

Marcus slumped in the suddenly uncomfortable chair. He was doomed. How could he tell his uncle about the £3,000 when their fortunes had just taken such a crippling turn for the worse? Dear Lord, how would he pay off Ainsley tomorrow if he couldn’t



procure the funds from his uncle? The sinking feeling hit his stomach so hard it threatened to cast up his accounts. He breathed slowly, counting to ten. That sometimes helped.

Putting on a mask of calm determination, he said, “Bad luck comes in threes, they always say, and we seemed to have proven them right. At least the estates are still producing well.” If the crops failed this fall, they’d be ruined for certain. “So what’s to be done, uncle?”

Uncle Parminter studied him then shrugged. “I suggest you begin searching for a rich wife.” He picked up the paper again. “You’re not the first peer to do so. No shame in it.”

Marcus swallowed, though a bitter taste clung to his tongue. “I had thought of that.” He nodded as if agreeing. “There are several good prospects this Season.”

“Huh.” His uncle readjusted his newspaper a third time. “Then you’d best start dancing attendance on them in quick order. When the ton hears of our financial woes, you won’t be able to procure an introduction to an heiress, much less her hand in marriage.”

Except for one. Marcus stifled a groan. “Is there no other way out?”

“I daresay you could look into a new line of investments.” Parminter folded the paper and laid it on the table. He continued to tap it with his fingers, the rattle of the sheets like a cold wind. “I hear from Lord Hamilton that Lord Finley’s returned from America full of tales about a bond investment that just paid off magnificently. He and Finley are putting together some capital for another such venture. If you’ve got the chinks at the moment, they may take you in as a third investor.” His uncle scowled until his brows hovered over his nose. “I suppose you have no ready money, Haversham? All mine is tied up in this blasted shipping venture.”

Ready money. The phrase sparked a memory of a conversation with Ainsley once as they'd been passing a counting house.

“Don't get yourself involved with these fellows, Haversham.” He'd sneered and nodded toward a narrow doorway. Over the worn, dark brown door hung a thin sign that read, Messrs. John Dear however, he did have Abbey Park, a small unentailed estate in the southwest corner of Cornwall. A pretty prospect and profitable enough. It could be sold for a tidy profit, had he the months it would take to find a likely buyer. King might be willing to take the property as security for a loan in a much shorter period. If the worst happened and the investment failed, at least he'd only lose a pound of flesh rather than his soul—as he would do should he marry Miss Locke.

“As it happens, I may be able to lay my hands on a couple of thousand if the investment indeed offers results in a matter of weeks.” Marcus stroked his chin, hoping to God he looked thoughtful. “But I'm afraid I've not been introduced to Lord Finley.”

“Hamilton can introduce you.” Uncle Parminter nodded briefly at the portly gentleman in the corner. “Finley comes here almost every evening, though I've not met the man. Tonight is Hamilton's whist night, so he should be able to accommodate you.” Uncle Parminter gave him a keen look but nodded. “Well, if you can reap the benefits of the scheme, you'll have my gratitude, Haversham.”

Marcus rose, resolve thick in his veins. He'd best get over to Ainsley's and ask for a bit of time. He was certain his friend would see reason when he heard about the financial disasters that had befallen him.

On the way to Locke Terrace, he'd stop at John King's and start that process along then be back tonight to scrape acquaintance with Lord Finley. It would be a dashed busy evening but hopefully with better luck than last night's.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

At breakfast next morning, Kate poured out her tea, remembering her waltz with Lord Finley with great fondness. She dropped in two lumps of sugar, stirred, then sipped slowly, staring across the table at an empty chair, imagining Lord Finley seated there. He'd been an excellent partner in both their dances, although if she had to admit it, Lord Haversham was actually the better dancer. But that was the only thing in which her nemesis excelled. In all other manners and characteristics, Lord Finley had proved to be the better man.

The only problem, however, was his apparent attraction to Celinda and her outright preference for him. He'd spend much of their waltz asking about Lord Halford and Lady Celinda, veiled inquiries that had fooled Kate not at all. She'd thought love at first sight only happened in the romance novels she borrowed from the circulating library. Apparently, she'd been wrong about that. Not that she was giving up on Lord Finley quite yet, but she couldn't afford to stop looking for other suitors as well.

"Penny for your thoughts." Nathan entered the breakfast room with an uncharacteristically sunny countenance. "It's such a lovely day, don't you think?"

Kate glanced out the window at the overcast sky and shrugged. "You must have woken up in a different world than I did, brother, to make that statement true."

"Well, a little rain never hurt anyone, did it?" Her brother settled himself across from her, in the very seat she'd been dreaming of Lord Finley occupying, putting paid to that particular castle in the air. "Have you given any more thought to my suggestion of last night?" He busied himself laying his napkin in his lap, but his covert gaze was trained on her.

“Regarding what, Nathan? We spoke of several very different topics last evening.” Wary now, Kate sipped her tea, steeling herself for his reply.

“My suggestion that you and Marcus would make a good match.” Nathan motioned to a footman, who brought him a cup of coffee immediately.

“Why would I give that idiotic idea any more thought at all, brother?” Kate affected an air of dismissal and pointedly stuck her fork in one of the plump sausages on the plate the footman had just placed in front of her. “As I stated yesterday, I cannot fathom the idea of marrying Lord Haversham.” As if to end the conversation once and for all, she cut off a chunk of the sausage link, popped it into her mouth, and chewed with gusto.

“You really should consider it, Kate.” Nathan stared steadily at her. “Unless you’ve developed a tendre for Bertie Symmons, I’m not aware of any other gentlemen who might be interested in courting you.”

Almost choking, Kate seized her tea and gulped it to dislodge the sausage that had stuck in her throat. When she could speak, she glared at her brother. “I have no desire to become affianced to either Bertie or Lord Haversham. You should know that, if you know nothing else at all about me. Bertie would bore me to tears before the banns could be read, and there are no words to describe what I feel about Lord Haversham.”

“Then find some, my dear.” Her brother put his cup into its saucer. “Tell me why you are so set against Marcus.”

Well, she would put a stop to her brother’s nonsense this moment. “Because I hate everything about the man, Nathan. I know he’s your best friend and has been for years, but I have disliked him ever since you brought him home. I’ve made no bones about it before, and I make none now.”

A smile played around Nathan's lips, and he leaned back in his chair. "Oh, surely that cannot be true, Kate. You hate everything about Haversham?"

"Yes, I do." Her brother could be stubborn as a goose when he wanted to be.

"Prove it."

Bewildered, she frowned at him. "What do you mean, prove it?"

"Make a list for me."

"I beg your pardon?" Her brother must've woken up with addled brains this morning.

"Make a list... I'll make it easy for you. Make a list of just ten things you hate about Marcus."

"Why would I do that?" Suddenly nervous, Kate pushed her breakfast around her plate, her appetite vanished.

"As a wager." Nathan's eyes flashed the challenge at her. "You list ten things you hate about my friend—with an explanation of each—and I will cease to suggest you should consider marrying him."

Now that was a wager she could get behind. Kate opened her mouth to accept then stopped, the memory of losing the wager over Calabree—and its penalty—still fresh in her mind. "And if I cannot come up with ten things I hate about him?" Fat chance of that, but best to make all the terms clear.

"Then you must accompany Lord Haversham on an outing of my choice one afternoon."

On the verge of saying, “Absolutely not,” she paused to reconsider. What did she have to lose? She could recite all the things she hated about Lord Haversham like a litany. On the other hand, she had much to gain when she won, for she would not have to put up with her brother’s incessant nagging about her marrying the earl. If half an hour’s scribbling would put an end to that torture, she’d gladly take that wager. “Done.” She picked up her fork and stabbed the sausage once more. “When would you like me to give you the list?”

“By this afternoon should be sufficient.” Her brother’s face was inscrutable.

Did he truly think she couldn’t come up with a mere ten things she loathed about Lord Haversham? He obviously hadn’t been listening to her conversation for the past seven years. His loss now. Kate drained her tea, set the cup back in its saucer, and rose. “I’ll bring it to you before teatime, if that’s agreeable?”

“Absolutely.” Nathan stood, a pucker to his lips. “Good luck.”

With a laugh, Kate strode out of the room. She wasn’t going to need luck, just a good quill, a sharp knife, and a full inkpot.

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“So you’ve decided to marry Kate? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” Ainsley poured tots of whisky into a pair of cut crystal tumblers and handed one to Marcus. “You are unable to pay your debts?”

Marcus gulped the amber liquid, the burn welcome in his stomach. He rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth, wishing for more. “No, I merely don’t have the funds at the moment. My uncle had very bad news from abroad. One ship delayed, another foundered, and a grape crop half dead. The last is the greatest blow to my heart, although all three taken together has proven disastrous for our capital.”

“Then marrying my sister will solve all your problems.” Ainsley beamed at him, making Marcus cringe.

“The financial ones, surely.” He shook his head and held the tumbler out again. “On a more personal level, I fear it would not serve, Ainsley. Much as I would like to call you brother, I do not think Miss Locke and I would suit.” He raised a hand to stave off his friend’s certain objection. “If we had some hope of an amicable regard for one another, I’d consider it. But I swear I don’t know which of us would kill the other first.”

To his surprise, his friend laughed. “I can imagine the two of you at each other’s throats, literally.” He smiled, a glint in his eye. “I can also see you in a somewhat more amicable pose.” Ainsley raised his eyebrows before downing his drink. “I watched you dance the waltz last night.” His eyes narrowed. “I saw you pressed against her in a very inappropriate manner.”

Marcus met the steel gray eyes staring at him. Oh, hell and damnation. His attempt to teach that woman a lesson would get them leg-shackled yet. “My God, Ainsley! She stomped on my foot.” Marcus pulled at his cravat, which had suddenly cut off his air supply. “I stumbled and fell against her for the briefest moment. No one else saw.”

“How do you know that?” Ainsley continued to stare at him, the slightest glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

“Because there’s been no hint of scandal bandied about the ton today. Not a jot, else I’d have heard, I’m sure. One’s friends are always the most eager to inform you when disaster looms.” If he could only convince himself of that. It was barely one o’clock.

“No, there hasn’t been any talk,” Ainsley agreed and relaxed into a chair. “More’s the pity. I could’ve demanded satisfaction or had you marry Kate on the spot.” He chuckled and tipped more whiskey into their glasses. “Might’ve worked too, if Lady

Morris had seen you. She bays like a hound after a fox. Everyone would've noticed."

"You fiendish wretch." Marcus slumped in his seat, holding his glass like a lifeline.

"I should run you through for giving me such a start."

"Wrong century, old chap. These days even pistols at dawn are passé. You will have to settle for a game of cards, winner take all."

"We did that last evening, if you recall." Marcus grumbled. "You want to deliver the coup de grace?"

"I assume you're going to Mr. King?" Ainsley sighed and shook his head then tossed the contents of the glass down his throat. "I hate to see you caught in his clutches."

"I'm assured of a good return on an investment, Ainsley. It will work out." Marcus sipped slowly, his steady hands a feat of magic.

"And if you are disappointed in this investment?" His friend's gaze followed his every move. "Marcus, I meant what I said that day in Three Kings Court. King will extract his pound of flesh, make no mistake of that."

"I will be on my guard, I promise you. I have a fondness for my heart and any other stray parts he might wish to remove as payment." Breathing normally for the first time that afternoon, Marcus stretched his legs and nodded to his empty tumbler. "I'd appreciate another, if you don't mind. My heart's had a bit of a shock it's still recovering from."

"Gladly." His host poured a generous amount into his glass then paused, stopper in one hand, decanter in the other. "What's the investment you have such high hopes for? I might wish to jump aboard if it sounds lucrative enough."



Marcus raised his glass, careful to avoid his friend's eyes. "Not sure just yet."

"Not sure what the investment is?" Ainsley's words slowed with each syllable. He set his empty glass on the table with a crash. "You don't know where this money you've all but risked your life to obtain is going? What the hell are you about, Marcus?"

"I'm meeting Lord Finley tonight. My uncle assures me the man can turn the money around quick as quick and then all is Bob."

"You have no assurances whatsoever that this business will come right in the end." Ainsley put a hand on Marcus's arm. "Why don't you at least give my sister a chance? If your investment comes through, then by all means pay the debt and be done. But if it doesn't, you'll be able to recoup your losses and get a wife into the bargain." He released Marcus's arm and grinned. "Who knows but you might find you actually like Kate."

"I could almost think she put you up to this just to have the opportunity to devil me." Marcus ran his finger around the rim of the glass, producing a dull hum. He was leaving a lot to chance. At this point, he'd not even met Finley. Anything could go wrong, and in his current state of luck, most likely would. "All right," he said, gritting his teeth. "I'll woo Miss Locke as best I can on the slight possibility that my investment will founder. Though I suspect there is less possibility of that than of your sister actually accepting my suit."

Ainsley broke out into a sickening "I told you so" grin. "Just make sure she doesn't discover I'm behind this or she will refuse you out of hand. She's contrary that way."

"You might've mentioned that one little flaw before I agreed," Marcus said with a sigh.

The Season had scarcely begun, and he could predict it would be an excruciating

eight weeks. If he lived to tell the tale.

“Are you going to Lady Carrolton’s this evening?”

“Yes, with Letitia and Aunt Alexandra.” Marcus raised an eyebrow. “I assume you ask because you are chaperoning your sister there as well and wish to let the games begin as swiftly as possible.”

Ainsley laughed and shook his head. “Not quite guilty. Which means yes, I’m accompanying Kate there this evening, but I asked only because I thought I’d invite you all to dinner. Then we could make a party of the evening.”

“That is kind of you, Ainsley.” He should’ve known his friend would not only have ulterior motives. “I am trying to bring Letitia out of herself as much as I can, but it is difficult. She’s always been shy and being out in Society has only made that worse. Perhaps dinner here would be good for her. It will give her a chance to be more forthcoming as she knows you.”

“Excellent.” His friend leaned back in his chair, a smile curling his lips.

“May I have pen and paper to write a note? I won’t be going home to change until just before dinner and want to give them notice well in advance.” He’d no idea if the proceedings with King would be lengthy or not. How long did it take to sign away your soul?

“There’s a writing desk in the room just down the hall on the right.” Ainsley stood. “I’ll see you at eight then?”

“On the dot.” Punctuality was one of the few things he could control in his life, therefore he made it a point never to be late for anything. When that was all you had, you made the most of it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Buoyant in spirit, Kate closed the door to her favorite receiving room, moved swiftly to the pretty little Queen Anne writing desk, lowered the front flap that became the writing surface, then pulled out all the myriad drawers. She wanted to make sure everything was in its place to assist her in recording every horrible trait Lord Haversham had inflicted on her over the years. She sat on the comfortably cushioned chair that matched the dainty walnut desk and drew out several sheets of foolscap from the drawer—she planned to be thorough lest Nathan accuse her of cheating—pen, pen knife, ink, and sand. She mended the pen, creating a good point, then carefully wrote across the top of the page in her best copperplate, “Ten Things I Hate about the Earl of Haversham.”

She settled down in the chair to decide which detestable trait she wished to begin with. Well, that was easy. Straightening her back, Kate wrote a bold number 1 then penned the first thing that came to her mind when she thought of Lord Haversham.

“Arrogance,” she said aloud as she wrote the word. “And a haughtier man never existed.” Continuing with her pen, she detailed Haversham’s primary fault. The gentleman has ever looked and spoken to me as though he were my superior in every way, although whether this is because I am a woman or because he simply sees himself as superior to everyone else, I am not certain. Kate smiled, satisfaction at having an official say about the odious Haversham seeming very sweet.

What next? Oh, but that was easy too.

Hypocrite. Her pen raced to put the word down. That might’ve been better as the first foul characteristic, but too late now. It would do just as well as the second. Lord Haversham’s insistence on denying his sister permission to dance a waltz while he

blatantly dances it with other unmarried young ladies makes him the epitome of hypocrisy. Either he should allow Lady Letitia to enjoy the pleasure of dancing a waltz or he should refrain from dancing it himself . At least she could understand why the earl danced the waltz. A better partner than he she had never had, though she truly hated to admit it. Still, one good trait in him could not erase all the bad.

Which brought her to the third thing she hated about him.

Kate paused, tapping the feather quill against her cheek, musing about what should come next. An idea came mind—related to the previous one, to be sure, but loathsome enough that it would stand on its own merit.

Unkind . He certainly was to both her and his sister. Lord Haversham is unkind in his dealings with his sister, forbidding her to dance the waltz and who knows what else. He has also been unkind to me since the moment we met, deviling me in both word and deed . She could leave it at that... “But Nathan should know how ill he has treated me,” she murmured, and continued writing. For instance, at Lady Hamilton’s ball, he gave me a glass of lemonade so brimful it could’ve ruined my favorite dress.

That truly would’ve been a disaster had the drink spilled on her. Wretched man. Although it had been a brilliant ploy. Haversham was simply too intelligent by far.

What else did she hate about him? The words should be coming more quickly. He could be insufferably rude. She wrote this down more slowly, trying to remember a specific incident of that. Of course, his manners were impeccable most of the time. He wouldn’t want to bring censure down on his head by flouting the ton ’s expectations of correct behavior.

The recollection of Lord Haversham pulling her close to him on the dance floor last evening popped into her mind, making her face heat and her body tingle. Oh, but that had been scandalous. If Nathan had seen it, he might’ve forced Haversham to marry

her then and there. So she certainly couldn't put that down, although it was a prime example of his rudeness to her. Of course there was rudeness to others to be considered as well. Quickly, she dipped her quill into the inkpot and wrote, Lord Haversham has been rude not only to me, but to others such as our cousin Celinda. He said he would not ask her to dance as he did not wish to have his toes stepped on any further, insinuating that I had stepped on his feet. To be honest, she had done so, but only in self-defense. Nathan needn't know that. And it was rude of the earl to remark on it, nonetheless.

How many things did that make? Kate sighed as she looked over the short list. Only four? The task of enumerating the things she hated about Haversham was becoming more difficult than she could've ever suspected.

Much as she hated to admit it, there were things about him she couldn't criticize if she wanted to maintain her honesty. He danced well, he was always elegantly attired, he did have witty conversation—even if the two of them always seemed bent on acting out scenes from Shakespeare's comedies. As Celinda had pointed out. Apparently, she didn't hate everything about the earl. But there must be something more. She wasn't even halfway through. Oh, why did her brother always have to be right? He really wasn't such a superior being...

And neither was Haversham, although he certainly acted that way a lot of the time.

Excited, Kate wrote Superior down, the example coming swiftly behind the word. Lord Haversham believes, as he is older and her brother, that he is right to deny his sister the waltz. This superior attitude has been noted by me on many occasions throughout our all-too-long history. He has, over the years, been smug and condescending toward me, and I'm sure toward other people as well. Not the strongest argument without anything more specific, but it would have to do.

At least now she was halfway through the list. Kate sat staring at what she had

written, thinking hard about what else she might put down. Drat the man. He must have other qualities she detested. What else had she complained about to Nathan? She cast her mind again over their most recent conversations, and one thing did stand out, although she was rather ashamed to write it. Still, it was true, and it would add to her items.

Kate took up the pen but hesitated. Perhaps the nib needed mending. She busied herself with sharpening the quill, taking more time than usual to do so, but at last was ready to dip it in the ink once more. Slowly she wrote the word *Lazy*. Well, from everything she'd heard, it was true. Even the gossip at the ball had said so. Nathan might be furious at her for mentioning it, but no more than he'd been last evening. Besides, no one else would see this list.

Drawing a deep breath, she wrote quickly. According to reports in the ton, Lord Haversham's finances have been in disarray since he inherited the earldom, and he has not lifted a finger to put them to rights. Such irresponsible behavior is reprehensible, especially considering that he must provide support for his sisters and any tenants who depend upon him for their livelihood.

Slumping in her chair, Kate looked at the list with something akin to loathing. She didn't like spewing such vitriol, after all. Somehow, Haversham had managed to even take the joy out of hating him. And the dratted list wasn't finished. She still only had six items written down. Surely there was something else she disliked about the man? Their animosity had been going on ever since her brother brought him home from university, looking like a great big frog.

Kate grinned at the memory. He hadn't really looked like a frog, but he did monopolize her brother's time when he was there. Precious time Nathan should've spent with her. So she'd said the first thing that had come into her head to disparage the then-Lord Cranfield. "I told Nathan his friend looked like a frog and would obviously try to give me warts." Still smiling, she picked up the quill and added the

word Frog . Will try to give me warts—whether he can actually do it or not.

Chuckling, Kate sanded the list then put her writing materials away. What she needed now was a walk to restore her humor and blow some of these vexing thoughts out of her head. She'd have to think more about what she disliked about Lord Haversham and come back to finish the list later this afternoon. She'd told Nathan she'd have it done by teatime, which was still several hours away. Surely she could come up with three more things about the man that irritated her. Perhaps she'd call on Celinda to help her. That might be quite entertaining.

Kate lifted the drop-down flap to shut the desk then tucked the partial list into the drawer where the paper was kept. Her spirits lifting now the list was out of sight, she began humming one of the waltz tunes from last night's ball and sped out of the receiving room to find her maid and make ready to visit her cousin. She felt so much better already.

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Marcus hurried down the corridor to the receiving room Ainsley had directed him to. The door was ajar, so he cocked his head, trying to discern if anyone was already inhabiting the chamber. After a moment of complete silence, Marcus pushed the door open to reveal an empty room. He strode over to the dainty writing desk, obviously an object that had belonged to Ainsley's mother—and now, likely, his sister. A faint hint of lavender assailed his nose, and a sudden chill raced down his spine, making him shiver. That scent belonged to Miss Locke. He'd noticed it when they were dancing last evening, when they'd been pressed against each other. Had she been here not long ago? The shiver returned, and Marcus jerked around to look toward the door. He'd need to stop such demonstrations when Miss Locke was present if Ainsley's plan was even to have a chance.

Not that Marcus had much hope of that. The woman detested him. Why her brother

thought Marcus could overcome that in mere weeks when their feuding had been going on for years was unfathomable. And a thought for another time. He must write to Letitia and Aunt Alexandra then hurry off to visit King and begin that dangerous transaction. He truly didn't know which choice would be more painful—King's threat for a pound of flesh or Miss Locke's barbed tongue. If only a third option would present itself. Marcus sent a prayer up for Lord Finley and his investment.

Meanwhile, he needed to get on with this. Pulling out the Queen Anne chair, Marcus surveyed the desk before sitting down at it. He lowered the flap then went about the business of rummaging in the drawers of various cubby holes, searching for quills and ink. Those implements presented themselves quickly, but the other important element evaded him. They must keep paper here somewhere. Why else would they need a desk at all?

Marcus groped under the pull-down leaf, and his fingers brushed the metal handle of a wide drawer. With an exasperated grunt, he tugged the drawer open and fumbled among the sheets, grasping several and withdrawing them. He slipped them onto the desk and shut the drawer before sliding a piece of paper toward him. After grabbing a quill, Marcus glanced down at the sheet before him and stopped, the pen hovering above the inkpot.

"Ten Things I Hate about the Earl of Haversham." Marcus read the words aloud, slowly lowering the pen to the polished walnut surface. It didn't take a genius to figure out who had written that title. He clenched his jaw as he skimmed the list. Miss Locke seemed to have outdone herself, although the document was incomplete. Still, the vitriol on the page was enough to make him swallow hard. Even when they'd bantered at their worst, Marcus hadn't realized Miss Locke had harbored such loathing for him as this.

His eyes returned to the first characteristic on the list. "Arrogance . Huh." Hardly original, but perhaps the first thing that had come to her mind. Ladies always accused



gentlemen of being arrogant. He perused the description and shook his head. “Miss Locke, you flatter yourself. I am toward you as I am toward everyone. Aloof sometimes, perhaps, but not arrogant. But that will lead quite naturally to Hypocrite .” Well, that was understandable. She’d accused him of that to his face last night. And on its heels Unkind .

“The little wretch!” Marcus gripped the piece of foolscap until it was close to tearing. “I am not unkind. I am the kindest person I know.” Fuming, he read on, but soon his grip slackened, and a smile crept over his lips. Who would’ve thought Miss Locke to be such a champion for Letitia? That might be the woman’s most endearing quality. He continued perusing the list and a chuckle escaped him. He’d thought the overfull glass of lemonade an excellent jape to devil Miss Locke, although he’d not thought about the possible consequences to her wardrobe.

More interested now in the lady’s rationales for her dislikes, Marcus read on. The rudeness he shrugged off as part and parcel of their sparring, as was its neighbor Superior . The sixth characteristic, however, gave Marcus pause again. While Lazy did not actually describe his attitude toward the earldom’s financial difficulties, his inattention and inexperience certainly had been factors. And Miss Locke was correct, the ton did have this perception of him. He’d heard this whispered about himself. At least he might begin to combat the rumors if he could get in on the venture with Lord Finley.

Or marry Miss Locke. He believed he could speak for the lady when he said that a successful venture would be the more pleasing of the two choices to them both.

His gaze came to rest on the final word, Frog . Marcus’s lips puckered into a smile in spite of himself. So his frog-like traits were not pleasing to the lady either? Miss Locke was a most demanding woman. Imagine what would’ve happened in The Frog Prince had the princess not kissed the frog in the end?

A sudden image of him kissing Miss Locke rose to mind so vividly he could feel her soft mouth, smell the lavender in her hair, taste the sweetness of her lips. Staring straight ahead, as if in the grip of a waking dream, Marcus clenched his fists as his cock sprang to life forcefully enough it hit his small clothes with an almost audible thump . He grunted, shook his head to dispel the disturbing image, and swiftly rose from the chair. Quickly, he stuffed all the writing accoutrements back into their cubbies, slid Miss Locke's list back into the drawer with the other papers, banged the desk closed, and hurried out of the reception room.

He'd have to call at home to tell Letitia and his aunt about the invitation as he couldn't remain in this room long enough to scribble the necessary lines. He didn't trust himself not to continue these bizarre thoughts about Miss Locke—and if he didn't stop, he'd need to return home at any rate to change his soiled clothing.

## Page 8

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Lady Carrolton's London abode had the dubious distinction of being the smallest townhome in Mayfair. No matter what she did to disguise it—including a wall of mirrors on one side of the ballroom—it was still a tight squeeze when accommodating more than six couples. Marcus would've chosen a bigger establishment, in a somewhat less fashionable neighborhood, rather than suffocate his guests. To some people, however, address was everything.

This evening, it appeared the entire ton had turned out. People crowded the sides of the dance floor, which looked to be the size of a good parlor rug. Throngs of people milled through the house, so closely packed he could barely fight his way through, blazing a path for Letitia and Aunt Alexandra.

They settled at last in a corner under a sconce, the room hot as blazes without the addition of the flame's heat, but his sister felt more comfortable in an out-of-the-way spot. So he mopped his brow with an already sodden handkerchief and kept an eye out for Miss Locke.

He'd made his peace, such as it was, with the situation. The introduction to Finley had been arranged at his club earlier this evening, necessitating his refusal of Ainsley's invitation. Which had been a blessing in several ways. He'd arrived home to find his sister and aunt already engaged for dinner and to have had to try to dine with Miss Locke with those rather erotic notions still buzzing around his head would've been torture of a kind he'd never experienced before.

The introduction had gone well, although Finley and Hamilton had regretfully informed him the investment deal had already taken place. That, unfortunately, had left Marcus with no time to find another viable venture and no other options save one.

Now he stood determined to woo Miss Locke and win her favor. A daunting task, perhaps, considering the list he'd found, but forewarned was forearmed. Knowing the things that displeased her most, he would be on his best behavior and try to keep control of his tongue and temper. He feared he'd be a candidate for sainthood before it was all over, most saints being martyred in gruesome ways before their deaths.

The crowd by the door stirred as people made way for Viscount Ainsley, followed immediately by his sister.

Marcus held his breath.

The woman looked stunning tonight, he'd give her that. If they did end up married, she would make a brilliant countess. Her gown of blue muslin shimmered in the dancing candlelight, the cloth shot through with metallic silver, giving Miss Locke a luster he'd not noticed before. Her neck had a regal arch to it, her auburn hair coiled high on her head, adorned with a circlet of silver flowers, like a crown. And her face—wreathed in smiles as she spoke to acquaintances—made his heart stutter. Lord, if only her temper matched her exquisite exterior, he'd be brought to his knees here and now.

That being far from the case, Marcus breathed deeply, affected what he hoped was a pleasing smile, and plunged across the dance floor toward her. He kept his gaze on her brother, hoping Ainsley would suggest they dance, as every word he'd practiced for this moment had dropped out of his head like ninepins falling.

“Ah, Haversham.” Ainsley bowed, looking smug, the dirty devil. “Good to see you this evening. Did you have a productive day? Those investments you spoke of looking into went well?” He managed to keep a straight face, but his eyebrows rose to new heights.

“Good evening, Ainsley.” The scathing glare he shot at the viscount would've killed

him on the spot had it been an arrow. He turned and bowed to the ravishing woman he could scarcely take his eyes off. “Miss Locke, delighted to see you.”

“And you as well, my lord.”

Her silken tone brought Marcus up short. Instead of answering his friend, he trained all his attention on the lovely woman at his side.

“The room is very warm, wouldn’t you say?” Miss Locke fluttered her fan very prettily. “I hope it will not be too warm, for I had so set my heart on dancing each dance tonight.” She continued to ply her fan back and forth languorously, staring into the corner from which the random squeaks of the tuning orchestra arose.

Ainsley’s face was carefully blank. He shrugged and turned to speak to an acquaintance, giving Marcus no help at all.

Might as well take the fight to the enemy, then. “Miss Locke, I may not have acquitted myself very well as your dance partner last evening, but I beg you to give me one more chance to prove myself able.” He clenched his jaw, determined not to flinch, no matter her outrageous reply.

“Thank you for that kind offer, Lord Haversham.” She raised the fan to cover her face, revealing nothing. “I am not engaged at the moment, so yes, I will be happy to accept you.” She smiled and curtsied, for all the world as though she meant it.

Words failed him. He managed a bow and grabbed his friend’s arm, hauling him away from Miss Locke’s disturbing presence. “What did you say to her?” he demanded as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Not a word. Why? Has she trampled your efforts before they are even born?” Ainsley’s frown—without a hint of mirth around the eyes—convinced Marcus his

friend spoke the truth.

“She accepted me.”

Ainsley slowly cocked his head. “Isn’t that the desired outcome of an invitation to dance?”

“Of course it is, jingle-brain. But when have you ever known your sister to be that gracious to me? She only agreed to stand up with me last night because of that stupid wager.”

“She told you about that?” With his mouth hanging open, Ainsley reminded Marcus of a gargoyle at Notre Dame.

“No, on-dit this morning from Aunt Alexandra. So I have you to thank for her ill-will toward me last night?” Marcus would’ve been sterner, but Miss Locke’s startling acceptance had him baffled.

“Guilty.” Ainsley shrugged. “You can’t blame me for trying.”

“Oh, yes, I can, and will, should your sister lay some devious trap to expose me to society while retaining her reputation.”

Miss Locke continued to smile and sway a bit to the music, as if anticipating the dance. If he hadn’t known her so well, he would’ve thought that was true. What the devil was she plotting?

“Well, you have no time to think about your next move as you are being called to a quadrille.” Ainsley gestured toward the floor then toward Marcus’s partner, still standing and smiling. Not impatient, not angry, not even a frown to mar her pretty face.

“Is that indeed your sister? I’d lay a wager she was not, but of course, I am out of funds.”

“It’s just as well you did not wager, as you would only have lost again.” His friend laughed and clamped his hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “She is my sister, and I made no threat nor bargain with her.” They walked back toward the entrancing figure in blue, still gazing over the sea of people with bright eyes. “Perhaps she has at last succumbed to your dash and charm.”

“Hah.” Marcus contemplated a disparaging comment, thought better of it, and turned his full attention back to Miss Locke, who stared up at him as though he were her North Star. Damn it. Someone was having him on, and he’d better find out soon if Miss Locke had laid a plan to make a fool of him, or if Ainsley had made this all up as some heinous jest. It had to be one or the other, considering he knew exactly what she thought of him. He stepped before his adversary and presented his arm. “I believe this dance is mine, Miss Locke.”

“Indeed it is, Lord Haversham. I was beginning to lose hope of you.” Words that normally would’ve been sharp with criticism held only a lilt of amusement. What was she really plotting for the evening with that engagingly sincere smile on her face? The woman was undoubtedly about to roast him like a tailor’s goose, and there was nothing he could do but try to deflect her barbs as best he could. Meanwhile, he would pray.

\* \* \* \*

Kate had dressed in her finest new gown, suffered Clarke’s ministrations over her toilette for almost two hours, endured her brother’s threats about her behavior on the carriage ride to the ball, and finally stood amidst the candlelight and sweating bodies with a pleasant smile plastered on her face. Her cheeks ached abominably after just ten minutes. A lot of pain and suffering to withstand; however, the object for whom

they had been undertaken, Lord Finley, was indeed present. She'd glimpsed him when she and Nathan had entered the cramped townhouse. Now to attract his attention and hopefully gain a dance or two herself.

To her dismay, her conference with Celinda had been less than helpful. In the throes of ecstasy over a bouquet of flowers Lord Finley had sent her, her cousin had given her no assistance whatsoever with discerning three more traits she could dislike about Lord Haversham. And truth be told, she scarcely wished to continue the wager. But Nathan would make her pay the forfeit if she did not finish it, so she'd begged another day to complete the list and hoped to be able to discover something about the earl tonight she could add to it.

So Kate had surveyed the ballroom as soon as they'd managed to shoulder their way to an unoccupied spot out of the great crush. Really, Lady Carrolton should not have invited quite so many people. The crowd was monstrous. Shaking off that thought, she snapped her fan open and perused the gentlemen—plentiful for once, it seemed. Who could she signal to approach so they might ask for the first dance?

“Did you wish me to lead you in this set?” Nathan had returned from speaking to Lord Carrolton.

“I believe I can find a partner on my own merits, dear brother.” She smirked at him then tried to catch the eye of the very attractive Lord Merriweather. The young earl, however, seemed not to see her interest. Drat. She needed a handsome man for the first dance, one she could laugh and flirt with, and thereby draw Lord Finley's attention. If she was vivacious enough, surely he would ask her for a dance? And not just any dance, but the supper dance. The main idea was to spend as much time as possible with his lordship.

“Suit yourself.” Nathan turned his back and began speaking to Lady Alice Braeton.



Kate looked about once more. Who was available? Almost immediately, she spied Lord Haversham and sighed a little guiltily. Thank goodness he had no idea of the disparaging thoughts she'd had about him all afternoon. Even in his ignorance, she doubted he'd ask her for another dance after her rude behavior last night. Not that he didn't deserve some censure for treating his sister so callously, but stamping on his foot might've been taking things too far. Still, it was a pity he wouldn't approach her. Even though she could not abide him, she had to admit he was a fine-looking gentleman. Dark hair, surprisingly bright eyes, and a striking profile made him one who would catch the eye of others when they paraded around the ballroom together.

Of course, there was Bertie, although he certainly wouldn't have the same effect. Lord Somersby was dashing enough, but she did not want to get swept up into his tangled web. One dance wouldn't hurt, perhaps.

Lord Camford would not ask her after their loud disagreement last Season, nor Lord Parkington, nor Mr. Reed. How had she come to disagree with so many young men? She turned hopeful eyes to Mr. Turner, with whom she'd danced and flirted quite often in her first Season.

The man stared back at her then raised his quizzing glass and abruptly turned away. Oh, dear. She had set him down rather strongly over his opinions on cattle. He simply had no idea how to discern good horseflesh from bad, and she'd told him so. Was she supposed to feign ignorance? Camford, Parkington, Reed, Turner, and now, likely, Haversham as well disliked her. She had managed to offend all the most eligible parties in the ton. A dreadful sinking feeling hit her stomach, and her mouth tasted metallic. She glanced about the room, where gentlemen were busily requesting dances of every young lady present. Save her.

She closed her eyes, suddenly weary. Her abominable tongue might just have doomed her to a life of spinsterhood.

“Miss Locke, delighted to see you.”

Kate jumped, and her eyes flew open.

Lord Haversham stepped from behind her where he’d apparently been speaking to her brother.

“And you as well, my lord.” She fought to regain her composure. Heat coursed through her body, and she plied her fan to cool her cheeks. Had he come to devil her some more? But no, even his greeting seemed mild-mannered enough tonight, no hint of sarcasm in his voice. So far. Of course, if she disparaged Lord Haversham again, Nathan might actually make good on his threat to leave her at home. Or worse, insist on that outing with Haversham whether she managed to complete her list or not. Perhaps she should try honey instead of vinegar to get a partner.

“The room is very warm, wouldn’t you say?” She fluttered her fan delicately. “I hope it will not be too warm, for I had so set my heart on dancing each dance tonight.”

“Miss Locke, I may not have acquitted myself very well as your dance partner last evening, but I beg you to give me one more chance to prove myself able.”

“Thank you for that kind offer, Lord Haversham.” She raised her fan quickly to hide a sudden smile. That had been rather easy. “I am not engaged at the moment, so yes, I will be happy to accept you.” She lowered the fan to reveal the smile and curtsied.

He seemed astounded by her answer, for his eyes widened and his mouth opened, although nothing came out. He managed a bow then grabbed her brother’s arm, hauling him a short distance away.

She continued to fan herself, swaying to snippets of music as the orchestra tuned in preparation for the first dance, trying to keep her smile pleasant, although the thought

of the coming dance with Haversham set her teeth on edge. Why had he asked her? Had it been because of her hint or did he have a more devious purpose in mind? Still, if the other gentlemen saw her being amiable with him, perhaps they would relent and ask her as well.

“I believe this dance is mine, Miss Locke.” Haversham had returned, offering his arm.

“Indeed it is, Lord Haversham. I was beginning to lose hope of you.” She smiled up at him, trying to relax. He was still behaving himself, thank goodness.

Haversham’s mouth quirked. “I do apologize that it is not a waltz. I know how fond you are of those.”

“Wretched man.” The words slipped out as if they had a life of their own.

His smile didn’t change, but the lines around his mouth whitened.

Curse her tongue. She batted his arm with her fan and slid her hand through the crook of his elbow. “You had best not step on my feet this time, Haversham.” She tugged on his sleeve, and they sallied forth onto the dance floor.

Lord Haversham’s face changed at least three times. He scowled at her words then his eyebrows rose startlingly high when she took his arm. Now he looked at her through mere slits of eyes. “If I recollect correctly, Miss Locke, you were the one who stepped on my toes.”

“I am certain that was not the case, my lord. Here is our set.” Kate guided him to a group making up with several couples she knew well. Lord Camford was part of couple number two, glaring at her, but he could go hang.

“I believe I could show you your footprint on my best pair of dancing slippers, Miss Locke. That is why I am currently wearing my second-best pair.” His voice had a severe tone, but his eyes gleamed with amusement.

“Nonsense.” Kate bit the inside of her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. He looked so doleful and serious. “I’m almost lame from the blow.”

“Why does the world report that Kate doth limp? Oh, slanderous world.” He furrowed his brow, and she couldn’t stop a giggle.

“Where did you study all this goodly speech?” she shot back. Shakespeare was her favorite playwright, especially for the play with her name in it.

“You inspired me, Miss Locke,” he said, grinning boyishly. “The Bard notwithstanding, of course. Shall we?” He bowed to her and took her hand.

Warmth shot through her glove and up her arm, surprising a gasp out of her.

“Oh, now, Miss Locke.” He gave her a stern look that somehow didn’t seem very stern at all. “I truly came nowhere near your foot.”

“No, my lord, you didn’t. I...” Kate couldn’t think what to say. Prickles of excitement suddenly burst through her body, simply from that touch on her hand.

The music commenced with a Scottish Reel, and thank goodness Haversham took control, leading her through the turning and twisting steps until she pulled her senses together and began to enjoy the dance. The earl was an excellent dancer, taking all the steps with ease, making faces at her during the short solo steps for the gentlemen that made her giggle despite herself.

They took hands and spun in a turn, faster than they should have, but Haversham

seemed hell-bent on making her dizzy. Kate threw back her head and laughed, the speed and warmth from his hands as intoxicating as any wine.

“Are you quite well, Miss Locke?” He peered into her face with mock concern. “I’ve made a concerted effort not to tread on your toes.”

She laughed again. Why hadn’t she realized his sense of humor fell naturally in with hers? “I...yes...well... Do you think it very warm in here?” Almost breathless, she fought to keep up with the next set of steps. She looked into Lord Haversham’s face, and her laughter subsided. The handsome features she’d more or less taken for granted earlier now struck her as more attractive than any man of her acquaintance, including Lord Finley. Curly chestnut hair to rival Lord Byron’s, high cheekbones, a strong jaw, and sherry-brown eyes she could’ve drowned in. How had she not seen it before?

“Warm? Well, perhaps a trifle.” They waited while the third and fourth couples made a bow and the ladies clasped hands in a circle. “There is a terrible crush, you know.” He led her in a skipping step down between the dancers. “If you are not well, they will forgive us for stopping.”

The attention that would call to them would be disastrous. “Oh, no, I am fine.” They circled hand in hand. The heat in her face increased. “We should continue to the end.” If she didn’t drop down dead first.

The reel wound on, Kate running hot and cold as though stepping into and out of an icehouse. What was wrong with her? At last, the music ended.

“Come, we will let you rest a moment.” He took her by the hand—which helped her peculiar feelings not at all—leading her through the throng of guests to a relatively quiet corner.

A young lady stood with her back against the wall, gazing about at the people with interest. Her white silk gown showed beautiful hand detailing in lace and rosettes of tambour work. Still, her air, so hesitant, made her seem as though she'd escaped from the schoolroom. An older woman stood beside her. Kate recognized her as Haversham's aunt, a rather no-nonsense matron with a deal of influence in the ton .

“Aunt Alexandra, may I present Miss Katherine Locke? I've managed to tire her out sufficiently in barely a dance. And not even a waltz. What shall we do if we needs must dance that as well?” His mouth puckered, but he brought it under control. “Miss Locke, my aunt, Lady George Pye. She has taken my sisters under her wing.” He drew the girl in white out of the corner—gently, as though not to frighten her. “Letitia, my dear. Come meet Miss Locke.”

The girl blinked and tried to draw back, but her brother coaxed her forward. “Lady Letitia Stowe, may I present my partner Miss Locke? Will you take good care of her while I fetch her some lemonade?”

Lady Letitia nodded, her big doe eyes casting a dubious glance at Kate. “Will you fetch me some as well, Marcus?”

“I will indeed, my dear.” He beamed at her then turned to his aunt. “Would you like some refreshment as well, aunt?”

“No, my dear. But Miss Locke,” the imposing woman turned her piercing eyes on Kate, “if you would oblige me by staying a moment with Lady Letitia? I just caught sight of Lady Ivor and must have a word with her.”

“Of course, my lady.” Kate curtsied, her mind suddenly clear and focused. “I would be delighted to become better acquainted with Lady Letitia.”

“Then I shall return shortly, suitably laden.” Lord Haversham bowed and started to

leave.

“You might remember, my lord.” Kate caught his eye, and his brow rose. “Enough is as good as a feast.” Lord knew she could not deal with yet another brimming glass tonight.

He chuckled, and his eyes sparkled in the flickering light. “I will remember that, I promise.”

She followed him, her rapt gaze keeping track of his lean figure, a graceful and dangerous animal, until he turned the corner toward and disappeared from sight.

Kate settled back, coming down from her tiptoes for the first time since Haversham had appeared. She snapped her fan open and fanned until her hot cheeks cooled. Forcing a deep breath, she smiled at Lady Letitia, who had retreated into her corner. “You must come watch the dancing from here, my lady. Your next partner will be looking for you shortly.”

“Oh, no, Miss Locke.” The girl gave a nervous shake of her head and pressed backward until her shoulders hit the wall. “I am not engaged until the supper dance. Then I am to stand up with my cousin, Lord Carstairs.”

There were at least three sets before the supper dance. This would never do. Lord Haversham should’ve seen to Lady Letitia’s partners. “We shall fill your evening with dancing, never fear, my lady. We cannot countenance you as a wallflower. You should be out on the floor for every dance.”

Lady Letitia shook her head, still trying to inch her way into the corner. “Oh no, Miss Locke. I do not fancy the dances as much as my brother does, or most of the other young ladies here tonight.”

“Truly?” Kate couldn’t fathom such a thing. Everyone of her circle adored dancing. “Perhaps you simply need a partner already of your acquaintance.” She glanced about for Nathan and spied him directly across the dance floor from them. “I see my brother just there, my lady.” Kate pointed her fan at the tall figure deep in conversation with Lady Diana Cholmondeley. “Let me summon him. I am certain he would be most eager to stand up with you.” A brilliant idea hit. “He is an excellent partner in the waltz. I’ve practiced with him for years.” She leaned toward the lady, who visibly trembled. With anticipation, perhaps? “Your brother wouldn’t ever have to know,” she whispered.

Lady Letitia’s gentle eyes widened, and she shook her head until her hair came down in straggles. “Oh, please, no, Miss Locke. Marcus promised to—”

“What, Letitia?”

Both of them jumped.

Marcus stood beside her, so quiet Kate hadn’t heard him at all. “I promised to what, Letitia?”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Lady Letitia let out a squeak, and Kate jumped at the sound of his voice. “Goodness, Lord Haversham, you gave me such a start.” Her heart beat frantically, and she plied her fan once more to help her calm down.

His sister’s face had paled to the hue of curdled milk. With her wide-eyes showing rims of white, she appeared ghost-like in the darkness of the corner. What had Haversham threatened about waltzing that had his sister so terrified?

“I am truly sorry to have startled you, Miss Locke. Here.” He handed her a glass of lemonade, only two-thirds full. “Perhaps this will guard you from the shock.” His eyes glittered, and he bit his lips against a smile. “And here is yours, Letitia.” He passed his sister another glass, and she took it gratefully, backing toward her corner.

“Thank you, my lord.” Kate took a welcome sip. “I was telling Lady Letitia that my brother would be an excellent partner for a waltz.”

Haversham’s brows shot up. “Indeed, Miss Locke. Ainsley is an accomplished dancer in many dances. If Letitia wishes, she may stand up with him for the next country dance.”

“But not the waltz.” Kate pursed her lips and set her glass down on a nearby table. “It’s rather tart, I fear.”

“Oh, what a pity.” Lord Haversham’s mouth twitched, and his eyes shone with unspoken laughter. “Letitia, is your lemonade too tart?”

“Why no, Marcus. It was fine.” Lady Letitia had drained her glass but continued to

clutch it.

“Here, let me take that.” Haversham plucked the cup from her hands and set it beside Kate’s. “I see we all have different tastes. Do we not, Miss Locke?”

“Indeed we do, Lord Haversham.” Lord, but the man could set her teeth on edge quicker than anyone else she knew. Still, looking at his handsome profile in the soft candlelight as he watched the dancers, she had to admit she secretly enjoyed their spats of bantering. The man had a sharp wit that kept her forever on her toes. No other man she’d met had challenged her so often or so well.

As if catching her thoughts, he leaned over to her. “I trust you are recovered sufficiently that you might dance again? Or shall I fetch your brother to escort you home?”

Kate glared at him. “I am perfectly fine, my lord. A fleeting indisposition only.” But had it been fleeting? If he took her hand again, would her feverish symptoms return?

“But you see now how incapacitating a simple dance can be.” Haversham shook his head, his eyes gleaming with mirth. “Only think how much worse a waltz would’ve been for your indisposition?”

Kate rolled her eyes. Would the man never let that topic rest? “I would hardly call The Eightsome Reel a simple dance. However, I assure you, I am quite ready to dance again.”

“Excellent. Then I would request the honor of partnering you for the supper dance, Miss Locke.”

Kate blinked several times. Had she heard him correctly? “I...I...” She’d left that dance open for Lord Finley. Where the devil was the man? She’d seen him once or

twice from a distance but hadn't spoken to him tonight. Her faintness, or whatever had come over her, had made her lose track of the charming viscount.

"Yes, Miss Locke. You." Haversham chuckled, his eyebrows quirked at her as though she were an idiot.

Kate rallied, stepping back from him and snapping her fan open. "I do not think that would be wise, my lord. We would have danced three times, and people would talk." She especially did not wish to find out if that peculiar heat would return if he touched her. A disturbing sensation she could still imagine she felt.

"Since it would only be our second dance this evening, I do not think we will draw undue comment." His smug face irritated her more each second.

"I don't—"

"Kate!" Lady Celinda pushed her way through a knot of chattering ladies and grabbed Kate by the arm, pulling her away from the aggravating earl. "I beg your pardon, my lady. My lord." She dropped a curtsy first to Letitia then to Haversham. "Please excuse me, but I must speak with Miss Locke directly. It's a matter of utmost urgency."

"By all means—"

Without pausing for Haversham to answer, Celinda propelled Kate down the crowded room, dodging guests as best she could. When they came to a relatively secluded space of wall, Kate slowed and swung her cousin around to face her.

"All right, Celinda. Stop, for goodness' sake. You will tear my gown with this incessant pulling." Kate straightened herself and glanced back down the ballroom, but the crush of people obscured her sight of Lord Haversham. What must he think of

that abrupt departure? She shouldn't have cared, but somehow, she did.

"Oh, Kate. I simply had to tell you. You will never believe it." Her usually sedate, cool-headed cousin was almost jumping up and down in her little pink slippers.

"Celinda, what has gotten into you?" A quick look around told her no one marked them; however, that could change at any moment. Such a public display of emotion could get a lady talked about.

"Lord Finley."

Kate's heart gave a huge thump. While she'd been sparring with Lord Haversham, the object of her true interest had been whisked away. She'd not even had a chance to impress the dashing viscount, and now Celinda had probably already secured his affections.

"Has he proposed to you?" She tried to sound enthusiastic, although the unfairness of the situation rankled sorely. Such a declaration would be unusual on this short an acquaintance, yet not completely unprecedented. What else would make her cousin as twitchy as a worm in hot ashes?

"What? Oh, no. But I so wish he had!" Celinda beamed, pink spots blooming on both cheeks.

Kate released a silent sigh. All might not yet be lost.

"Papa could not help but accept his suit," Celinda prattled on, the dreamy look in her eyes rather alarming. Her cousin seemed a fair way toward being totally in alt over the man.

"So if not a proposal, what did Lord Finley do?" There was little else that could cause

such an expression on Celinda's face except— "Celinda! You didn't let him kiss you?"

Dear Lord, if someone had seen them, her cousin would be snared for life, forced to marry the gentleman no matter if he later turned out to be neither suitable nor a gentleman.

"Why, Kate. No, of course not." The dreamy quality in Celinda's eyes vanished, replaced by shock. "I would never have let him do that."

Good. At least her cousin hadn't lost her sense of propriety. Kate glanced about, looking for eavesdroppers. They could not be too careful.

"Although, I certainly would not have minded had he tried."

"Celinda," Kate hissed, smiling at Lady Constance Farrow, who had cut her eyes toward them as she passed by. Once the lady had continued, she returned her attention to Celinda. "You had best behave yourself." The evening was turning into more of a disaster than she'd ever believed. "Now tell me exactly what Lord Finley did."

"He asked me for the first waltz then he asked for the supper dance as well." Celinda rose up on her toes, and for a stricken moment, Kate feared she'd perform a full pirouette. Instead, she snapped open her fan and waved it so vigorously Kate could feel the breeze.

Thank goodness it was no worse than a supper dance. The supper dance she'd hoped Lord Finley would ask her for. Dismay washed through her, dimming the luster of the evening. Although Finley had merely asked for a dance from her cousin, to have requested it so early in the festivities and on such short acquaintance with Celinda spoke eloquently about his regard for her. He certainly hadn't sought Kate out

tonight. Perhaps he had seen her dancing with Lord Haversham and misconstrued it. Hoist with her own petard. The Bard's phrase rang eerily true for her.

"Isn't that wonderful, Kate?" Celinda peering into her face brought her out of her thoughts.

"Yes, of course it is." She must try to be happy for her cousin, but her body suddenly weighed her down, as though she'd sink to the floor and not rise again.

"I danced the opening quadrille with Lord Camford, and when he left me with Mamma, Lord Finley was there asking for the waltz and the supper dance." Celinda nattered on about her list of partners. Kate stared at the dancing figures on the floor, her mind in a whirl.

What was she to do now? Every option she came up with was grim. Lord Finley had been a brief hope, but now she must put him beyond the pale. Celinda had made her preference clear, and as her cousin was younger, more vivacious, more popular, and possessed a title, the viscount would be a fool not to offer for her when the time came.

But Celinda's situation had drawn Kate's attention to her own plight, direr than simply finding dance partners. If a man wouldn't even stand up with her, he certainly wouldn't offer for her. And she couldn't wait and pray for new gentlemen to appear. A fourth Season would be too humiliating to endure even if Nathan would allow such a thing. So at the end of this Season, she would be at her brother's mercy. He couldn't force her to wed, but the ton was quite unforgiving in its criticism of women who did not marry.

Neither could she hope to regain the good opinions of the gentlemen with whom she'd quarreled. Those bridges were piles of ash she could not reconstruct, even if she desired to do so. She'd argued with them and treated them with thinly veiled

contempt for a reason. That left her with few options. She could choose to remain single, but the reality of that decision was discouraging. Her brother would wed soon enough. Whoever the lady turned out to be, Kate would hate living in a house she had to share with another woman.

She could always encourage Bertie Symmons. It would take little more than agreeing to a supper dance and a carriage ride for him to consider himself engaged to her. Kate shivered, as though a goose had walked over her grave. That alternative held less appeal than remaining single. Bertie was an old, annoying friend, not someone she could ever envision being married to.

Neither would she wish to see herself leg-shackled to Lord Somersby. That gentleman was simply too wild for words, with a malicious streak she did not care to see turned toward her.

Or there was Lord Haversham. Although irritating beyond reason, at least the man would provide lively conversation. He was attractive, which couldn't in all honesty be said of Bertie. And unlike Somersby, she'd never seen the earl behave in a mean-spirited manner. Marriage to Haversham would not be dull. They might try to kill one another, but they would not die of boredom. Many successful ton marriages were based on less.

"Kate? Kate." Celinda's shrill voice sounded faint, as though coming from another room.

She blinked, and the sounds of the ballroom became loud once more.

"Did you not hear a word I said?" Celinda beat her fan into her palm and glared at her.

"I beg your pardon, Celinda." Time to pay the piper. "Wait here a moment, and you

can tell me all about the perfections of Lord Finley.” She stared into Celinda’s wary blue eyes and squeezed her hand. “I have a bit of unfinished business I need to attend to.” Before she lost her nerve, she picked up her skirts and threaded her way back through the tightly packed patrons to the corner where Lady Letitia still stood, looking more frightened than a cornered rabbit. Perhaps that was something she’d also be able to remedy in time.

“Lord Haversham.” She curtsied then met his wary brown eyes. “I am so sorry to have left you with no answer for so long. I fear my cousin required my immediate attention.”

“Of course, Miss Locke.” That sardonic eyebrow rose. “And now you have an answer for me?”

What she had for him was the rough side of her tongue, but she would refrain from that for now. Later, however, might be a completely different matter. If she hadn’t scared Haversham off yet, she likely wouldn’t need to change her demeanor.

“I do, my lord.” She forced a smile she hoped was nearly pleasant. “I would deem it an honor to accept your company for the supper dance.”

\* \* \* \*

It took all Marcus’s training not to show his shock at Miss Locke’s acceptance of his request. He’d been sure she’d take her cousin’s interruption as a way to avoid an outright rejection of him, and she still looked none too pleased, despite her strained smile. He wouldn’t have believed it possible for a woman to smile and still look as though she were being choked. If she didn’t want to dance and dine with him, why the devil had she accepted? “I am honored, Miss Locke.”

There ensued a silence nearly as painful as her acceptance.



What was he to do with her now? He couldn't ask her to dance again, and he'd already gotten her a refreshment. Why wasn't she out on the ballroom floor dancing with someone else? He gazed around the room but spied no one who seemed to be looking for her. "May I escort you to your brother? Your next partner is likely searching for you."

A stricken look flashed across her face, her cheeks flushed, and she looked away. "I believe I see my brother there. I will expect you for the supper dance, my lord." She dipped a curtsy so quickly he would've missed it had he blinked then whirled around and strode off toward Ainsley, who stood talking to Miss Waters.

Marcus frowned. What had he said now? The woman was pricklier than a hedgehog. He turned to Letitia, determined to have a good time despite the circumstances. "Are you enjoying yourself, my dear?"

"Of course not, Marcus." His sister might seem shy to others; however, she would speak her mind to him.

"Why would you say that?" He peered into her woebegone face.

"Because I don't wish to dance, and everyone else does." She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "I have had to refuse two gentlemen already."

Marcus sighed and grasped her hand. He'd hoped by this point in the Season his sister would be more at ease, more confident. "That is a pity. You must learn to dance with gentlemen other than your family. They will not be mean to you. Quite the opposite, in fact. Dancing should be a pleasure."

"Well, it does not seem so to me." She nodded toward the vanishing figure of Miss Locke. "Nor to Miss Locke either, save when she is with you." Letitia played with the ribs of her fan, opening and closing the pretty painted silk over and over.

“Why would you say that, Letitia? Miss Locke is quite a popular lady.” Marcus scanned the dance floor for his erstwhile partner to illustrate his point, but she seemed to be missing. He tried looking about the crowd and finally spied her chatting with Ainsley. Hadn’t she been engaged for this country dance?

“I’ve only seen her stand up with you, Marcus.” Letitia nodded toward Miss Locke. “I’ve been watching her to see how she acts around gentlemen, but she only talks to her brother.”

“Perhaps she has refused offers from other potential partners?” Such an action would have been frowned upon, to be sure. Still, he’d put nothing past Miss. Locke. It would be flattering to think she only wished to dance with him, but that was a conceit even he could not countenance.

“No. So far this evening, no one has approached her. No young gentlemen, that is. She seems to be conversing mostly with her brother and the delightful lady in pink.”

Her cousin, Lady Celinda Grantham, that would be. Surely Miss Locke had spoken to someone else or danced with another gentleman? But if Letitia had not seen anyone approach her... Gentlemen were, while not plentiful, at least available in sufficient numbers. Had none of them offered to dance with her? That stricken look on her face might be the key. Would no one partner Miss Locke? It would explain why she had accepted his request for the supper dance, despite what she apparently thought of him. Better him than being a wallflower, he supposed.

He’d not noticed before—he’d wanted to avoid her more than have her take notice of him—but come to think of it, Ainsley had mentioned she was in her third Season. Was she as desperate as Marcus himself? And would this circumstance make it easier to pursue his suit with her or more difficult? How she’d react when she found out he was marrying her to pay off a wager didn’t bear thinking about. Especially in light of that list.

Memory of that stricken look, however, sent a pang of sympathy straight to his heart. If he was going to marry Kate Locke, he needed to learn to care for her and make her care for him if they were to have any sort of life together that didn't include misery for them both. Marcus nodded, his resolve like granite.

He'd focus on wooing Miss Locke in earnest, on mending his own faults as much as possible, and making her fall in love with him, even if it killed him.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

“These just arrived for you, miss.” Parker held a huge cut-crystal vase filled with lovely pink and cream roses, interspersed with tiny, delicate daisies.

Kate, just coming to sit down to breakfast Monday morning, frowned even as she leaned forward to sniff the fragrant blossoms. Beautiful flowers, but who had sent them? “Is there a card?”

She’d danced only the two dances with Lord Haversham Saturday evening. And had a brief conversation with Lord Finley at supper as he’d waited on Celinda. Much as she’d like to believe the bouquet was from him, she wasn’t about to try to fool herself. Which made the arrival of the flowers even more intriguing. She searched over the blooms and finally plucked the card from amongst the greenery and opened it.

With my heartfelt gratitude and admiration for my excellent partner. May I call upon you this afternoon?

Lord Haversham

She jerked back from the blooms as if stung. Her cheeks heated a second later. Lord Haversham. Why the devil did he wish to call upon her? They’d shared the supper dance without incident, although she’d noticed his lordship talked much less wittily and more, well, conventionally. Topics like the weather and the decoration on his sister’s gown were the high points of the conversation.

Now this morning he sent flowers and wanted to call?

“Put them in the foyer, please, Parker.” She tapped the card against her fingers. What did he mean by this request? Had he thought her granting him the supper dance meant something? It did, but certainly not what he might’ve thought it meant.

She’d stood beside Celinda and watched all her social aspirations disappear like a thin mist at dawn. No one would ask to dance with her. Young Mr. Pine had cast looks at her briefly—until his cousin, Lord Seaford, with whom she’d argued two years ago, had whispered vehemently in his ear, and they’d then decamped to another part of the house. From the corner of her eye, she’d spied Lord Eastland speaking earnestly to another young gentleman, gesturing toward her and shaking his head. Somehow, when she wasn’t looking, she’d become the pariah of the ton .

Only Haversham had offered to dance with her. Rather than be the obvious wallflower, she’d accepted him. Kate closed her eyes, reliving the moment, which had been a country dance. Haversham danced like a dream. While his partner, she need never worry about putting a foot wrong. Supper, however, had been more trying, the conversation focusing on equally mundane topics.

By the end of the evening, she’d thought she’d go mad with the inconsequential prattling of their dinner partners. Usually, Haversham could be counted on for invigorating repartee. Last night, however, his wit had been much more subdued as they’d sat with Celinda and Lord Finley, and Lady Letitia and Lord Carstairs. Her right-side conversation was nearly void as Celinda talked mainly to the viscount. Across the small table, silence reigned, save for a quiet “Pass the salt, please,” from Lady Letitia. Haversham’s clever quips alone, uttered sotto voce , had kept her amused, though they’d been fewer than usual. She had to give it to the man. He had a wit sharp enough to slice cheese. She almost looked forward to trading barbs with him.

Which brought her full circle back to the foyer and the flowers she’d continued to sniff and stroke. They were heaven to touch. She stepped back and headed for the

receiving room. It would be no trouble to allow Lord Haversham to call. In fact, it might be the highlight of her afternoon. Perhaps she could engage him again about his sister's restriction where the waltz was concerned. If he'd only lift his edict on that dance, perhaps Lady Letitia would rest easier about dancing in general. She seemed a sweet lady, but she'd likely never catch a husband if she continued to refuse to dance. Kate would have to come up with some clever arguments that made her point and set Haversham down a peg.

She hurried to the writing desk and pulled out a sheet of paper, ready to write a brief note agreeing to Haversham's call. The first sheet she pulled out, however, was her unfinished list of things she hated about the earl. Kate stared at it, going from one item to the next, looking to see if she'd been fair to the man. The first five traits she would confidently stand by. Lord Haversham was, without a doubt, an unkind, arrogant hypocrite who was rude and acted superior. At least some of the time. However, she wasn't certain she should label him lazy. She truly didn't know enough about him or the workings of an estate to determine that. And the froggy comment was just spite on her part, although she would have to keep it or else come up with yet another thing she hated about Haversham. She'd found enough fault with him when she wasn't trying to list them all. Why was it so hard to do so now?

Shaking her head, she tucked the list under the stack of foolscap and pulled a fresh sheet to her. She'd have to avoid Nathan until she could come up with the final three things. Perhaps this afternoon's encounter would help her determine them. Unfortunately, Kate had the sinking feeling the opposite might occur instead.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus sat outside Locke Terrace in his curricule, screwing up his courage to enter The Manse, as Ainsley affectionately called his townhouse. He still couldn't believe the note he'd received two hours ago. He pulled it out of his pocket and read the neat hand once more.

You may call upon me this afternoon between 3:00 and 4:00.

Brief and to the point, but he carefully folded it and tucked it away. It hadn't contained any barbs, so that was a step in the correct direction. Of course, she might be luring him into an ambush, but he had to take the chance. He didn't plan to stay long—if he could just convince himself to climb out of the vehicle.

No matter how ridiculous he felt, he had to knock on the blasted door. He jumped down, strode up to the looming jet-black door, and knocked rapidly.

Parker opened it immediately, his impassive face betraying their long acquaintance by a slight twitch of his lips. "Lord Haversham. I am afraid his lordship is from home at the moment. If you would like to leave your card, I will make sure he receives it the instant he returns."

Marcus shifted on the stoop. Deucedly awkward, but there was nothing for it. "I, uh, am come to call on Miss Locke today, Parker. I believe she is expecting me." He tried to ignore the look of profound shock in Parker's sunken brown eyes.

"Yes, of course, my lord." The butler regained his outward composure, ushered him in and closed the door. His hand slipped from the latch, and the door slammed with a loud boom. "My pardon, Lord Haversham." Parker straightened his shoulders and headed into the house, the tips of his ears growing cherry red.

Lord, if he'd rattled the unflappable Parker, this visit must be a nine days' wonder.

The butler led him to the morning room, where the early afternoon light gave the pale blue-gray walls a glow. A comfortable room, with pale blue jacquard-covered sofa and chairs, made uncomfortable now by the figure at the bay window overlooking the rear gardens.

Marcus shook himself and assumed a pleasing smile. If he was going to marry this woman, he'd have to stop dreading her company.

"Lord Haversham, miss." Parker closed the door partially.

He would've laid odds the man had remained nearby. Ainsley's servants were well-trained, well-paid, and loyal to a fault.

Miss Locke turned, and his heart skipped a beat. Lit from behind by the great window, she looked like an angel in white muslin, sprinkled with tiny blue flowers. Her hair, touched by the sunlight, shone like copper fire. She came toward him, and with each step, his heart pounded harder—from fear or desire, he'd best find out, and soon.

"Lord Haversham, how nice of you to call." Her voice, though carefully neutral, still carried a tinge of her usual edge.

That was comforting, somehow, perhaps because of its familiarity, and he relaxed into his own accustomed role. "Miss Locke," he said, bowing, "so good to see you once more." His mouth dried, and he glanced around the room. Fool. One could not take spirits before a lady, but he would've given his soul for one mouthful of good brandy.

"Will you have a seat?" She indicated an elegant Queen Anne chair across from her.

He nodded, dropping onto it gratefully, worn out by mere introductions. He smoothed his coat, picked at the weave in his brown trousers, anything other than look at Miss Locke. How the deuce did someone go about courting a woman anyway? He'd danced and dined with scores of ladies, but nothing more. His amorous adventures had been restricted to forays into the more popular brothels. So how did one woo a respectable lady?



“How is your sister today?” Miss Locke began. “Did she enjoy the ball last evening?”

“I believe she did enjoy it, as did I.” He risked a glance at her.

Miss Locke stared directly at him, her mouth pinched into a bow. “I am sure she would’ve enjoyed it even more had she been allowed to stand up in a waltz.”

The woman was like a dog with a bone. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her the truth...but perhaps the devil in Miss Locke might enjoy trying to persuade him to allow his sister leave to dance the scandalous waltz. An odd manner of courtship, perhaps, but it would be lively, he suspected.

Affecting his best stern countenance, he put up a hand. “Really, Miss Locke, I believe I know what is best for my sister.”

“As you have never been a woman who had to refuse partners for a dance, I might beg to differ. I saw Lady Letitia turn down two gentlemen last night alone.” She bit her lip, as though restraining her tongue. “I beg of you, Lord Haversham, allow your sister to waltz. I am certain she will be the happier for it.”

“Would you have been happier had we danced a waltz last evening instead?” Marcus stared into the blue eyes across from him, which suddenly appeared uncomfortable. They darted all around, avoiding him at any cost. “Did you prefer our waltz the night before last, Miss Locke?”

“Of...of course not, or, no, yes, I did. I did enjoy our waltz, Lord Haversham. You are an excellent dancer.” The woman might’ve been eating a lemon or something that left a bad taste in her mouth, like curdled milk. “As would your sister be, were she able to do so.”

He restrained a chuckle. “Perhaps you could convince me while we ride in the park? I

have my curricule outside.” Would she consent to being seen with him alone in public? Would the bait of being able to change his mind about Letitia prove enticing enough?

She narrowed her eyes, and Marcus braced for the worst. He’d seen that gleam before. It had never boded well for him. “Why yes, my lord. That would be quite a challenging outing, wouldn’t it?”

“And you enjoy a challenge, Miss Locke?”

“I do indeed, my lord.” She rose, never taking her gaze from his face.

Marcus shot up and out of his seat. Lord, what had he just unleashed on himself?

“I’ll be but a moment getting my Spencer.” She glided out of the room, deliberately taking her time.

Marcus didn’t mind in the least. Her slow exit gave him ample opportunity to appreciate the straight back and hint of curves revealed by the undulating white gown. Had the sun been in front of her, what sights might that gauzy gown have revealed? He gulped, amazed at the sudden response in his breeches. Heavens, was he truly desirous of Miss Katherine Locke?

That thought had crossed his mind before. And reappeared rather quickly now, as well. Of course, she was a beautiful woman. If only she could’ve kept her tongue in check, she’d have been snatched up her first Season. Perhaps Fate had had a hand in this all along.

“Are you coming, Lord Haversham?” she called from the foyer. “I assume you wish to take me for this ride in your curricule rather than have me drive it myself.” The underlying glee in that last statement sent him hurrying from the morning room. He wouldn’t put it past her to try to take the ribbons.

“Of course not, Miss Locke.” He was brought up short by the stunning sight of Kate Locke standing in a dark blue Spencer with matching hat that made her eyes change to the color of the sky. Breathtaking, to be sure.

He offered his arm, and they walked sedately if rather awkwardly out to his waiting curricule. After handing her in, he hopped up beside her and took the ribbons. A sly glance at her made her laugh.

“Do not worry, my lord. I promise I shall not seize the reins unless you give me good cause.” Her cheeks had pinked with her laughter. The color became her. She should laugh more often. Perhaps he could remedy that, as well.

He turned the matched chestnuts toward Hyde Park. They were earlier than the most fashionable crowd, but he hadn’t wanted to be obvious about the courtship yet. “We have a grand afternoon for our drive, I see.” After a cloudy morning, the weather had turned brilliant.

“Lord Haversham,” she said, training a sour gaze on him, “do you think me a simpleton?”

Her words took him by surprise, but he answered back, rapid fire. “I might think many things of you, Miss Locke, but being a simpleton is not one of them.” He turned the rig into the park. “Why do you ask?”

The fury in her face made him want to cringe. “My brother put you up to taking me out, didn’t he?”

The accusation caught him unawares. He managed to keep the alarm out of his voice, but barely. “No, he did not.” Technically, he spoke truth, as Ainsley hadn’t specifically asked him to take her out for a carriage ride, but he skated on the thinnest ice possible.

“Then why have you taken this sudden interest in me?” Her voice wavered between outrage and hopelessness. “Dancing with me, the supper dance, a carriage ride. It smacks of Ainsley interfering in my social life again, and I will not have it. He thinks he knows what’s best for me.”

“Brothers often do.” Marcus dangled that bait, praying she’d take it and move swiftly away from the dangerous waters in which he now treaded.

“Hah. You think marrying you is what’s best for me?” Her voice rose alarmingly, and he peered around, terrified someone had heard her.

Fortunately, the park was lightly populated. Time to tease her back to safer shallows. “I would never presume to tell you, of all people, Miss Locke, what’s best for you. I would, however, like your advice on how to help Lady Letitia as she navigates the sometimes treacherous waters of her first Season.” He cracked a slight smile. “The waltz notwithstanding.” He pinned her with a sharp stare as she leaned forward and opened her mouth.

Marcus steeled himself for the onslaught.

She pursed her lips. “Why would you want my opinion, my lord? We obviously disagree on most topics.”

He released a sigh of relief. “You have expressed an interest in my sister’s welfare, Miss Locke. I appreciate that deeply. My sister has few friends, and Aunt Alexandra is much older. I would like to hear what you would recommend as one closer to her own age, to help bring her out of her shell.”

“She is rather retiring.” Miss Locke nodded in agreement. “I did notice that last evening.” She cut her eyes at him then stared straight at the horses’ backs. “I believe she is particularly fearful of the punishment or penalty you have imposed if she

dances that waltz. If I may speak frankly—”

“I wouldn’t dream of trying to stop you.”

Miss Locke faltered, blushing, then chuckled. “Well, you might attempt it, my lord, but I would doubt your success.” Miss Locke sent him a sly look and adjusted her Spencer. “As I was about to say, your sister is frightened of dancing the waltz. You must lift this ban so she can take part in Society more fully.”

Marcus pretended to think on the scheme’s merits, furrowing his brows, pursing his lips, clenching his fist. “I cannot see my way clear to do so at this time, Miss Locke, although I do appreciate your point.”

She scowled at him and opened her lips, but he cut her off. “Other than dancing, however, is there some way you can think of to bring her out of herself?” He truly would be grateful if she could hit upon a plan that would help Letitia.

“Well,” she said, fingering the material of her reticule, “does Lady Letitia enjoy shopping?”

The simple question stymied Marcus. “I’m not certain.” He’d never heard his sister talk about such outings, but then he’d been seldom at home before his father’s death last autumn. During her mourning period, of course, she’d wanted to do nothing, save stay in her room and cry.

“If you will allow me, my lord, I will send a note to Lady Letitia this afternoon requesting her company on a shopping excursion tomorrow morning. Then I can better assess how much work it will take to bring her out of her shell.”

“My sincerest gratitude for your assistance, Miss Locke.” Marcus beamed at her, and she ducked her head. “If we can encourage my sister to interact more with other

ladies and gentlemen, I will be forever in your debt.”

Miss Locke’s eyes sparkled, and Marcus’s stomach dropped. He had no idea what she might be planning, but he would’ve bet his fortune—if he’d had one—she would try to coax Letitia into standing up in a waltz in defiance of his edict. He suppressed a smile. Just let her try. “If you are free tomorrow afternoon, might we meet again, to confer on Letitia and perhaps come up with a plan for her for the rest of the Season?”

As she opened her lips, Marcus steeled himself for the rejection he was sure would come. Miss Locke had been too accommodating thus far not to expect it.

“Yes, of course.”

He pulled back on the reins so swiftly the horses jibbed. “Whoa, Samson, Delilah.” Marcus peered at Miss Locke, incredulous. “Yes, of course?”

She smiled at him, a genuine one this time. “If we are to help Lady Letitia, you must know what I find out as soon as possible. That way, we can come up with several things you can encourage her to do to help free her from her shyness.”

“Yes, of course.” Marcus suddenly had to concentrate on driving. He didn’t quite trust himself to look at Miss Locke. Her kindness toward his sister seemed out of character for her. Or perhaps he simply didn’t know the lady as well as he believed he did. “At this same time?”

“I think that would work admirably.” She gave him a serene smile then turned her head to watch the increasing number of people walking about the park.

So she did not seem to have an issue with being seen in public with him. All well and good. He shook the reins, and the horses picked up their pace. Time to move them further along in their courtship.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Next afternoon, Marcus pulled the team up precisely at three o'clock, more than a little curious about what had transpired during the morning's shopping trip. Letitia had found him at breakfast, beaming as she told him about Miss Locke's invitation to accompany her shopping.

"Oh, Marcus, may I go?" she'd pleaded with him, doe eyed. "And with just Miss Locke? Not with Aunt Alexandra along. I've never been shopping with someone my own age before."

"Of course you may, my dear. Miss Locke will be an admirable chaperone." He'd never seen his sister so enthusiastic before. "Did she say what she wants to shop for?"

"No." Letitia frowned briefly then her face cleared. "But I'm happy to give her advice on anything she needs. That's why she asked me, you see. Her note said after making my acquaintance, she thought I could give her a fresh perspective on some of her clothing choices." His sister had given him a curious glance. "Although I wonder if she's actually trying to gain your favor by befriending me."

That had been too close to the truth for Marcus's taste. And he would not wish his sister to think herself unvalued as a friend. "Miss Locke trying to gain my favor? Have you lost your senses, Letitia? The lady's been nothing but critical of me." Thinking of her list, his lips had pursed. "I suspect her intentions are simply those she mentioned—that she needs fresh eyes to give her advice, and you are her newest acquaintance. I would take it as a great compliment."

"Oh, I do, Marcus, I do." She'd kissed his cheek and run from the room on happy feet.

As he'd been from home when she'd returned, Marcus was very eager to hear from Miss Locke how she and his sister had fared.

He climbed down, hurried up the steps, and was about to ply the brass door knocker, when the door flew open and suddenly Miss Locke stared him in the face. Marcus stumbled back and would've pitched himself down the marble stairs had her hand not grasped his lapel and jerked him toward her.

"Where have you been?" she hissed at him, her blue eyes flashing.

"At my club for most of the morning. Why?" His proximity to Miss Locke, with her lavender scent wafting into his nose, was making it difficult to focus on anything other than her porcelain skin and what it would feel like to caress it. "I'm here at the appointed time."

"It is three o'clock, Lord Haversham."

"And that's the same hour we agreed upon for yesterday, is it not?"

Her brows dipped in a frown. "I believe you came at two o'clock yesterday."

"I'm sorry to contradict you, but it was three." He cocked his head, curious. "You wrote it in your note the day before."

"Oh." She shook her head, making the fiery curls framing her face dance. "I could've sworn it was two o'clock."

"Is something amiss, Miss Locke?" Marcus was becoming alarmed by her urgency. "Something to do with my sister?"

"Yes. Well, no, nothing is wrong, but it does have to do with your sister." She



nodded toward his curricule. “Shall we go? I really do have a lot to tell you, my lord.”

“By all means, Miss Locke.” Marcus offered his arm, still confused by her actions. The Miss Locke he was familiar with was not this flighty. He assisted her into the curricule, and they set off once more for Hyde Park. “So your shopping trip this morning was successful? Letitia was thrilled that you asked her.”

“Yes, she had a wonderful time, no thanks to you.” Miss Locke gave him a wicked glare.

“No thanks to me?” Marcus stared back at her. “I gave permission for her to go with you. Without Aunt Augusta.”

“And that’s what you should’ve been doing since before Lady Letitia had her come out, my lord.” The lady shook her head. “Does Lady Letitia have friends?”

“I...I don’t know.” The question took Marcus by surprise. “I assumed she did. She didn’t wish to go out after Father died, and I wasn’t around much before he did. Did she say something to you?”

“Not directly, but she did tell me this was the first time she’d been shopping without you or her aunt in attendance. Which is terrible for her, my lord. She’s likely shy because she’s been alone so long. And when I asked why she hadn’t been out with her friends, she said she didn’t have very many. That they were mostly her cousins, who did not live near you.” Miss Locke was staring accusingly at him. “Did she never play with the children near your estate?”

Again, his answer was a shameful, “I don’t know.” But he had to defend himself somewhat. “I’m almost seven years older than Letitia. By the time she was out of the nursery, I was off at school then university. I’m sorry, but I don’t know who her friends were growing up.” He sighed. That little admission would likely add a line to

Miss Locke's list: uncaring.

"And I can understand that, my lord." She didn't look particularly understanding. "My brother didn't pay much attention to me either, until our father died. But as soon as he was the one responsible for me, he made it his business to know who my friends were, what I did, where I went, what entertainments I liked and didn't like." She looked at him, her eyes half-accusatory, half-pleading. "This is what you should've been doing all last winter, in preparation for Lady Letitia's come out."

Marcus sighed. "You are correct, Miss Locke. I should have done and am sorry I did not think to do so. What can I do now to make amends?"

Looking quite mollified, Miss Locke settled her ruffled feathers. "I am sure you didn't neglect her out of spite, my lord. And I believe there are ways to help Lady Letitia be more forthcoming during her Season." She looked up at him curiously. "Did you know your sister adores hats?"

"Hats?" This was the first Marcus had heard of this. Letitia had never confided such a thing to him.

"Hats and bonnets." Miss Locke nodded emphatically. "My cousin Lady Celinda is exactly the same. I've never seen anyone with such a collection of millinery in my life. And your sister's preparing to rival her in her acquisition."

"Let me guess, I will shortly receive a rather large bill from the milliner?" Marcus suppressed a groan. His pursuit of Miss Locke had best conclude quickly and favorably, else he'd have nary a feather to fly with.

The grin on her face told him he'd guessed correctly. He turned the horses through the north gate and started along Rotten Row.

“Her face lit up like the sun after a rainstorm, my lord, the very moment we entered Madame Morriss’s shop. She tried on so many different bonnets and hats, and they truly became her.” Miss Locke nodded again. “You know there are some women who simply cannot wear a hat and have it look right, but your sister is not one of them. So I confess I begged her to indulge herself this once.” She leaned toward him and grasped his arm. “But I have a plan to employ them to help bring her out of her shyness.”

The moment she touched his arm, a surge of heat hit Marcus as though he’d stepped into a Turkish bath. Good lord, what was happening to him? If this happened whenever the woman touched him, he’d never survive a set of country dances, much less a waltz. He tried to smile pleasantly at her, praying she’d release him before sweat popped out on his brow. “What is that, Miss Locke?”

“First, I have encouraged her to go out more often, not just to balls, but to events where she can wear her hats and bonnets.” Miss Locke chuckled and released his arm.

Not a moment too soon as his nether regions had become agitated by his overall warmth.

“Lady Letitia was very accepting of that suggestion. So she may begin to ask you to take her to the theatre, or to museums, or even Vauxhall.” His companion grabbed his arm again, and Marcus gritted his teeth. “I do hope you will allow her to go there. It would be so good for her if you got up a party.”

He groaned, the fire she ignited in him racing from head to toe.

“Oh, come, my lord.” She shook his sleeve as though she were a terrier with a rat. “You must allow her to experience the thrills of Vauxhall.”

“Of course, Miss Locke. I do agree.” He would’ve agreed to anything if only she’d release him. He wasn’t going to be able to stand much more of this torture. In about thirty seconds, he would pull the horses to a stop, grasp Miss Locke by the shoulders, and plant a kiss on her that would convince the world she’d already agreed to marry him.

The lady let go of his sleeve, and Marcus could’ve wept with relief. “Thank you so much for your interest in my sister’s welfare. I knew another woman would be able to ascertain how best to help Letitia.”

“Oh, and that is not the only thing you must do, Lord Haversham.” She turned eagerly to him, and Marcus braced himself for another onslaught of fire. “You must help her get to know the gentlemen she will be partnering during the Season.”

Frowning, Marcus headed the curricule toward a certain tree he’d spied yesterday in the park. “Do you have a plan as to how I can do that?”

“Yes, I do. Would you like to hear it?” She leaned dangerously close to him.

“Of course, but I think I need to pay absolute attention to you.” He pulled the horses to a stop, and his tiger ran around to hold their heads. “Let us stop here for a while so I can give you and your plan my complete attention.” He jumped down, discreetly checking his trousers for signs of tenting. Thankful there were none, Marcus strode around to the other side of the curricule and helped Miss Locke descend.

“Do you mean for us to stand here and talk?” Her brow was furrowed as she glanced about. “We could just as easily go back to The Manse.”

“Ah, but then we could not do what I’ve expressly brought you here to do.” He gazed down at her, a strange hunger burning brightly in his chest.

“And what is that , my lord?” Her narrowed eyes gleamed at him.

“Have a picnic, of course.”

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His statement took Kate sorely aback. She'd not thought of this ride as an outing of any kind, but merely a way for them to speak in private about his sister. Although, as she'd just stated, they could've done that in her receiving room at the townhouse. So was Lord Haversham actually courting her while trying to make it seem as if she was merely helping his sister? The man was devious, so she wouldn't put it past him. “You did not tell me we would be picnicking, my lord.”

“My way of thanking you for the interest you've taken in Letitia. I am terribly grateful to you, Miss Locke.” He motioned to his tiger, and the servant hurried to the rear of the curricule and returned with a large blanket and an even larger wicker picnic basket. Lord Haversham offered her his arm. “This way, if you please.”

If the man hadn't been so charming, she might've refused him. And if he was trying to court her, she'd bet her entire wardrobe Nathan had put him up to it. Had her brother realized, as she had, that her choice of husband had dwindled to one? And was Haversham truly interested in her, or was he doing this as a favor to his friend? Well, she doubted any man would woo a woman he disliked just to accommodate his friend. Friendship did have limits. So perhaps Haversham had an actual liking for her. A flicker of something, Kate didn't quite know what, flared in her chest.

“You are full of surprises, my lord.” She took the arm he offered, her heart fluttering strangely.

“I have to keep you off guard, Miss Locke.” He grinned down at her. “That's the only way I can ever hope to stay ahead of you.”

“Indeed, my lord. You can scarcely do it even then.”

“Sad but true. Still,” his eyes twinkled at her, “that is the fun of the game, is it not?”

Smiling in spite of herself, Kate nodded as they approached the thick blue jacquard cover the tiger had spread on the ground. She dropped gracefully onto it and stretched her legs, excited by the prospect of a picnic. They were one of her favorite ways of eating al fresco.

Lord Haversham sat sprawled beside her and pulled the wicker basket to him. “Let’s see if Cook’s outdone herself as usual.” He unpacked a substantial bowl of greens mixed with various meats, cheeses, and boiled eggs. “Salmagundi. A delicious start to our repast.”

The servant passed him plates and silverware, and Haversham neatly scooped the salad onto their plates.

“Ah, and what would a picnic be without a pie.” He withdrew an enormous pie tin, the flaky crust sitting well above the rim. “Chicken pie, I suspect. It’s Cook’s favorite.” Moments later, he plopped a huge slice of the savory onto her plate, the gravy oozing out making Kate’s mouth water. “There’s also bread and cheese, frosted cakes, and fruit.” He turned his dark eyes on her, and Kate’s heart beat faster. “What’s your pleasure, Miss Locke?”

Without thinking, she almost said, “ You .” Appalled at that bizarre response, she couldn’t think what to say, but at last managed, “Bread and cheese, please.”

“We’ll leave the desserts in the basket for now.” He passed her the plate and silverware, and Kate gratefully lowered her gaze to the food. “You were going to explain to me how to help my sister with her suitors.” Haversham shoveled a huge piece of the pie into his mouth. “Will you tell me?”

Kate swallowed carefully—her mouth was dry, and the bread didn't help that—and began on her plan. "I think instead of making Lady Letitia meet the gentlemen of the ton all at once, at a ball or entertainment, you should invite them one by one to meet her at home. That way she will come to view them as friends and will hopefully be less shy around them when they ask her for a dance or to sit with them at a musical evening." She forked up another bite of pie, relishing the creamy goodness. "That way you can also become better acquainted with them and ascertain if any of them are scoundrels."

"I assure you, Lord Somersby will not attend Letitia ever ." Lord Haversham gave a firm shake of his head, and stabbed a piece of meat from the salad so forcefully the fork clinked on the China.

Laughing, Kate finished her pie and moved onto the salad as well. "I'll be surprised if Lord Somersby ever finds a bride. Everyone in the ton knows what kind of cad he is."

Lord Haversham shook his head. "Some matchmaking mama will decide the game is worth the candle and throw her daughter at him—with orders to make him compromise her or else. Many a parent would likely disregard Somersby's behavior to have their child wear a marchioness's coronet."

"You are right about that. Some people put position above all else." She gave him a sideways glance. "I am glad you are not one of those."

"Thank you. I am happy to have found favor with you at last, Miss Locke."

Kate kept her gaze on her plate, wishing she could bury her head in it to hide her red cheeks. Thank goodness Haversham had never seen that list.

Plink!

Something had struck the side of her bonnet. Confused, she looked over at Lord Haversham just in time to see him hurl another missile at her.

Plink!

The soft projectile caught her on her chin as her jaw dropped open. She glanced down at the blanket to find two fat red grapes just coming to rest. “Lord Haversham!”

“Yes, Miss Locke?” He pelted her with another grape, this one striking the shoulder of her Spencer and bouncing into the grass.

Kate grabbed the two grapes at her side and fired them quickly at her adversary. The first one went wide, but the second found its mark squarely in the middle of his broad chest. Laughing, she glanced around but spied nothing else she could use to retaliate. Lord Haversham was taking grapes directly out of the picnic basket. “No fair, Haversham. You’ve stolen all the ammunition.”

“All’s fair in love and war, Miss Locke.” He aimed carefully and lobbed another grape so it came down on the top of her bonnet and stayed there.

“Wretch!” Kate made a grab and captured the wicker basket. “Aha!” She thrust her hand into the basket, grasped the first object she found, and threw it directly at Haversham’s head. Her aim was perfect this time, but she’d had the misfortune to grab not a grape but one of the iced cakes. The confection hit Lord Haversham squarely in the nose, leaving pink icing glistening all over his face.

Appalled, Kate covered her mouth, certain the wrath of God was about to descend on her. So she was truly shocked when the man laughed loudly, produced a handkerchief, and proceeded to scrape the gooey mess from his nose, cheeks, and chin.



“Well aimed of such a young one,” he commented, another line from Shakespeare’s Shrew .

“That’s Katherine’s line.” She ventured a smile at him, amazed at his continued good humor.

“I thought it better mine, in the circumstances.” He finished scrubbing his face and was about to toss the soiled handkerchief in the basket when she stopped him.

“You missed a spot.”

“I’m not surprised.” He held the handkerchief before his face. “Where is it?”

“You’d better let me do it.” Kate knelt before him, took the now-pink scrap of cotton, and brushed at the spatters he’d missed near his jaw. The sudden realization of how close she was to him hit her, and her stomach clenched. His dark eyes studied her—she could see her reflection in their mahogany depths.

“I believe you owe me a forfeit for that last hit, Miss Locke.” His mouth was so close to hers she couldn’t look away.

“Wh...what forfeit would that be my lord?” Her words came out a whisper.

“The first waltz at Lady Camden’s ball tonight.”

Kate sat back, letting out the breath she’d been holding, and recovered as best she could. “Only one, my lord?”

He raised one sardonic eyebrow. “That will depend on what other mischief you get into.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Lady Camden's elegant ballroom was crowded, however that was only to be expected this early in the Season. At least there was sufficient room to breathe, although not much. Kate stood pressed against Celinda on one side and Nathan on the other, searching the excited throng for Lord Haversham. After their spirited exchange this afternoon, she found herself actually looking forward to seeing him tonight—and even more surprisingly eager to pay her forfeit and dance the waltz with him.

Kate had chosen one of her favorite gowns this evening, the cornflower blue muslin, shot through with silver and trimmed in the same sparkling color. Gold tones might have highlighted her hair better, but this particular shade of blue did something to the color of her eyes that made people take notice. At least that was what Celinda had told her. Why she'd chosen this gown, when she had no more hope of Lord Finley than the man in the moon, she wasn't quite sure. Or if she did have an inkling, she didn't want to think about it. Not yet anyway. She still had serious reservations about Lord Haversham's character, even though she'd mentally deleted two of the items on her list. He still had the first five to make amends for, if such a thing could be done. Which reminded her to speak to Nathan about that list. Turning to her brother, Kate caught sight of Lord Haversham, Lady George, and Lady Letitia entering the ballroom.

Immediately, she straightened her back, trying to make herself look taller and ensure that her gown fell in the perfect folds of a Grecian statue. Raising her chin, she smiled, trying to catch Lord Haversham's eye. One never knew but that the orchestra might play a waltz to begin the first set.

Lord Haversham, however, was settling his sister onto a section of wall—not a corner, thank goodness—and speaking with his aunt. Then he darted across the

ballroom floor, but not toward her.

Disappointment sent an arrow darting into her chest, but she really must not read too much into Lord Haversham's attentions this afternoon. She'd helped him with suggestions for his sister's shyness, but the gentleman owed her nothing save some thanks, which he'd already given her. And an extremely amusing afternoon. Kate had to admit she'd not had so much fun in quite a while. Well, she'd never said Haversham was a stick in the mud.

"Good evening, Miss Locke."

Kate jumped and whirled around to find Lord Haversham grinning. "Good evening, my lord, although having the devil scared out of one is hardly the definition of a 'good evening.'"

"Did I startle you, Miss Locke? My most abject apologies." He placed his hand over his heart and bowed, though he kept his mirthful gaze on her. "I did, however, wish to bring your attention to a little drama about to take place across the ballroom there." He nodded to the wall where his sister and aunt stood conversing, as usual.

"There is drama to be had in such a normal conversation, my lord?" Kate raised an eyebrow. "I did not know your life was so...unexceptional."

"The drama is about to begin, Miss Locke." He nodded again to Lady Letitia, except now a young gentleman had joined the conversation. "I just suggested to Mr. Symmons that my sister might be agreeable if he asked her for the first dance."

"Bertie Symmons?" Of all the young gentlemen present, why would Haversham choose him to lead lady Letitia out?

"I know the gentleman, who is definitely not a scoundrel."

“No, Bertie may be many things, but he’s definitely not that.” Kate had to admit her old friend was every bit as honorable as Haversham.

“And what is more, Letitia knows him from some garden party last year.” He leaned toward her and whispered in her ear, “Look.”

Holding her breath, Kate watched rapt as Bertie approached Lady Letitia, making his usual awkward bow then launching into a conversation regarding Heaven knew what. But whatever topic Bertie had decided to lead off with, the lady smiled and nodded, seeming almost to hang on his every word.

Wide-eyed, Kate turned to Lord Haversham. “Do you think—”

Haversham simply nodded toward his sister, and Kate returned her gaze to the couple to find Lady Letitia now on Bertie’s arm as he led her to the dance floor. “I have you to thank, Miss Locke, for this little miracle.” Lord Haversham grasped her hand and kissed the gloved knuckles.

A tingle, charged like the air during a lightning storm, ran up her arm, making her heart race unaccountably. What an odd thing to have happened. For once, Kate was struck speechless.

“Is...is this first dance a waltz?” Kate asked at last, unexpectedly hoping his next words would claim her for his partner.

“You should know better than that, Miss Locke.” He gave her a skeptical look tinged with humor. “While I encouraged Letitia to dance, and am delighted she has chosen to do so, I hope you do not think me so remiss I would allow her to waltz around the room in the arms of Mr. Symmons?”

Kate bit her cheek to keep from smiling. That would give Haversham too much

satisfaction. Of course, he had a point about Bertie. Waltzing wasn't her old friend's strong suit, by any means. Lady Letitia deserved an excellent partner for her first performance of that most exquisite dance. "Perhaps I take your point on that, my lord."

"At last, the lady sees sense!" Haversham broke out in a huge grin as the orchestra began to tune up. It sounded like it was to be a country dance set.

She was promised to him for the first waltz, but that didn't mean they couldn't dance this one as well. Looking up at Haversham, she smiled and waited for him to ask for the dance.

To her consternation, however, he scanned the room until his gaze came to rest on a not-so-young lady standing with her mother, looking about eagerly. The lady's gown was not the first stare of fashion, although it was serviceable enough. Her hair was plainly dressed, with flowers rather than jewels, but it became her well. Haversham continued to gaze at her, until curiosity got the better of her. "Do you know her, my lord?" She nodded toward the lady in question.

"Miss Anne Bartholomew. We were introduced last year." He still hadn't taken his eyes off the lady.

"So this is her second Season?"

"Her third. She has not found favor with the young gentlemen this year. Which is a pity as she is quite charming." He hesitated, peering intently at Miss Bartholomew as a gentleman approached her.

The lady's face lit up, her smile eager, but the gentleman who seemed to be making for her continued past her toward a somewhat younger blond lady.

Lord Haversham's lips thinned into a straight line. "Her fortune is meager, alas, which has likely hampered her chances at a decent match." The musicians continued their preparatory squawks and squeals. He sighed. "If you will excuse me, Miss Locke? I am called to rescue another wallflower, but I will return to claim my waltz and the supper dance, if it is still available?"

"Yes, it is, my lord." Kate gazed at him, seeing him anew. He was about to do a kindness to Miss Bartholomew, to keep her from the embarrassment of having no partner in a room full of dancing couples. Much as he'd done for her the other night. Was that Haversham's personal mission then, to engage those ladies who might not be the most popular in the ton ?

In light of this revelation, she didn't even care that he'd left her to be a wallflower for this first set. Miss Bartholomew needed him more than she did. Besides, he'd already asked her for two dances. Kate followed his progress across the ballroom to the lady whose whole countenance seemed to glow as he approached.

"Good evening, Miss Locke."

Kate jumped. She really must pay more attention to who was sneaking up on her. Turning, she smiled and curtsied to Lord Montrose. "Good evening, my lord."

"Would you care to dance this first set with me?" Montrose was a bit older than most of the gentlemen on the hunt this Season and not as attractive. Still, if he would do her the kindness of asking her to dance when no one else would, she certainly wouldn't turn him down.

"I would love to, my lord." The smile Kate sent him as she took his arm was as genuine as could be. Kindness came from the most unexpected places and should not be taken for granted.

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“Did you enjoy your set with Lord Montrose?” Lord Haversham asked as they spun about the room to the strains of the promised waltz.

“I did, rather. He’s a nice gentleman, although there is an air of sadness about him.” Kate sighed with contentment, perfectly willing to allow Haversham to take command of the dance and weave them in and around the other couples on the ballroom floor.

“Such a pity about his wife. She died in childbirth, she and the child. He’s been grief-stricken ever since.” Haversham’s face had become grave. “They were very devoted to one another.”

“I’d heard that. So horrible for him.” Kate inadvertently gripped his hand tighter. “That he misses her terribly, even after all this time.”

“We must all carry on despite our grief.” Haversham’s tone held a hint of melancholy.

Kate peered into his face, which suddenly seemed more careworn. But of course, his father had died not long ago. Nathan had told her Haversham had been devastated to lose him at such a young age. She’d not been very sympathetic toward the earl then, but now wondered if part of his acerbic wit was an attempt to mask his lingering grief. “We do indeed, my lord. It is the burden those left behind must bear.”

“Oh dear, Miss Locke. I hope we are not descending into the maudlin.” He spun them around so quickly Kate became quite dizzy. “To combat that disgraceful decline, let us do something to divert us, to divert the entire ton.”

“What might that be, my lord? I’d think a picnic in public where you pelted me with

grapes would be diverting enough for anyone.” Still, the fun of that mock battle had Kate looking forward to any further diversion Haversham might suggest.

“I think we should dance a country dance after supper.” His eyes twinkled at her.

“Lord Haversham!” Again, Kate’s heart took off racing in her chest. “Is this your misguided way of proposing to me?” Everyone knew that dancing more than two dances with one gentleman was tantamount to an engagement.

“Heaven forbid, Miss Locke.” His voice carried his normal teasing tone, but something more serious lurked in the back of his eyes. “I merely wish to see if anyone is paying attention to us.”

“If they haven’t been, they certainly would then. Lady Morris can count to three if no one else can.” That lady’s gossiping nature had been the cause of at least three ton marriages that would never have occurred had the woman’s keen eyes not spied a minor impropriety. “I am afraid you will have to be satisfied with two waltzes and supper this evening, my lord.” She peered up at him, suddenly alert. Had people begun to take notice of their recent amity? And how would she feel about it if they had?



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Three evenings later, Kate found herself sitting in the back row of chairs in Lady Atherton's salon, waiting for the renowned opera singer Madam DuClaire to begin her concert. Or, more accurately, waiting for Lord Haversham to appear.

After his scandalous suggestion they dance a third dance at Lady Camden's, she'd scrutinized his behavior more closely, trying to decide if the earl was showing signs of partiality toward her. The last two evenings, he'd been his usual acerbic self, and she'd welcomed the return of their spirited exchanges. However, her opinion of him had undeniably altered.

When she'd come home from Lady Camden's, she'd gone straight to the receiving room, taken the infamous list out of the drawer, crumpled it up, and thrown it on the fire. She'd tell Nathan, if he ever asked about it, that she would have to pay the forfeit. Not that she'd mind now. She couldn't summon regret over taking the wager, though. That list had unexpectedly made her focus more keenly on Lord Haversham's good qualities.

"Pardon me, but is this seat taken?" The man himself appeared as if summoned, and Kate flushed.

"Yes, it is. I'm saving it for a gentleman who's eternally late to every gathering." Kate pursed her lips but then relaxed them into a smile.

"I cannot be late if the entertainment isn't screeching yet." Haversham made a face as he sat down next to her.

"Madame DuClaire is a French opera singer, my lord. She does not screech." Kate

wasn't a great fan of opera, but she'd heard the lady was talented and could move audiences to tears. "I hope you are prepared to eat those words."

"As easily as I did the cake, Miss Locke." He gave her a droll look.

Kate sputtered, trying not to laugh as the madame took her place in front of Lady Atherton's large fireplace, adorned with green and white garlands for the festive occasion.

"Shhh." Haversham shushed her, giving her a wicked glare. "Control yourself, Miss Locke. Madame DuClaret is about to begin."

Kate swallowed her laughter and rapped him on the arm briskly with her fan. The man was more incorrigible than a twelve-year-old boy.

Madame DuClaire began with the aria "Salce" from Rossini's *Otello*, and Kate settled down in her chair, determined to enjoy the music, even if she didn't understand a word of Italian. She'd just begun to ignore the words and let herself be carried away by the tune when a whisper caught her attention.

"I'd say by the level her screeching's reached, someone's told Desdemona her husband's about to kill her." Haversham had leaned his head slightly toward her, his lips directly beside her ear.

Kate gasped, fighting to keep in the laugh that threatened to explode from her.

"I know if my wife caterwauled like that, I'd be the first to strangle her."

Biting her cheek to try keep her face under control, Kate was mortified when she began to shake with mirth and tears of repressed laughter trickled down her face. She would kill the wretch this time, make no mistake.

“You really must behave yourself, Miss Locke.” Lord Haversham shook his head, his face solemn as though they were in church. “Laughing at such a divine singer is really beneath you. Your governess should’ve taught you better.”

She opened her mouth to retort, but Nathan, seated on her other side, squeezed her hand so hard she gasped.

“Behave yourselves.” Her brother’s threatening look didn’t disturb Kate in the least; she’d grown up with Nathan trying to tell her what to do.

“Tell him that,” she mouthed to her brother, who leaned forward to glare at Lord Haversham.

Haversham shrugged, looking as though butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, and motioned toward Madame DuClaire, who’d moved on to an aria from Beethoven’s *Fidelio* .

Kate kept her eyes forward, though her heart beat in a strange little rhythm when she sent glances askance at Lord Haversham. The man was incorrigible, but she had to admit she enjoyed his company.

At the intermission, Kate, Nathan, and Lord Haversham all rose to stretch their legs. She was afraid Nathan might say something to his friend about his disruptive behavior, but he simply gave a tsk and turned to speak to Miss Hunt-Smythe.

“Are you enjoying the concert, Miss Locke?” Lord Haversham smiled pleasantly at her, for all the world as though he’d not been acting like a schoolboy in his first term.

“Very much, my lord. When I can keep my mind on the music.”

“Are you afflicted with a wandering mind? I am sorry to hear it.” The earl put on a

teasing face. “I do hope you will remember me when I’m gone.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware you were going somewhere, my lord.”

He chuckled. “Neither was I until this afternoon.” Haversham glanced down at her. “But I will be quitting London in the morning, I fear.”

Startled, Kate almost swayed toward him, but caught herself just in time. “Where are you going on such short notice?”

“Eden Hall, my estate in the north, near Carlisle.”

“Carlisle.” Far to the north. Almost a week’s journey. Kate frowned. She wasn’t sure she liked the idea of Haversham’s absence. She’d become accustomed to seeing the earl on an almost daily basis. Now he’d be gone for some weeks, in the middle of the Season.

“You’ll be gone for a month or more, will you not?”

“Sadly, yes. My steward there was thrown from his horse and has broken his leg.” The earl shook his head. “I seem to be having more difficulties with my stewards these days.” He offered his arm, and Kate took it. “I must go and manage things so I can hire a temporary replacement until Farnsworth is back on his feet—literally.”

“There’s no one else you can send to interview stewards?” The prospect of facing the ton’s entertainments without the earl’s witticisms to divert her was grimmer than Kate would’ve believed.

“I am the Earl of Haversham, Miss Locke. It’s my duty to see to the running of the estates.” He raised his eyebrows provocatively. “Dare I hope your question means you will miss me when I’m gone?”

“As much as one misses a sore thumb when it ceases to hurt.” The quip came automatically to her lips, but it was far from the truth.

“Ah, well, then I must make a request of you while you are kicking up your heels in my absence. Let us get some lemonade. I must have something to sustain me through another bout of Madame DuClaire’s attempts at song.” He led her back toward the refreshment table where Nathan stood, gazing at their approach. “I wondered if you might look after Letitia while I’m gone? Make sure she continues to put herself forward as she has been doing the past evenings. I would hate to lose the meagre ground we have gained. And take her shopping again. I will not mind another bill for bonnets if it makes her more willing to attend social functions.”

“I will be glad to befriend Lady Letitia, my lord.” Kate glanced over at the lady in question, talking animatedly to Bertie Symmons once more. She might have her work cut out for her if Bertie continued to monopolize Lady Letitia’s attention.

“Splendid.” Haversham’s face lit up as they approached her brother. “There is, however, another boon I would ask of you, if your brother allows it.”

“What is that?” Kate frowned, confused.

“Ainsley, well met.” Haversham handed her over to Nathan. “I have a favor to ask of you, old chap.”

“Thank you, Haversham, although we have already met this evening, if you remember.” He glanced at Kate, who shrugged. “How may I help you?”

“I’m off to Carlisle in the morning. Deuced steward broke his leg, and I have to take the reins until I can find a replacement. I’ve asked Miss Locke to take my sister under her wing in my absence, which she has graciously agreed to do.”

“Kate is free to do as she wishes with regard to spending time with Lady Letitia, Haversham. No need to ask my permission for that.” Nathan looked as confused as Kate felt.

“Well, the favor is of a more personal nature.” Haversham looked from her to her brother expectantly.

About to fly to pieces, Kate spoke up brusquely. “Spit it out, for goodness’ sakes, Haversham. What scandalous thing do you wish to ask Nathan to do?”

Mouth puckering to restrain a smile, he addressed himself to her brother. “I would ask that you allow Miss Locke to write to me while I’m in Carlisle.”

Kate gasped, her hand going to her throat while her heart took off at a gallop. Young ladies were not allowed to correspond with gentlemen to whom they were not related. The sole exception being the man to whom they were betrothed.

“Is this a declaration for my sister, Haversham?” Nathan’s mouth had thinned into a straight line.

“It most certainly is not.” Haversham looked completely offended. “I think I have more breeding than to ask for a lady’s hand in the middle of a particularly noisy musical evening.”

Heart slowing back to normal, Kate had to look away from Haversham and her brother lest they see an emotion on her face she would rather keep to herself.

“Then explain yourself, Marcus.”

“As Miss Locke has agreed to take Letitia under her wing while I’m away, I wish for her to write and let me know how the Season is going for my sister.”

Face now composed, Kate turned back to him. What the earl asked was reasonable, if Nathan would allow it.

“I’m certain Letitia will write to me but will not tell me if she has fallen further into her shyness. Aunt Alexandra will also send me correspondence. However, I doubt she will tell me anything other than which entertainments she and my sister have attended or the latest on-dit .” Haversham beamed at them. “This is where Miss Locke’s letters will be invaluable in keeping me informed about my sister’s progress.” His gaze flitted from her to her brother. “If you prefer, Miss Locke could show you her letters before they are sent, just so you will know we are not sending violent love letters to one another.”

Kate’s cheeks heated hotter than a stove in January. She fixed the earl with a gimlet eye, although her tone was less severe. “I assure you, Lord Haversham, if you pen anything that smacks of love in your letters, there will be violence on my part.”

Grinning, Haversham turned to Nathan. “Well, old chap? I can address my letters to Miss Locke to you if you prefer, so you can see everything is totally above board.”

Her brother shrugged. “I think Kate has made herself perfectly clear, Haversham. I doubt my chaperonage of this correspondence will be necessary.” He turned to Kate. “If you are willing to undertake it, sister? It is totally up to you.”

The scheme seemed harmless to her, if rather exciting. With Nathan’s permission secured, she assumed no one else would ever know nor care if she wrote to Haversham about his sister’s well-being.

“Very well, Lord Haversham. Consider me your proxy chaperone while you are in the north.” She cocked her head, considering. “How often would you like me to report to you?”

“I believe once a week should keep me amply informed.” Haversham’s gaze lingered on her face for a moment longer than strictly necessary. “My grateful thanks to you, Miss Locke. I will send the direction over by footman tomorrow.” He bowed. “And I will return in a moment to accompany you back to your seat for the rest of the...entertainment. I hate to abandon you so abruptly, but I must attend to my duties as chaperone.” He grimaced and nodded toward Lady Letitia and Bertie, still laughing and talking. “An obligation I gratefully pass on to you beginning tomorrow.”

As Haversham’s figure retreated across the room, Nathan turned to her with a smirk. “You may not be betrothed to the man, Kate, but he’s given you a task fit for his countess. I wish you luck with managing Lady Letitia.” He gazed across the floor at the lady in question, whose eyes were sparkling for the first time while out in public. “I suspect you’ll need it.”



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Eden Hall

Near Carlisle

May 19, 1820

Dear Miss Locke,

Thank you very kindly for your letter that reached me almost as soon as I arrived here. If your correspondence is always as prompt and informative, I will feel as though I have not left London at all.

My journey was tedious, without even a hint of a highwayman or runaway carriage. The accommodations along the way were as comfortable as might be expected. Remind me, next time my steward is incapacitated, to bring my own bedding and victuals for the trip. Although I must commend Mrs. Clarke of the Blue Belle Inn in Retford for the delightful French chicken cutlets with stewed vegetables in gravy and a very jolly apple tart drenched in cream. I could have eaten that meal at every inn at which we stopped.

Your report of Letitia's behavior at Lady Dilwyn's soiree saddens me, although it does not surprise me in the least. She will take the opportunity, now that I am not at her side, to retreat to her previous wallflower ways. You must be firm with her, Miss Locke. If anyone knows what you are capable of, it is I. Do not sway from our plan. You must call upon Letitia and make certain you are accompanied by a young gentleman you can introduce to her. This will continue your excellent strategy.

Just be certain you do not frighten the gentlemen off before you can introduce them to my sister.

Did you enjoy yourself at Lady Dilwyn's, Miss Locke? I am sorry I was not there to entertain you, but we all have our crosses to bear. Mine currently is interviewing stewards and finding them not at all clever enough for the post. I blame you, Miss Locke, for not suggesting that I bring a temporary steward from London, where the choices would have been much livelier.

Consider yourself chastised, and I will return to London having devised a suitable forfeit for you.

Your obedient servant,

Marcus, Lord Haversham

London

The Manse

May 25, 1820

Dear Lord Haversham,

While I am happy to learn that you arrived in the north unscathed by either ruffians or recalcitrant coaches, I believe our correspondence must not stray from its primary purpose, which is to give you an account of Lady Letitia's behavior at ton gatherings. Please try to restrain yourself from other inquiries, especially those that touch on my personal life in any manner.

Unfortunately, since you asked about my enjoyment of Lady Dilwyn's soiree, I feel it

would be rude to ignore your question. Therefore, I will answer you by saying that I had a thoroughly disagreeable time, your sister's company notwithstanding. If I am to blame for your lack of forethought in not bringing a suitable steward to Carlisle with you, then you are equally to blame for my utter boredom with all ton activities.

Had you simply had the good sense to send a replacement steward to the north, you would not have had to leave London, and I would not have ended up in want not only of a decent partner for dancing but also intelligent conversation, save my brother's. And he seems most preoccupied at the moment—although I cannot fathom with what—so I am left to my own devices, which is never a good thing.

I must inform you that Lady Letitia pled a headache to beg out of going to Mrs. Tripplehorn's musical evening last night. I believe she feared I would make her perform, which I would never have done—loathing such exhibitions myself, I would never inflict them on anyone else.

As a result, I have nothing to report save we did go shopping day before yesterday, and your sister found several very fetching bonnets she simply could not decide between. Therefore, I had to tell her she must take them all. I hoped the purchase would persuade her to go to Mrs. Tripplehorn's entertainment, but alas it did not. I will try again tonight to encourage her to attend Lady Alcester's ball. I've convinced Nathan to introduce Lord Pemberton to Lady Letitia tonight. I do hope they get on well.

Do not imagine I wish to worry you, or hurry your return, but Lady Letitia seems very taken with Bertie Symmons. Not that there's anything wrong with Bertie—well, not much—still, I believe your sister can make a more advantageous match. She needs your guiding hand to navigate her through the murky waters of the Season.

Do you know yet when you may be starting your journey to London? Both Lady Letitia and I despair of a decent partner until your return.

Yours sincerely,

Miss Katherine Locke

Eden Hall

Too Near Carlisle

May 30, 1820

Dear Miss Locke,

My many and grateful thanks for your faithful correspondence regarding my disobedient sister's lack of success at the various ton entertainments. I am certain you did your best—I suppose you could not have threatened her with some sort of dire punishment to ensure her cooperation, even though I would have immediately given you permission to do so had you asked for it—and although I will not cast blame on you, I must say I am disappointed you did not have more success with getting Letitia to dance or even attend the outings. Your powers of persuasion have always cowed me, but perhaps they work less well on the fairer sex.

You may find it comforting, therefore, that your duties in that respect will soon be lightened considerably. At last, I have secured a temporary steward who does not seem a total cake and engaged him until such time as Mr. Baines can resume his duties. I am happy to report that I shall be leaving Eden Hall in the morning and hope to reach London no later than Monday the fifth of June.

To that end, and in celebration of my return, I would ask that you and your brother join a party I am getting up—a visit to the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens for Letitia, Mr. Symmons (she seems very attached to the gentleman), Lady Celinda, Lord Finley, Aunt Alexandra, and you and Ainsley. I think my return warrants some fireworks,

and what better place to enjoy them than Vauxhall?

I hope your acceptance will be awaiting me upon my return to my townhouse, and I look forward eagerly to annoying you in person once more.

As always, your obedient servant,

Marcus, Lord Haversham

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

The myriad twinkling lights and paper lanterns that lit Vauxhall Gardens with a dreamy, romantic air gave Kate gooseflesh every time she looked at them. Something magical was going to happen tonight, she just knew it. Vauxhall was a place where magic occurred, and just because it had never happened here for her before, didn't mean it couldn't tonight.

Ever since Lord Haversham's letter inviting her and Nathan to join his welcome home party, Kate had been atwitter. She'd missed Haversham's company more than she'd ever believed possible during his time in the north, so she was very much looking forward to seeing him again. And what better place than Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. One of London's most popular entertainments, it was also the most scandalous. Of course, there were the normal delights to see, such as the Turkish Tent, the Grotto, and the Waterworks. But there were also dimly lighted paths down which adventuresome young ladies sometimes strayed with a gentleman—and returned much wiser than when they'd gone down them.

Somehow the thought of those shadow-filled alleys had her on edge more so than any other time she'd visited Vauxhall.

As soon as she and Nathan had arrived, Lord Haversham had greeted them, looking scrumptious in a suit of navy blue, excellently cut to show off his marvelous physique, and immediately offered her his arm. Kate had taken it, thrilling to the touch of her hand on his sleeve.

Now they strolled along, taking in the sights and excited throng milling around, waiting for the fireworks exhibition to begin. Nathan had elected to walk behind them, so they must certainly be circumspect in their behavior.

Celinda and Lord Finley were part of the party as well, walking just in front of them, with Lady Letitia, Bertie Symmons, and Lady George Pye in the lead before them. The party was small by ton standards, but Kate was glad Lord Haversham hadn't made it any larger. Lady Letitia seemed to be having a good time so far, talking to Bertie and laughing every so often. That was such a good sign, given the lady's previous wallflower tendencies. If one could get over the idea that Bertie was someone's preferred companion.

"You seem to have done well with Letitia, Miss Locke." Lord Haversham might've been reading her mind. "I have returned to find my sister no longer a wallflower."

"Well, it's just Bertie. He's harmless, but I think your sister could make a better match." She looked up to find his dark gaze fixed on her and swallowed. "Still, I'm glad the plan's working well for her."

"I am certainly in your debt, Miss Locke." He tucked her arm closer into his elbow. "However am I to repay you?"

Gazing into his hungry eyes, Kate's heart took off, beating wildly. Her earlier trepidation about the dark alleyways of Vauxhall suddenly seemed less fanciful.

"What the devil is he doing?" Haversham's gaze left her, his attention now focused on Bertie, who'd darted toward a set of vendor stalls. "Excuse me, Miss Locke. Ainsley, will you look after your sister a moment? I must attend to mine."

"Of course, Haversham. Nothing new in that." Nathan's sardonic tone irritated Kate more than usual tonight.

"Brother, as you scarcely chaperone me in any case, why don't you converse with Lord Finley and let me have a word with Celinda?" She'd been hoping for a chance to speak to her cousin all evening.

“Excellent plan, Kate.” He motioned her to go ahead of him. “You two put your heads together, and we’ll keep an eye on you. Finley,” he all but pushed Kate toward Celinda and buttonholed the viscount, “I hear you’re a good hand at cards.”

God help Lord Finley once Nathan got his hooks into him. Her brother was as masterful at the card table as he was at horses, fencing, boxing, billiards, and a plethora of other gentlemanly pursuits.

Kate turned to Celinda and drew her cousin a little ahead of the men. “Thank goodness Lord Finley is distracting Nathan. I would much rather talk to you than have to deal with my brother right now.”

Celinda’s eyes narrowed, and she leaned toward Kate. “I’ve been wanting to speak with you too, cousin.”

“Oh, really? What about?”

“Lord Haversham—I want to know if he’s proposed to you yet.”

Appalled, Kate shook her head wildly, pulling her cousin even farther ahead. “Of course not.” She blushed. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“After the spectacle you made of yourselves in the park, I’m surprised the banns weren’t read before Haversham left London.” The arch tone in Celinda’s voice wasn’t lost on Kate.

“Are people still talking about that?” Kate tried to be nonchalant, but she cut her eyes toward her brother. Thank goodness no one knew about her correspondence with Haversham. That would be the on-dit of the Season.

“Some are. I only know because Miss Hunt happened to be passing in a carriage and



saw you throwing..." She wrinkled her brow. "What were you were throwing at Lord Haversham? And why?"

"Grapes...and an iced cake. But he started it." Kate still couldn't believe she'd done that in public.

"Oh." Celinda still looked confused. "Well, anyway, Miss Hunt saw it, and she and her mother came to call last week and mentioned it to me." Celinda giggled. "I told her it must be some new parlor game you were playing."

"Lord, Celinda." Leave it to her cousin to come up with an explanation for the oddest of behaviors. "But thank you." Kate glanced surreptitiously at her. "Haversham's been gone for ages, though. Why would you still believe he's going to propose?"

"Because of the way he looks at you, Kate." Celinda's tone said she was stating the obvious.

Kate dropped her gaze to the ground. Could there be something to what Celinda said? Ever since that afternoon in the park, her own attitude had changed drastically toward Lord Haversham. Their letters had only strengthened her regard for him. And asking her to help look after his sister had shown her the depth of his trust in her. As Nathan had said, it was the type of responsibility he would have relegated to his countess.

"I think he's in love with you."

Kate sent her cousin a stricken look. "You do?" Had that been the meaning of the look she'd seen before?

Celinda's eyes widened, her voice rising. "He might even propose here tonight!"

"Shhh." Kate dragged her cousin even farther ahead of Nathan and the viscount.

“Don’t let Nathan hear you. He’s been pressing me all Season to marry Haversham. I don’t want him to get any ideas.”

Or did she? The insistent beating of her heart now that she’d raised that question intimated that she might no longer object quite so strenuously to Nathan’s suggestion. It was all just a big muddle in her head. She’d need time to consider what she really wanted—

“Are you going to let him take you down the Dark Path?”

“Celinda!” Gooseflesh rose over her arms as Kate’s attention was jerked back to the present. The Dark Path had the worst reputation of all the poorly lit pathways at Vauxhall.

Celinda pursed her mouth. “Well, the man’s not dim-witted. It would be the perfect place to propose.”

“My pardon, Miss Locke.” Lord Haversham suddenly appeared by her side, making Kate jump. “Mr. Symmons had run off to fetch Letitia an ice she said she fancied, not understanding, apparently, that a gentleman does not leave the lady he’s escorting alone to do so.”

“You shouldn’t fault poor Bertie for his enthusiasm, my lord.” Celinda chuckled. “There are worse things he could do to show his desire to please Lady Letitia.”

“I suppose not. However, I will keep a sharp eye on him to make sure he doesn’t repeat the offense tonight.” Haversham’s determined face made Kate’s heart tremble. If they had to stay close to Letitia, he’d have no opportunity to drag her off to one of those dark pathways. Was she actually disappointed?

“Why not let Lord Finley and me chaperone her, along with Lord Ainsley and your

aunt?" Celinda turned her best wheedling tone on Haversham. "This is your welcome home party, my lord. You should be allowed to enjoy yourself as well."

Kate wasn't sure whether to thank her cousin or strangle her.

Lord Haversham looked down at Kate, seeming to consider the offer. "Thank you, Lady Celinda. I do appreciate that. Ainsley," he turned to his friend, "would you mind shepherding my sister and the rest of the party over to the Bandstand? I believe the fireworks are going to begin in a few minutes."

Nathan nodded. "Of course, Haversham." Then he raised an eyebrow. "What will you and my sister be doing while I'm playing shepherd?"

"Miss Locke has expressed an interest in seeing some of the vendor stalls. We will visit those on our way to join you." The smooth answer sent a shiver down Kate's spine. He did wish to get her alone.

"Very well, but do not tarry." Nathan's voice had an edge to it.

"I will attempt to hurry your sister along, but you do know how she is." Haversham gave her brother a long-suffering look.

"Yes, I do." Nathan's brows rose briefly then he moved toward Lady Letitia.

"What vendors would you like to visit, Miss Locke?" Haversham took her arm and looped it through his. "The candied fruit might be to your liking. I believe they would make excellent projectiles the next time you wish to declare war on me."

"Don't tempt me, Haversham." Kate calmed herself, trying to affect her normal bantering attitude toward him. "But you are the one who insisted it was my desire to shop. Which stalls do you think I'd be most interested in?"

“What about the one down this row?” He gestured to a line of vendors that stretched all the way to the woods. “I believe they sell all manner of lady’s paraphernalia.” His mouth twitched. “Surely even you can find something to your liking at such a shop.” With that disarming statement, he led them down the path to the next-to-last stall.

Haversham was correct about one thing—the seller’s wares ranged from painted fans to paste jewelry, from China cups to various small trinkets. The variety alone charmed Kate, and she wanted to look at each item. “I will say, Haversham, you have an eye for hodgepodge.” She picked up a tin whistle. “I could use this to summon you to my beck and call.” She blew a shrill blast that had the earl covering his ears.

“If you were three counties away.” He plucked the instrument from her hands and set it down. “Perhaps a quieter item would be a better choice.” Rummaging around the stall, Haversham finally grabbed a cup and ball toy, which he demonstrated successfully. “There, something to keep you occupied and out of mischief.”

“I could say the same thing for you, my lord.” Kate grinned as he attempted the toy again, managing instead to hit himself in the eye with the tethered ball. “At least you cannot blame that mishap on me.”

“Oh, but I can, Miss Locke.” He set the toy aside and took her arm. “I wounded myself attempting to satisfy you.”

“It would behoove you to find a less destructive way of doing that, Haversham. Although I did find it quite amusing.” Kate chuckled as they strolled onward to the final stall. “Shouldn’t we be getting back to the others? We don’t want to miss the fireworks, do we?”

A peculiar look came over Haversham’s face and instead of heading back the way they’d come, the earl grabbed her hand and pulled her past the final stall, onto the unlit path that led into the woods. Kate’s heart raced as she ran to keep pace with

him, all the while wondering where Lord Haversham was taking her—and what would happen when they got there.

He stopped finally beside a tall, dark tree, the roots knobby with age, then pulled her off the path and around behind the huge trunk.

Panting, Kate stared up at him, his handsome face scarcely discernible in the poor light. “You don’t like fireworks, my lord?”

His sensual mouth curled into a slight smile. “I thought we might rather make some of our own.” Then his lips were on hers, and the world exploded for Kate in a wave of heat that seared her to the bone and made her heart pound so hard it hurt her chest. Then her nose bumped into his, distracting her from the warmth racing through her. She couldn’t figure out which way to turn.

With a chuckle, he guided her head until their mouths came together like two pieces of a puzzle, fitting exactly right.

Surprised by the unaccountable warmth of his lips, Kate melted against him. Shivers shook her body, and she clutched at him, wanting it to go on forever.

At last, he carefully broke the kiss, easing her away from him. “Were those fireworks enough for you, Miss Locke?”

“No.” She gazed up at him, breathless and utterly confused. Then she grabbed the lapels of his jacket and pulled him back toward her. If this was going to be her first kiss, then by God, she’d be the one to say when it stopped. He came willingly toward her, and she backed up until she hit the hard tree trunk. “I want more.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” he murmured, kissing her lips in little bursts, each venture longer and longer until he pressed them against hers in earnest, his body

following until he covered her completely, sending her senses spinning out of control.

All too soon, he lifted his lips. “I missed you while I was gone, Miss Locke.”

“I missed you too, my lord.” She was surprised by how much.

Haversham sighed and looked away. “I think we’d best join the others.” He stepped back, adjusting his clothing.

Lord, what must she look like after that interlude? Her hands flew upward, but her hat was still on her head. Carefully, she stepped away from the tree, brushing at the back of her gown. “Is there any bark clinging to me?” She turned to Haversham.

He eyed her from a distance. “Nothing seems out of place, thank goodness. Your brother would have my head on a plate, Miss Locke, if he knew we’d been indulging in this kind of fireworks.”

“Kate.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“After kissing me like that,” she ducked her head, “I suppose you really should call me Kate.”

He laughed. “I shall be honored to do so...Kate.”

She liked the way he said that in his rich, deep voice.

“Will you call me Marcus? My family always has. I prefer it.”

Was she really standing here, breathless from the Earl of Haversham’s kiss, being

encouraged to call him Marcus? The world had turned upside down. “Yes, Marcus.” His name sounded good in her mouth. He felt good on her mouth. Oh, Lord. Her cheeks would burst into flame.

“We really must get back, Kate. I’m serious about what Ainsley will do should he suspect.” He grasped her hand and helped her back to the pathway. “This way.” He led them back a different way, so they emerged not far from the spot where everyone was standing, looking up at the streamers exploding overhead.

“How do you know so much about the dark paths of Vauxhall, Marcus?” She sent him a saucy glance as they took up places just behind their party.

“There are some things, Kate, you are better off not knowing.” He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. “Are you attending Mrs. Doyle’s card party tomorrow night?”

“Unfortunately not. Nathan and I are promised to Lady Grayson for dinner and a political evening.” Kate made a face. She hated such meetings, but Nathan would accept invitations from political hostesses from time to time and drag her with him. Now that Marcus had returned, she’d much rather spend time with him, but her brother wouldn’t likely let her cry off.

“Better you than me.” He grinned down at her. “Then will you drive with me on Saturday? To Hyde Park?”

“Are we to renew our battle lines with another skirmish or will it be all-out war this time?” She grinned back at him.

“Oh, I believe it will be winner take all.”

Something in his voice made Kate catch her breath.

Between Celinda's prediction and the searing kiss she couldn't quite convince herself had just happened, Kate found it difficult to deny the likelihood that Lord Haversham might be taking her to the park to propose to her.

And if he did that, what on earth would her answer be?



*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Saturday morning dawned bright, the sun shining without a cloud in the sky. Kate took that as an auspicious omen for her forthcoming ride with Marcus. Standing in the foyer, peering out the window waiting for him, she whispered the name, savoring it like a forbidden sweetmeat. She'd been saying it to herself ever since Thursday night at Vauxhall—in her head throughout the day, and in surreptitious whispers at night when she was in her bed, alone. Perhaps that would not be the case much longer.

Once Celinda had sown the seeds of the possibility, Kate hadn't been able to shake the idea that Marcus might be getting ready to propose to her. Perhaps even today. Their bantering, so vitriolic at the beginning of the Season, had become less barbed and more playful. And Kate could easily admit to enjoying the earl's company now, particularly because of their spirited exchanges, and she assumed he felt the same—why else had he been seeking her out so much? And after that unexpected and thoroughly heart-stopping kiss the other night, she shouldn't delude herself anymore. Marcus was an honorable gentleman. If he kissed her, it meant he was planning to propose to her.

And if he did, she was going to say yes.

Cheeks heating at the thought, Kate fanned her face with her hand and hoped Marcus didn't show up just yet. She'd hate to have to explain her blushes.

The sound of a vehicle pulling up to the curb made her glance out the window. Drat it. There was Marcus, right on schedule. Hurriedly, she pulled on her gloves, and at his knock, rushed to the foyer, hoping her haste to meet him could be given as the reason for her pink cheeks should Marcus remark on it. She actually beat Parker to

the door by several steps, drawing a look of reproach from the butler. She pulled it open, beaming at the surprised look on Marcus's face.

"Does Ainsley not employ a butler anymore, Miss Locke?" Marcus asked as she stepped across the threshold. "I distinctly remember Parker opening the door to me until recently. Did he seek employment elsewhere?"

"No, he's still here, just slower than I am." She frowned. "You're supposed to call me Kate now. Don't tell me you've forgotten about...about that ." If he'd forgotten their kiss, she would declare war—and use something other than grapes as ammunition.

"How could I ever forget about that , my dear?" The warmth in his eyes told her he had not. "However, I will not disrespect you by calling you so familiarly in front of the servants. In private, it will be a different matter."

"Oh." Kate's face heated again, but she tossed her head back, trying to affect a nonchalant attitude she absolutely did not feel. "Then that's perfectly fine. Shall we go?"

"I only await your pleasure, Kate ."

Her head snapped toward him, but he merely grinned and offered his arm. "No one is close enough to hear us now."

She took his arm, suddenly thrilling to the touch of his firm muscles beneath the dark brown superfine of his jacket. "You said we are going to the park?"

"That is the normal place for couples to ride, although we are much too early for the Grand Strut." He led her to the curricule and helped her up. "Although I will confess that is by design." His eyes seemed to pin her to the seat. "We will be quite alone, I think."

Hands suddenly shaking, Kate tucked her skirts in as he climbed up beside her. Marcus was going to propose. With that now all but a certainty, Kate's earlier calm deliberations flew right up the chimney. Was she truly ready to hear his proposal? To accept it?

Clearing her throat, Kate tried to make her voice sound normal. "I had a note yesterday that the bookseller has gotten in another volume of the Waverly novels, called *Ivanhoe*. I was hoping I could persuade you to take me there so I could get it."

"You are an aficionado of the Waverly series?" He started the team. "I am astonished. Never would I have taken you for a woman who reads such thrilling works. Yet another mark against Ainsley's good sense."

"Have you read any of them yourself, Marcus?" She sent him a sidelong look, her nerves a bit steadier.

"I have better things to do with my time. Such as driving you to the bookseller's." His face took on a thoughtful look. "Would you mind if we invited Letitia to come with us? She needs an excuse to wear another bonnet."

Kate chuckled. "I see you've taken quite a lot of my advice."

"I have, because it is working." Marcus sent her a grateful glance. "I would also like her to read more, and I'm afraid my father's library at the townhouse tends more to history, travel, and philosophy than novels a young lady would prefer."

"Then by all means let's include her." Kate would have relished Letitia's company another time, but today she was too much on edge to do so. Not to mention that if Marcus had planned to propose to her, it surely would not happen with his sister by their side. But it could not be helped. She wasn't about to deny Marcus's request, so she would have to make the best of it. A flair of regret in her chest made her shake

herself and assume a genuine smile. After all, they had plenty of time.

“Thank you, my dear.” He turned the horses at the next corner, heading back into Mayfair. “My sister will be thrilled to join us. After this excursion, we can return her to the house to peruse her purchases,” he sent her a knowing glance, “and we can continue to the park, if that’s agreeable to you.”

“Absolutely.” Kate bit her lip but kept smiling, even though her mouth had dried. The day had suddenly taken another turn. She’d wanted a brief respite to gather herself before Marcus’s proposal. Now she’d have to endure half the afternoon waiting for them to be alone again. Kate didn’t begrudge Letitia the outing, exactly; however, the longer she must dwell on the impending proposal, the more nervous she’d likely become. She squeezed her hands together in her lap to keep them from trembling. Amazing that she could feel this way about a gentleman she’d loathed until just recently.

But she hadn’t really known Marcus then, not the way she did now. Hadn’t known his generous nature toward his sister, hadn’t understood how kind he could be. Or how much fun he was to be around. She truly believed she could anticipate a lifetime filled with love and laughter with Lord Haversham.

They pulled to a stop in front of his townhouse, a white marble, three-story building in the most fashionable part of Mayfair. He gave the reins to his tiger and requested the family landau be brought around. “It will take them a few moments to remove the top so we can enjoy the excellent weather,” he explained as they walked up the stairs and entered the townhouse.

Kate’s head swiveled to take in the stylish appointments of the entry hall, the marble floor in the foyer, the soft green of the walls framed with molding of white wooden panels. She peeped into the open door of a small pale blue receiving room, decorated in the sleek Neoclassic style. Such an elegantly furnished house. Her home, perhaps,

one day soon. A shiver raced down her back as Marcus rang for the butler.

The servant appeared, a surprised look on his face. “I’m sorry, my lord. I thought you’d gone out for the morning.”

“I had, but I have returned, Hobbs.” Marcus peeled off his gloves and stretched his hands out. “Where is Lady Letitia? I wish to take her on an outing with Miss Locke.”

“I’m sorry, my lord, but Lady Letitia and Lady George have gone to call on Mrs. Quimby.”

“My aunt’s sister.” Marcus turned to her in explanation. “She’d not said anything to me about such an outing.”

“Lady George had a note from Mrs. Quimby shortly after you left, my lord. She’s unwell and wished her sister to call.” Hobbs stood straight, eyes forward. “Do you wish to send a note to have them return home, my lord?”

“No, the game’s not worth the candle.” He turned sheepishly to Kate. “I’m afraid we are destined to go alone today. I hope you don’t mind. Thank you, Hobbs.”

“Very good, my lord.” The man bowed and retreated down the corridor.

“So we are now off to the bookseller’s?” Kate spoke distractedly, still avidly looking at the house.

“Yes. Oh, drat.” Marcus headed toward the nearest bell pull. “I’ll need Hobbs to tell the grooms I won’t need the landau after all.”

“Wait.” Kate stopped him before he could pull the cord. “Before you do, could you show me more of your house? It’s very lovely. What I have seen of it, that is.”

Marcus gave her a keen look. "You do realize with Aunt Augusta gone there is no chaperone here. Your reputation could be in jeopardy."

"As no one knows I'm here, I think I'll take my chances." Kate grinned at him. "I'd really love to see more of it."

"Well, perhaps a tour of the ground floor rooms would not send you beyond the pale as far as the ton is concerned." He motioned her toward the central corridor. "This way, Miss Locke."

"We are alone, Marcus."

"I'm all too aware of that, my dear."

The words sent a thrill through Kate.

"The first room on the right is the library." He opened the door to a masculine room, furnished with comfortable leather chairs and shelves upon shelves of thick volumes. "As I said earlier, you will find little in here to interest you."

"Such a pity." She shook her head. "You must furnish it with books you and your sisters can enjoy."

"More instruction, I see." Marcus closed that door and stepped across the corridor to open the one opposite. "I begin to understand the ulterior motive for your tour."

"I assure you, that was a suggestion only." Grinning, Kate followed him into the next room.

"This is the dining room." His lips puckered. "Will you also give me instruction about my dinner menus?"

Kate laughed and stepped back into the corridor. “Only if my assistance is requested.”

They continued down the corridor, Marcus making droll comments about each room and her possible directions on how to change them. At last, they reached the end of the corridor and the final room, his study. Kate had been wanting to see this room most of all, hoping it would give her additional insight into Marcus’s character. She believed she knew him rather well by now, but rooms where one spent a great deal of time tended to reveal things about that person.

On the surface, the study was the typical masculine retreat—Nathan had one very similar both in The Manse and at home in Somerset. The dark paneled walls gave the chamber an aura of privacy, though they’d likely not been Marcus’s choice. Nor the heavy mahogany desk or overstuffed leather chairs in front of the fireplace. The objects that did seem to be of Marcus’s choosing were the whimsical pendant lamp suspended over the desk, designed to resemble the Earth, and the brilliant red and blue Turkish carpet that looked sorely out of place among the rest of the drab furnishings.

“Have you seen enough now, my dear?” His brow furrowed, and he glanced at the longcase clock in the corner. “We truly should be going. Believe it or not, people might have noted your coming into the house.”

“That would only matter if they were also the people who’d seen Lady Letitia and Lady George leaving earlier.” She smiled, studying the truly remarkable globe. Perhaps he’d brought it back from his travels on his Grand Tour. “Are your neighbors always so observant?”

“If I didn’t know you better, Kate, I’d suspect you wished to compromise me.” Suddenly, he stood behind her, his looming presence at once menacing and thrilling.

She turned to face him, a surety in her spirit she'd rarely felt before. "Do you really know me that well, Marcus?"

The look of longing in his eyes gave her the courage to grasp his neck and pull him down for another kiss. A moment of resistance from him—but only a moment—then she was in his arms, his lips pressed to hers as though he'd been in a desert and she was the blessed water of life. He tilted his head until their mouths melded perfectly, sending flames of desire licking through her veins. If she hadn't been sure of it before, she was certain now that more than anything in the world she wanted to be with this man, together like this, forever.

But too soon, he broke the kiss, leaving her aching, wanting so much more.

He sighed and pressed his forehead to hers. "I think we must leave now, Kate. Else I may not continue to behave like a gentleman."

"You could never be anything but a gentleman, Marcus." Kate rested against him, not wanting to be parted from him. "But I want you to show me one more room."

He straightened, a suspicious look coming over his face. "Which one?"

"Your bedroom."



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Stunned into silence, Marcus stared at Kate, not believing what she'd just asked him. "If that was a jest, Kate, it was in very poor taste."

And yet the words brought immediately to mind images he'd envisioned over the past weeks—Kate standing in his bed chamber, naked save for her flame-colored hair cascading over her shoulders, covering her breasts except where her pert nipples peeked through the long tresses. Both of them naked, tangled in the sheets of the great bed, making passionate love, him bringing her to the ultimate pleasure time and again. And her doing the same for him.

Marcus bit his lip, trying to remove that image before he tented his breeches. This was no way to behave when he was about to ask the woman to marry him.

"Does that mean you wouldn't like to take me to your room?" The siren stared at him then licked her lips, worse than any wanton.

"That is not the question, Kate. There is a time and place for everything, and this is not the time for that ." He had to find a way to get her out of the townhouse before either someone discovered her here or he lost control and did as she asked. At the moment, it was touch and go whether there was enough control in the world for him to succeed.

"The kiss we just shared said this is the perfect time and place." She moved toward him, and he backed until he hit the door.

He grasped the handle and opened it. "The time would be after we are married, not before I have even proposed."

Her eyes brightened. “Then you were going to propose in the park today.”

Sighing, Marcus nodded. “Yes. I wished to make a grand gesture by proposing at the spot where we were first friendly together.”

She frowned. “You mean under the tree where you pelted me with grapes?”

“Do you not think that romantic?” He grinned at her. “I remember that afternoon with great fondness.”

She blushed. “I do as well.”

He took her hands. “So let us go there now. Let me kneel and declare myself properly.”

Squeezing his hands, Kate drew them around her until she was pressed against him.

God, she must be able to feel his cockstand through his breeches. He certainly could.

“I know you desire me, Marcus. I desire you too.” She rose on tiptoe until she could whisper in his ear. “Declare yourself with your entire body, and I will do the same. Oh, my love,” she kissed his cheek, “let us act as ever we have, with spirit and fire toward one another.”

To say his flesh was weak was an understatement, but then his spirit was equally vulnerable. Her request was wrong, by society’s standards. She should remain innocent until they were married. But they were going to marry. She’d said as much, and when Kate Locke made up her mind, it took heaven and earth to change it. Why not be a little scandalous—or a lot? If they were careful, no one would know. No one had discovered their tête-à-tête at Vauxhall. And besides, so many couples anticipated the wedding night these days it was almost expected.

One more look into her brilliant blue eyes, gazing up at him with uncontrolled desire he'd never imagined seeing from her, sealed their fate. After pressing a searing kiss to her lips, he grasped her hand and opened the door. "Be quiet and follow me."

He led her around the corner from the study to the servants' staircase. Stealthily, they ascended the steps, Marcus praying the maids were taking advantage of his sister and aunt's absence to clean the lower floor rooms. He hadn't seen them as he'd been showing her around, but then he never did. They were almost invisible, which had its advantages and disadvantages. One never knew when one would surprise a maid with her duster. He stuck his head around the corner on the second floor and sighed with relief to find the corridor empty. Marcus put his arm around Kate's waist and swiftly ushered her to the first door on the right. He jerked the large oak door open, and they sped inside, Marcus then able to breathe again.

He closed the door, turned the key, then removed it and placed it on top of the dressing table. Absolutely no one was entering this room while they were here. Thinking rationally once more, he stood back and took in the sight of Kate, actually here in his room. Just as he'd dreamed it. She was looking around as though this was quite a normal occurrence. Of course, in the future, it would be.

She turned toward him, a smile on her face. "This room is such a reflection of you."

How could she be so blasé about this? Well, that was Kate down to the ground.

In two strides, he was in front of her, his arms sliding around her, his mouth descending on hers. Every time they kissed, a hunger for more of her grew within him. Today, at last, that hunger would be satisfied. He pressed his tongue against the seam of her lips, hoping she'd understand and grant him entry.

She tensed in his arms, her head tilting a little, then tentatively relaxed her lips. With a groan of victory, he slid his tongue into her as he'd dreamed of doing these past

weeks. Her mouth was soft as velvet and sweeter than any woman he'd ever known. He plundered here and there, needing to discover every bit of her.

Moaning low in her throat, she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him with total abandon.

That guttural sound sent a streak of fire directly to his member, which had already been semi-erect. Now his cock bumped against his smallclothes, impatient to play as well. Marcus broke the kiss, panting as he stared into Kate's incredulous face.

"What do you call that kiss?" She breathed deeply, her cheeks a bright red, her blue eyes dark with desire.

"A lover's kiss." This woman was so lovely, so desirable. That it had taken him so long to realize it spoke to his addled brain.

"Because we're about to become lovers?" Her gaze met his, warm and eager. He need have no fear that she was unwilling.

Marcus nodded and licked his lips. He was so very ready for her but had no idea what she knew regarding what they were about to do. Most young ladies were sheltered from such knowledge, although knowing Kate, he wouldn't be surprised if she'd managed to find out more than the usual unmarried miss. He pulled her back to him, and she laid her head on his chest, as naturally as if she'd done it all her life. "Do you know anything about what that means, Kate?"

She nodded.

Well, he'd called that one.

"Celinda overheard some things when her mother wasn't paying attention to her. She

told me.”

“What did she tell you?”

Kate pulled back and peered up at him. “Don’t you know?”

Marcus had to bite back a laugh. “I do know, but what young ladies overhear may not be exactly correct. I want to know if you understand what to expect.”

Her face pinkened, but she nodded. “I trust you to know what to do if I don’t.”

She trusted him. Something he’d never thought to hear from her beautiful mouth. He needed to live up to that trust, not just today, but for the rest of their lives. “Thank you, my love. That means more to me than you know.”

The smile she sent him made his knees weak and his groin ache. “Shall we continue, then?” He stepped back and stripped off his jacket. “Would you like me to help you?”

But she was already removing her gloves, bonnet, and Spencer then reaching behind her, feeling for the laces. After a moment, during which he unwound his cravat, she shook her head. “Yes, I will need you to act as my lady’s maid. Sometimes, I can do it myself, but this gown laces higher than others.” She turned neatly, presenting her back to him. “Thank you, Marcus.”

So eager his hands shook, he unlaced the cornflower blue gown until the material sagged, revealing her chemise and stays. Marcus swallowed hard then set his lips against the soft nape of her neck.

A shudder rippled through her body, and gooseflesh rose on her tender flesh.

Excited by her response, he slowly drew the material off her shoulders, his lips

straying downward as the garment fell away. He nuzzled her slender neck even as he unlaced her stays and drew them off. Slipping his arms around her, Marcus slid his hands up until he cupped her magnificent breasts, eliciting first a gasp then a moan from Kate.

“Oh, Marcus.” She leaned back against him, her breath coming faster as he teased her nipples through her chemise until they furled themselves into tight, hard peaks. Kate rolled her head from side to side across his chest. “That feels so good.”

“And there is better yet to come, my love,” he whispered in her ear. Turning her toward him, he gazed deeply into her passion-glazed eyes. “Let me shed my clothes as well.”

Dazedly, she nodded, not taking her eyes from him as he swiftly divested himself of everything save his shirt. They now faced one another, the soft crackling of the fire the only sound in the room. Marcus drew her toward him. “Moment of truth?”

“Moment of truth.” She smiled up at him then loosened the tie at her neckline, so her chemise fell further off her shoulders. Tugging the material lower, Kate managed to uncover her décolletage little by little until the fabric clung only to her nipples, a smidgeon away from exposing all her natural loveliness.

Marcus held his breath, his gaze riveted to the scrap of fabric.

Then it plunged to the floor, revealing the luscious form he’d imagined night after night in his most erotic dreams. Her abundant breasts, the rosy nipples round and dark, drew his attention first, as if begging for his touch once more. His gaze lowered to her trim waist, the skin pale and smooth, then finally dipped to the thatch of bright curls that covered her sex. A more beautiful woman he had never seen. And she was about to be his for all time.

Falling to his knees before her, Marcus pulled the slim body to him, burying his face between her breasts. “Oh, God, Kate. I’ve dreamed about this moment, but I never quite believed it would happen.”

She lifted his head until their eyes locked, and her lips curled into a small smile. “Believe, my love.”

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How she’d summoned the courage to be so brazen, Kate had no idea, but standing here now, embraced by the man she loved, she thanked God for it. She was going to marry Marcus, and that was all that mattered right now. Waiting until after their wedding for him to make her his seemed a waste of time. Time they could spend enjoying the things Celinda had told her belonged to the marriage bed.

Marcus rose, scooping her up in his arms, his mouth on hers as he carried her toward the bed. He set her down on the edge of the mattress, broke the kiss, then swept his shirt up over his head in a single, liquid movement that revealed his magnificent body all at once.

Kate gasped. His was the first nude male body she’d ever seen—as startling as it was arousing. The sheer heat his closeness generated in her was astounding.

She’d known Marcus was a powerful man, but the muscles laid bare for her to see—from broad shoulders to his expansive chest to his firm abdomen tapering down toward his hips—caused a frenzied beating of her heart. When her gaze strayed further down to his male member, standing straight out, the sight of him started a strange ache between her legs. Suddenly everything Celinda had told her to expect flew out of her head.

“What...what do I do now?”

“Let me take care of you, love.” Marcus lifted her face to his then sank his mouth onto hers, his lips burning away any lingering doubt or fear. He strayed over to her ear, the rasp of his ragged breathing sending exquisite shivers throughout her body.

Kate arched her neck, inviting his next caress.

“Mmmm.” His lips descended slowly, trailing one hot kiss after another until he stopped, his mouth poised over one breast. “Never have I tasted anything as sweet as you, my love.”

Her own breath coming harder, Kate pulled his head toward her, needing him, urging him to continue. When his mouth engulfed her nipple, a streak of fire erupted within her, shooting down to the place that ached so badly. Each time his tongue licked or swirled around the crest—now tightly furled and with an ache of its own—she moaned and writhed with the strangely pleasurable sensations coursing through her.

“You like that, love?”

“Oh, yes.” Kate’s breathy voice had lowered.

“And now?” He skimmed his lips lower, across her stomach to her navel, where his tongue circled the small cavity.

“Yes.” The ache below became more insistent, and Kate clutched the bed covers, almost overcome by her growing need for...something more.

“What about this?” He dipped his tongue fleetingly into her navel, and she moaned deeply as another streak of heat shot straight to her core.

“Or this.” Marcus moved lower, his lips moving into the thicket of curls between her thighs.



A gasp brought Kate up off the bed. “Marcus!”

He raised his head, his eyes dark and calm. “Shhh. Trust me, love.” He grasped her hand. “Lie back.”

Trembling, Kate lay back down, eyes closed, her whole face aflame.

Marcus returned his attention to her nether regions, finding his way to a little nub that lay there. He touched his tongue to it, and Kate gasped as a shock flew through her. Her hips bucked of their own accord, and the ache inside her spiraled upward. Every lick, every touch brought a new wave of sensation crashing over her. Kate rolled her head from side to side, moaning as the spiral inside her grew more insistent. Marcus swirled his tongue around her delicate flesh until she shrieked as she shattered from the inside out. Over and over, waves of pleasure crashed through her until at last her body stilled.

Then she was in Marcus’s arms, being cradled, being caressed, being loved by him. A wonderful heaviness assailed her, and she rubbed her cheek against his chest, quite willing to stay there for the rest of eternity.

“Did you enjoy your first time, love?” Marcus had moved them to the middle of the bed and somehow got them under the covers.

“That was the most wonderful thing ever to happen to me.” Kate grasped him to her, wanting to feel his warmth against her. “Thank you, Marcus.”

“There is more, you know.”

She met his eyes and nodded. “I know.” What had just happened was not what Celinda had prepared her for at all.

“We can continue on or we can stop now and resume after we are married.” His face was set in serious lines. “The decision is yours, my dear. Although you must understand that even though you are technically still a virgin, you can hardly be deemed an innocent after what you just experienced. So whether we continue now or not, we will marry regardless.”

Kate smiled into his chest. That ultimatum had been foregone the moment she stepped into his bedchamber. “Well then, we might as well be hung for a sheep as lamb.”

“How delightfully flattering you are, Miss Locke.”

“You should know that about me by now, my lord.”

His lips seized hers, and he rolled them until she was situated beneath him, pressing her down until his body covered hers, warming her from the inside out. He nudged her legs open and at once the hot presence of his member strained against her opening.

Kate closed her eyes, steeling herself against the pain to come. This was the part her cousin had told her about, that it was supposed to hurt, but she hadn’t known how much or for how long. Well, she’d find out soon enough.

“Kate.”

She opened her eyes to find Marcus gazing down at her. “Trust me again, love.”

“I do.” And she did. It wasn’t his fault this time it was going to hurt.

“Look at me, Kate.” His voice was soft, insistent.

She nodded, raising her gaze to his loving face.

“Remember, we are together in this.” He shifted his weight, and the pressure between her legs increased.

“Yes.” She wouldn’t let the fear take over in this moment. Rarely had she ever been afraid of anything. And she wanted this to happen right now. Carefully, she slid her arms around his neck. “So we can become as one.”

“Yes, love.” Marcus nudged himself closer.

The ache between her thighs intensified. As if seeking his heat, Kate lifted her hips, just as Marcus thrust forward.

She bit back a cry, partly at the suddenness of it, partly at the pain. Because it had hurt, though not as badly as she’d expected. Still, it felt terribly peculiar. She glanced up at Marcus, whose face seemed transfixed with awe. Breathing heavily, he continued to push forward until at last, he seemed fully seated inside her. A miracle considering the size of him.

“Are you all right, love?” he asked, his gaze now trained on her, concern all over his face.

“Yes.” It was uncomfortable, but she didn’t want to make him feel bad about it. “And you said it will get better?”

“Let’s see if we can make it much better. Put your legs around me.”

Fearing to move, Kate gingerly did as he asked. The initial pain had subsided, and she didn’t want it to return. But moving her legs into the new position made no difference. “Now what?”

“Relax, and let me do all the work.” With a smile, he rocked back then gently thrust forward, time and again, each stroke urging him deeper and deeper. The rhythm he set for them became familiar, so Kate could anticipate his movements, lifting her hips in time to meet his thrusts, and that strange ache between her legs began to grow once more.

It spiraled upward, taking Kate’s senses with it until, with a suddenness that took her breath away, she reached that ultimate peak once more. Those wonderful waves of pleasure were more intense somehow because Marcus was there inside her, like nothing she’d ever felt before. Kate’s eyes opened wide as she clutched at him and called, “Marcus!”

Her cry seemed to spur him on, for he sped up, thrusting faster and faster until he cried out her name, and erupted deep inside her. Sagging against her, Marcus panted as though his lungs would burst. When he could speak, he glanced at her and asked, “Are you all right?”

When she nodded—Kate was far too exhausted to speak—he rolled away from her, throwing his arm over his face as he continued to breathe deeply. After another moment, he pulled her to him, engulfing her in his arms.

Kissing her brow, he snuggled close to her and whispered, “I love you, Kate Locke. I cannot wait until we are married.”

The words reverberated through Kate, creating a warmth that stole all the way through her. It was one thing to suspect his feelings and quite another to hear them professed aloud.

She rolled over until she could look directly into his face. “Do you truly mean that, Marcus?”

“How can you doubt it, my love?” He stroked a strand of her sweaty hair off her forehead. “I would not have taken your innocence had I not loved you with my whole heart. Which is why I want you to be my wife more than anything on earth.”

“Is that a proposal, Lord Haversham?” Kate grinned at him.

“No. Well, not the true proposal. As I said, that must be made with a grand gesture.” He pulled her on top of him. “Although it will be made as soon as possible. So we can be married and spend all our afternoons just like this.”

“That sounds lovely, doesn’t it?” Kate sighed. “Entwined like this forever.”

“Although, I’m surprised you’re not more concerned that I will give you warts.”

“What?” Kate froze then pursed her lips. “You remembered what I said about you when I was fourteen?” It was rather endearing that he recalled the first insult she’d hurled at him.

“Yes, I did.” Marcus sat up, bringing her up with him. “But I was also reminded of it in your list of ten things you hate about me.”

Kate’s stomach roiled as though she might cast up her accounts. “How?” Nathan couldn’t have shown it to him as he’d never seen it himself. “How could you have seen that list?”

“I found it in a desk drawer one day when I was trying to write a note to my sister.”

“And you still decided to court me?” Mortified, Kate could scarcely look at him. How dare he look at her private writing?

“My love,” he turned her head toward him and ran his thumb down her cheek, “that

list is one of the things that made me decide to court you. I took it as a challenge. If that was what you thought of me, then I must mend my ways where you were concerned.” Marcus pulled her close and placed a searing kiss on her lips. “That you are now here in my bed tells me I must’ve corrected some of my atrocious behaviors.”

“Wretch!” Kate grabbed a pillow and bopped him over the head with it. “You should’ve told me you’d read it.”

“What would’ve been the fun in that?” He grabbed the pillow and tossed it off the bed. “I’d much rather have it lead to more battles like this.” Before she could protest, he’d pulled her underneath him, the glint in his eyes telling her this battle would end in victory for them both. “Don’t you agree?”

His member demanded entrance again, and Kate willingly obliged him. She had to admit, this type of battle was much more satisfying than any of their others. “I do,” she said as he slid home. “As long as you assure me there will be no warts.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Kate paced from the cold fireplace to the bay window that overlooked the street in the front reception room. Carriages flashed to and fro in the bright sunlight on the busy street. She leaned forward, peering up and down, but Marcus's polished curricule was nowhere in sight. A shiver coursed through her, and she backed away from the window. It wouldn't do for him to see her looking for him. Instead, she padded over to the gilt-and-white chaise and slowly lowered herself onto it. She picked up her white kid gloves for the thousandth time, put them on then pulled them off. Waiting always made her fly to pieces, although she should've been used to waiting for him by now.

It had been two agonizing days since their glorious tryst at his townhouse. Two days in which she'd been able to do nothing but think about Marcus and long for his embrace once more. She wasn't certain why she'd not heard from him yesterday, but this morning, she'd received a note asking her to drive in the park with him this afternoon, making her blush. They'd not made it to the park on Saturday, being very much otherwise occupied, but now she could only believe once there she would receive his longed-for proposal. Of course, he'd all but said the words on Saturday, but today would make it official. She was going to marry Lord Haversham.

Her hands shook, and she rubbed them up and down her arms. The trembling continued until she vibrated like a stringed instrument when plucked. Why should she be so nervous? Perhaps because every time she allowed herself to remember the consummate pleasure Marcus had given her, she couldn't believe that utter happiness was just within her grasp. Certainly, he would propose today. And she would accept him, and they would be so very happy together.

How she could believe such a thing baffled her, given their colorful history, yet in her

heart she knew it to be true. Marcus filled her waking hours until she couldn't bear waiting to see him. As now.

A rap on the door sent her heartbeat pounding. She must remain calm. It wouldn't be seemly for him to know how much he affected her every time they met nor how she longed to see him each day. Except he probably did. After Saturday, he likely knew everything there was to know about her.

Kate straightened the skirts of her blue muslin gown, the one she'd worn to the park the day of their impromptu battle. The same color she'd been wearing the night she'd noticed him with anything but annoyance for the first time. Cornflower blue always became her. She hoped he thought so as well.

"Lord Haversham," Parker announced him, even as the tall, dark lord strode toward her.

"Miss Locke. How do you do?" He bowed then grasped her hand and kissed it, sending a white-hot streak of fire up her arm.

At his touch, all the memories of them together in his bed assailed her, so that she quite suddenly couldn't breathe. After a moment, she managed, "Well, my lord. I am well." She cleared her throat. "I trust you are also?" She must get hold of herself and stop this infernal trembling. Like a leaf fluttering on the breeze.

"Indeed, Miss Locke, I am in fine fettle and eager for our ride." He smiled, his eyes deepening to near black.

"Yes, yes, as am I." She shot up out of the chair, wobbling as dizziness overtook her.

"Be careful, my dear, I beg of you." Lord Haversham clutched her arm, steadying her even as he made her heart beat faster. "Shall we go?"



Kate nodded and pulled on her gloves, regretfully. She'd no longer be able to look forward to the touch of his skin on her hand.

Unless he kissed her. Or took her to his bed again.

She shivered and tried to breathe slowly. Clutching his arm, she allowed him to lead her from the room and out to his curricule, trying to put those thoughts out of her mind. Although once they were truly betrothed, well, they'd already anticipated their wedding night. What did it matter what they did now?

Marcus settled her into the curricule, took his place, and started the team. They quickly reached Hyde Park, as usual a bit earlier than the fashionable crowd.

"We have almost worn our own path through the park, we've been here so often these past weeks," she said, grasping her hands together as if seizing a lifeline.

"I believe you are correct, my dear." He chuckled. "So I don't think another time will do any more damage to the grass." He swung the team left, toward the tree that had become their favorite place to drive. Once he'd pulled them to a halt, Marcus jumped out and fastened the reins to a nearby bush.

"Where is your tiger?" Kate hadn't realized the young groom wasn't riding behind them.

"I thought today should be just us two." He took her hand and helped her to the ground then wound her arm through his and led her under the tall oak tree, the upper branches rustling in the gentle breeze.

Goodness, this truly was it. Kate glanced around, but this part of the park was entirely deserted. She turned her gaze on Marcus, who grinned at her, took her hand, then fell to one knee.

“Miss Locke.”

Heart racing, all Kate could do was stare straight at him. He was going to do it. He was going to propose. A thousand thoughts shot through her head, but not one could she snag to steady her.

“I think you have noticed my attentions recently have been most decidedly fixed on you.” Marcus squeezed her hand. “And if you have not noticed, I do not know where your mind has been.”

His quip seemed to have broken the spell. “Oh, I have noticed, my lord. Most particularly when we toured your house.”

“Good. So you have been paying attention.” His eyes twinkled at her. “And you have given me some hope that you are not inclined to reject me.”

“No.”

His eyebrows flew upward. “No?”

“I mean, yes.” What did she mean? Why did he have to phrase it in such a convoluted manner? That was so like Haversham. “I mean no, I am not inclined to reject your attentions.”

He smiled and squeezed her hand. “Then I beg of you, Miss Locke, put me out of my misery and make me the happiest man in the world by consenting to become my wife.”

“Oh.” Her breath came in a little squeaking gasp. He had proposed. Her nemesis, the Earl of Haversham, had proposed to her. Would the sky fall next?

He gazed back, his grin widening. “You can give me an answer at your earliest convenience, Miss Locke. Or if you prefer, I can guess.” He rose and slid his hand up to cup the back of her head, guiding her mouth closer to his. “Shall I see if the cat’s got your tongue?” he whispered, his lips hovering just above hers.

“Yes, please.” Kate lifted her lips to his, melting into him as he crushed her against his chest. The strong arms she remembered so well enfolded her, and she gave herself up oh-so-willingly to his caresses. If anyone drove by them now, they would be thoroughly scandalized.

He broke the kiss and smiled at her, making her stomach flip. That smile would make a saint beg to be a sinner. “Was that your answer?”

“What was the question?” She was either foxed or addlebrained.

“Will you marry me?”

“Oh. Yes.” Pinpricks of heat burst out all over her. Had anyone told her at the beginning of the Season she’d answer him so, she’d have sent them to Bedlam. Yet there was no other answer she wanted to give. She wanted to marry him more than anything else in the world, be with him always, feel the touch of his hand, his kiss, his body pressed against hers.

As though the sun had broken through a dense fog, his face glowed, his amiable grin stretching from one side of his face to the other. “Are you quite sure, Miss Locke?” The hope in his wide eyes smote her heart. “I would not wish it to be said I entrapped you in any way.”

“If anyone did the entrapping, it was me.”

“I will remember that confession, my love. Make no mistake about it.”

They stood embracing one another, Kate drinking in the feeling of being cherished by the man she adored.

“You must speak to my brother as soon as possible.” She leaned her head against his chest and sighed. “This is scandalously improper without his consent.”

“But I’ve had Ainsley’s approval from the beginning.” He nuzzled the nape of her neck, sending glorious shivers down her spine.

“You have? I mean, I know he has been in favor of the match ever since the night of Lady Hamilton’s ball. But he never said anything to me about you having a formal suit.” She stood back. Why hadn’t Nathan told her Marcus had asked to court her? He’d specifically denied it at Lady Hamilton’s. “When did you speak to him? He said absolutely nothing to me about a formal courtship.” Her shiver of delight turned cold.

“Uh, some time ago.” Marcus’s face had reddened suspiciously.

“When exactly?” Nathan should have come to her immediately with this news. Perhaps he hadn’t wanted to for fear she’d say no outright. He’d had her make that list, though. Had he actually been trying to soften her toward Haversham?

“The night of Lady Hamilton’s ball.” He sighed. “And the day after. We spoke of my suit then.”

“Why would you have asked to court me when you’d just been abominably rude to me?” She drew back further. What had happened that night that could have caused him to speak to her brother? Had he been jealous of her attentions to Lord Finley? No, he’d not seen them dancing. He’d gone to the card room with Nathan...

“A wager?” Her brother had said he wanted them to marry. Had he wagered with Lord Haversham for his suit? “Did Nathan bet you couldn’t woo me and get me to

agree to marry you?” She had to take a deep breath or she would faint.

“No, Kate, it wasn’t like that...exactly.” His gaze shifted back and forth over her face.

“Do not call me Kate. And do not lie to me.” She drew herself up, outrage thrumming through every inch of her.

“There was no wager over you, I swear it.” He grabbed his handkerchief and wiped his brow, giving her a quick glance that didn’t quite meet her eyes. “I lost almost every hand to your brother that night. I don’t know when my luck has ever been that bad. It was enough money that I would’ve been ruined financially had I paid the debt and ruined socially if I had not.” The sadness in his eyes froze her heart. “He offered to cancel the debt if I agreed to marry you.”

“What?” A whisper was all she could manage. How could her brother have done such a thing? Especially after she’d specifically told him she’d never, ever marry Lord Haversham. Yet she had just accepted him. Dear Lord. She’d anticipated their wedding night. The world around her seemed to waver into shades of gray. What had she done?

“I told him no, at first.” Haversham’s voice came to her from a great distance. “I didn’t think you’d even dance with me again, much less consent to marry me. I found, however, I had no choice. My finances were in shambles, so I told him I’d court you.” He looked her in the face, his brows furrowed, mouth set. “I didn’t believe for one second you’d see past your prejudice against me. You’ve never liked me from the first moment of our acquaintance.”

“No, Lord Haversham, I have not.” She clutched her Spencer around her, shivering with a coldness that radiated from her heart.

“And yet you just accepted my proposal.” He reached toward her, and she drew back so far she almost stumbled against the tree. He grabbed her arm.

“Don’t touch me!”

“You accepted me, Miss Locke.” He pulled her upright and released her. “I had hoped over the course of these last weeks you would put aside your dislike of me and see me for the man I am, not the hobgoblin a fourteen-year-old created in a fit of pique.”

“I do see you for who you are, Lord Haversham.” She spat out each word as though they had barbs. “A miserable fraud who would connive with my brother to save his own honor at the expense of mine.” How could he have done such a thing? Kate hardly knew which man to hate more.

She composed herself, straightening her shoulders until she stood tall as a lamp pole and twice as hard. “I must rescind my acceptance of your offer, Lord Haversham. I will not, under any circumstances, marry you. Please take me home.” Kate stalked toward the curricule, staring straight ahead, willing herself not to cry.

“Kate, you cannot refuse.” Haversham followed right behind her. “I compromised you—ruined you to the point you cannot marry anyone else.”

“I do not know what you mean, Lord Haversham.” She put her foot on the step, shaking off his hand when he tried to assist her. “You have done nothing to me to warrant such a claim.” She stared daggers into his astonished face. “And if you say such a thing to my brother, in an ill-advised attempt to force me to marry you, I will tell him you are lying, and he will be obliged to call you out.” She narrowed her eyes to slits. “And as you know, my brother is an excellent shot.”

Haversham paled, as well he might. No one with a grain of sense would wish to stare

down the barrel of Nathan's pistol.

"As you will, Miss Locke." He sighed deeply, climbed up beside her, and started the horses, who sped them out of the park.

Their silence weighed heavy, but not as heavy as her outraged heart.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Marcus sat in Ainsley's study, a glass of brandy clutched in his hand. He'd only stayed sober this morning so he could come and give his friend the unhappy news that he would not be marrying his sister after all.

Yesterday had been a nightmare. The ride home from the park had been a cold, silent affair. He'd retreated to strict formality with Miss Locke, made more difficult by the fresh memory of her warm body and eager response to him. Her passionate "yes" followed by that scathing "no" had driven him to kill a bottle of scotch last evening, so his head hurt abominably this morning. But less so than his heart. Best get this over with quickly and return home to another round of drink and pray for oblivion.

"Do you want me to speak to her?" Ainsley knocked back his shot and poured another.

Marcus refrained from mentioning it was scarcely eleven in the morning and held out his own glass.

"I wondered last night what had happened when she refused to go to Lady Ithorpe's masquerade. She'd been looking forward to it."

"No, don't say anything. I doubt she'll talk to either of us, and I don't want you to badger her." Why could he not have told her from the beginning? Or given up the idea once he'd become enamored of her? "She's within her rights to think herself ill-used. I fear I've hurt her deeply, for which I shall never forgive myself." Never, ever forgive himself for ruining her irreparably. "Please don't make it worse on her."

"You sound as though you care about her, Haversham." His friend contemplated him



keenly while pouring another shot. “I thought this was merely a bit of business. A means to an end.”

“Then you were mistaken, Ainsley.” Marcus stared at the green-leaf patterned carpet as though it might hold the answer to his problem. “I wanted to make her happy. I believed, after that first evening at Lady Carrolton’s, that she might come to care for me, and I for her.” The thing that twisted like a knife in his heart was that she had come to love him—and as quickly to hate him all over again. She should have no problem finishing her list now.

“You care for Kate?” His friend’s eyes were trained on his face.

“I love her, Ainsley.” If he could have kicked himself, his footprint would be indelibly printed on his own backside. He’d been so close to winning her, to happiness he’d not imagined. Now he’d lost it all.

Ainsley watched him keenly. “You needn’t worry about the debt of honor. Consider it paid, old chap.”

“Hah.” Marcus grunted and rose from the chair. That payment was the least of his worries now. “I’ll pay it all right.” He drew a sheaf of bills from his coat and tossed them on the desk. “I’ve had this for days. I never found a chance to give it to you, too busy enjoying the company of your sister.” He winced and shot a look at Ainsley, who stared at the pile of bills, eyes impossibly wide.

“Where the devil did this come from?” He picked up the money gingerly, staring at it as though he’d never seen currency before. “Is this King’s blood money?”

“No.” Marcus waved him away. “I broke it off with King when I thought I’d be marrying Kate...Miss Locke.”

“Then where?” He shuffled through the bills. “There’s three thousand pounds here. It certainly didn’t fall off a tree.” Ainsley began to stack the bills before him on the desk.

“It hardly matters any more. There it is. It’s yours. I’m done with it.” Marcus drained his glass and set it beside the growing piles of money, his heart aching. He’d lost what had most likely been his one chance at happiness. He’d realized over the course of these past weeks that Katherine Locke was the perfect woman for him. No matter that they’d once argued like Punch and Judy, at last he’d seen the passion, and compassion, in Kate he’d always missed before. Her spirit and most generous nature toward his sister kept drawing him more and more toward her, like a moth to the destructive beauty of the flame. The pain of knowing she would never be his bride now seared like a blade on a fresh wound. Knowing he’d have to live without her ate him alive.

Ainsley had arranged the bills neatly, crossing one stack over the other.

Of course, there was a way out of this hell if he would only take it. Temptation whispered in his ear a song as sweet as it was treacherous. He’d obviously not told his friend about what had transpired at his townhouse on Saturday. If Ainsley had the least inkling he’d ruined Kate—he hated that such a loving experience could be deemed ruination—he’d insist they marry no matter how much his sister might protest. Or call him out as Kate had predicted.

Marcus looked over at Ainsley, still tallying figures in his ledger. The words were there, on the tip of his tongue. If he survived his friend’s wrath, he might possibly be able to woo Kate, to make her love him once more. He cleared his throat.

Ainsley looked up from his accounting, a curious look on his face.

“I suppose I shall see you at Almack’s?” He was too much of a gentleman to trap her

into a marriage on the hope she might one day forgive him. He loved and respected her too much to submit her to such an existence. If worse came to worst, and she'd caught with his child, then he'd have to rethink that position.

Ainsley frowned. "You're still going about?"

"Letitia must be chaperoned." Marcus shrugged. "Aunt Alexandra has asked that I be present to help her put my sister forward. She is much better now that I took your sister's advice, but it is still not a task for a single person." It was also not a prospect he looked forward to. To attend these festive events and remember how his own hopes for happiness had been dashed would be agony.

"Are you still forbidding Lady Letitia the waltz?" His friend tried to smile, but the effort failed.

"I never forbade her." Marcus grasped the back of a red-leather office chair with a tufted back. "She begged me not to make her dance it. She said being that close to a stranger would be too embarrassing for her." He sank his fingers into the soft leather. "So I said I'd take the blame for her reluctance. That way no one could tease her about it. She could point to her ogre of a brother and be vindicated."

"Did you ever tell Kate that?" Ainsley stared at him as though he'd never seen him before.

"No, I never did." Marcus smiled, remembering their heated debates on the subject of his antiquated views on dancing. "I thought it might prove an incentive for her to try to change my mind about the waltz." He laughed mirthlessly. "You can tell her if you like. Or better still, tell her that her persuasions have borne fruit. If Letitia desires to waltz still, I have no objections." Marcus headed for the door, hoping to God Hobbs had laid in a good supply of brandy.

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“I came as soon as I received this.” Celinda waved a piece of paper at her then stared at her cousin in disbelief. “What are you doing?”

Kate looked up from the piles of clothing covering her bed to find Celinda holding the familiar piece of rumpled stationery, the lines on it wandering up and down, the words blotted and splotched where tears had fallen as Kate wrote. She sniffed and dropped a stack of freshly laundered nightgowns into her open trunk. “I’m packing. Could you not read the note? I didn’t think it that ill-written.”

“I could make it out fine. But that doesn’t answer the question of what you think you’re doing.” Celinda came over to the bed and stayed Kate’s hands as she picked up a white morning gown.

Kate shook her off and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. They simply would not stop tearing up this morning. She hated that she could be so weak about this utter disaster. “Clarke is indisposed this morning, so I am packing up my belongings and returning to Somerset.”

“In the middle of the Season? Why? For how long?” Celinda’s thoroughly shocked face stopped Kate as she picked up a yellow ball gown, already folded and ready for the trunk.

“For good.” After a long night of tossing, and turning, and tears, she’d risen with the dawn, determined to leave behind London and the whole wretched mess concerning the Earl of Haversham. Better to remain a spinster in the country than to have to listen to the sniggers and gossip of the ton about “poor Miss Locke who turned down her only chance at marriage. A marriage to pay off a wager is better than none at all.” What did they know? Solitude in her brother’s household was better than staying to such scorn and ridicule.

She dropped the yellow gown into the trunk and clenched her hands. How could she have been such a ninny? Never again would she risk her heart with a man who made her love him when he didn't love her.

"You are not serious." Celinda picked up the nightgowns and carried them back toward the open dressing room.

"Oh, yes, I am. Stop that, Celinda. Give those back to me." Kate tried to snatch the clothing out of Celinda's hands, but her cousin stepped nimbly away, holding the garments out of reach.

"Tell me what's happened. Your note said only to come and say goodbye, not why."

Kate swallowed back more tears. She didn't want to cry anymore. "Oh, Celinda, I've been such an awful fool."

Somehow, they were seated on the bed as she told Celinda everything about the courtship, the proposal, and the secret wager, though she could not bring herself to confess her gravest folly.

"Well, it wasn't actually a wager, it seems." Her cousin handed her another clean handkerchief from one of the piles they had pushed aside.

"It's just as bad," Kate wailed, mopping her face. "He agreed to marry me to pay off a debt. That's even worse. My brother practically sold me to him for three thousand pounds." She forced herself to calm her breathing. She didn't want to faint into the bargain. "I don't know which one of them I hate more."

"The problem is that you love both of them." Celinda sighed and tucked a foot underneath her. "You wouldn't be so distraught if you didn't."

“I...but... Don’t be ridiculous.” Kate slid off the bed, pacing to the window with angry strides. She hated Nathan for making that despicable offer and hated Marcus even more for agreeing to it. And for making her fall in love with him. Drat these tears. She hated them most for making her cry.

“I’m not being ridiculous, and you know it. Look at me and tell me you’re not in love with Lord Haversham.”

Kate whirled around to stare at her beautiful blond cousin, trying to decide if she didn’t hate her as well. She didn’t want to think about Marcus, much less talk about him. Yet she couldn’t stop herself. “Whether or not I love him is beside the point. He doesn’t love me.” Despite what he’d confessed in the throes of passion, he couldn’t truly love her if he’d agreed to marry her to pay off a debt. Her heart constricted until she could scarcely breathe each time she thought of it. “The only reason he courted me was for the wretched money.”

“Hmmm.” Celinda jumped to the floor, grabbed Kate’s hand, and led her back to the bed. “I suspect that may indeed have been the original reason for his wooing you, but to be fair, Lord Haversham is not the first nobleman to need to marry for money. His method of doing so may have been unorthodox, but there is no shame in the motive itself. However, I also suspect his reasons changed over the course of the courtship.”

“How could you think that?” Kate blew her nose, unwilling to entertain such a seductive notion.

“Because of what transpired this past Friday night.” Celinda nodded, a triumphant smile on her face.

“Last Friday night?” Kate peered at her, baffled. She couldn’t even remember where she’d gone that evening amidst the past weeks’ whirl of activities.

“I was at Mrs. Doyle’s for supper and cards.” Celinda cocked her head, excitement in her eyes.

“Nathan and I attended a political dinner that night instead.” Kate frowned. “What difference would that make?”

“I met Lord Finley there as well.”

“I’m sure that was to your good fortune, rather than mine.” Kate’s frown deepened. What the devil was her cousin getting at?

“You may think differently in a moment. After supper, I was detained by our hostess then couldn’t find Lord Finley until almost the end of the party.” Celinda’s brows dipped briefly. “That was most annoying as I wanted his company particularly that evening. Papa is being difficult again about the man I wish to marry.” She gave herself a little shake and smiled at Kate. “Anyway, when I finally found him again, he apologized most abjectly and told me he’d been caught up in a very spirited game of Bezique with Lord Haversham.”

Kate sniffed. “I’m sure that’s no concern of mine.”

“Oh, but it is, my dear.” Celinda drew closer to her. “Lord Finley said he’d have to be careful when playing with Lord Haversham in the future, for the man was uncannily good at the game and had trounced him soundly.”

Kate swallowed, trying to moisten her suddenly dry mouth. “Did he say how much he’d lost?”

“Not to me, no, but the very next day, Lord Carmichael, who’s in the same club as Lord Finley, told Lady Carmichael, who told Lady Margery Scopes, who told Mrs. Hatcherd, who my maid Cutter overheard tell my mother that Lord Finley had lost

five thousand pounds and paid it without blinking an eye.” Celinda’s triumphant voice rang in Kate’s ears. “I am so happy that Mamma heard this because now she can confirm what I’ve told her about Lord Finley’s assets, and she can tell Papa. A man who can lose that much without flinching must be well set up financially. Papa must see that in a favorable light.” Her cousin finished her recitation and beamed at Kate.

“You’re sure it was five thousand pounds Lord Finley lost?” Kate’s hands had grown damp, and she wiped them on her skirt, heedless of the stain. If this was true, Marcus had gained a fortune the day before they’d made love. At that moment, he hadn’t needed to marry her to pay his debt to Nathan. And if he hadn’t planned to marry her, he wouldn’t have allowed that tryst to happen. She might believe many horrible things about him, but she would swear on her life he was an honorable gentleman above all.

“I suspect Lord Haversham may have begun courting you with an eye to cancelling the debt but fell in love along the way.” Celinda’s cornflower blue eyes twinkled. “Why would he propose to a woman he loathed if there was no need?”

Could that be true? A flicker of hope began to thaw the icy ring surrounding her heart. If Marcus had no feelings for her at all, wouldn’t he have simply paid Nathan as soon as he received the funds? She glanced at Celinda. “There was another reason for his proposal.”

Her cousin cocked her head. “What reason?”

“The ultimate reason a gentleman would need to marry a lady.” Kate blushed to the roots of her hair.

Celinda’s eyes grew big and round and her jaw dropped open. “Kate, you didn’t!”



Nodding, Kate sat on the bed. "Saturday afternoon, we were supposed to go to the park, where I thought he was going to propose. But we ended up at his house instead and..."

"Did he seduce you?" Celinda whispered, even though they were quite alone.

"I suppose I seduced him." How she'd been so bold she had no idea. Except she'd wanted Marcus so very badly.

"Was it awful?"

"It was the most wonderful thing, Celinda." Without a doubt, she'd never wish to experience it with any other man. "You must marry Lord Finley as quick as you can."

"Well, you didn't wait for marriage." Her cousin gave her a stern look.

"And I would not recommend doing what I did." Even though she wasn't sorry. Especially if Marcus truly loved her. "He wouldn't have allowed us to...do that if he didn't really wish to marry me. Do you think? He already the dubs to get him out of the River Tick." She wanted to believe it with all her heart.

"Lord Haversham is an honorable gentleman. I'd wager my best hat on that." Celinda laughed gleefully. "And you know how fond I am of my hats. I believe you are going to be very happy together."

"Somehow I doubt that." Kate frowned, not yet convinced. Marcus still had much to answer for. "He made an agreement with my brother to woo me without consulting me whatsoever. How would you like that?"

Her cousin shrugged. "I suppose if I loved the man, I wouldn't mind so much."

“Well, I mind very much.” She slid off the bed and began to pace, seeking distraction from the ache in her heart.

“Do you truly want to throw away your happiness, cousin, because the man made a mistake?” Celinda followed her and grabbed her arm. “Do you love him?”

Miserably, Kate met her eyes. “I’ve been trying to convince myself all night that I don’t.” With a sob, she threw herself into Celinda’s arms. “But I do.”

“Then forgive him and be happy.”

Kate stared at her cousin, thinking hard. Could she forgive him for his deception? If he loved her—and in her heart, she knew it to be true—she would be a fool not to. Who would fling their happiness away with both hands? Did she love him enough to swallow her pride, go to Marcus and say, “I understand, and I forgive you?” That would be easy enough if she just let go of her anger...

“But what if he will not forgive me ?” A horrible sinking feeling filled her with dread. “I refused him, Celinda.” Memory of that refusal, of her hurtful words, turned the blood in her veins to ice. “I said truly awful things to him.” She bit her lip. “What should I do? Tell Nathan? Or write to Marcus? Ask if he will see me?”

“Oh, I don’t think you need bother with that. He’s here right now.”

“What?” Her head spun.

“I saw his curricule out front when I arrived.”

Kate’s heart pounded in her chest. Dared she go down and face him? “What if he doesn’t want me anymore?”

“Do you still want him?” Celinda leaned toward her, hanging on her every word.

“Yes, yes, I do.” Kate trembled, tears gathering in her eyes once more. Could happiness be so close and yet lost to her? “I thought so even before he kissed me at Vauxhall. But after we were intimate—”

Celinda clutched her arm, a sudden gleam in her eye. “He kissed you at Vauxhall?”

\* \* \* \*

“So, will I see you this evening?” Ainsley came from behind his desk, glass still in hand.

“You shall.” Marcus bit his lip but asked anyway. “Will your sister...?”

“I highly doubt it.” Ainsley glanced into his glass and grimaced. “She’s not spoken to me since yesterday, but her maid Clarke informed me first thing this morning that Kate had requested her trunks be brought to her rooms. I believe she’s preparing to take her maid and retire to my estate in—”

“Is he in here?”

The muffled sounds of a woman’s raised voice penetrated the oak door a moment before it burst open, and Kate Locke strode in. Her auburn hair lit up like a flame in the afternoon sunlight and her eyes gleamed when they fell on him.

Marcus staggered back, his heart in his throat.

“Kate! What the devil is the meaning of this outburst?” Ainsley scowled, going toward his sister as though to ward her off.

Marcus sighed, drinking in the sight of her, savoring each moment that might be his last for a very long time.

“Aha. He is here, Celinda.”

On Kate’s heels came Lady Celinda Grantham. She fixed her stare on him as well but gave him a wink. What the deuce did that mean? What was going on now?

Kate stretched out her arm, pointed her finger at him, and in a voice dramatic enough to rival Sarah Siddon’s Lady Macbeth announced, “Nathan, I demand that you make Lord Haversham marry me.”

Marcus blinked, looking from Kate, whose eyes blazed, to her brother, whose mouth hung open.

“What?” Ainsley finally managed. He kept his attention on his sister, though he glanced at Marcus, eyebrows raised. “What the deuce is going on, Kate?”

“I said you must make Lord Haversham marry me.”

“I must? But why?”

Kate arched her neck and lifted her chin. “Because he kissed me—in front of witnesses.”

“He did what?” Ainsley turned the color of new cheese.

Marcus gripped the back of the nearest chair. He’d hoped to keep those kisses—and everything else—a secret so Kate wouldn’t be obligated to a man she detested. So why was she literally shouting about it and demanding he marry her? Could she have had a change of mind? Or was this some wild ploy to disgrace him once again? Best

err on the side of caution. “I believe Miss Locke is mistaken.”

“No, she is not.” Lady Celinda stepped forward, a smile still playing over her lips. “A woman knows when she’s been kissed, my lord, unless the man is very inept, which I would wager you are not. Not based on what I saw at Vauxhall.”

“You saw us?” Dear God. How could Lady Celinda have been able to see anything on that dark path? She’d been with his sister at the fireworks.

“So you did kiss her?” Ainsley rounded on him, anger darkening his face.

“Well, yes, I did, but I thought at the time I was marrying her.” Marcus ran a hand over his face. The morning had taken on a nightmarish quality.

“You are absolutely correct about that, Haversham. If there were witnesses to your depraved behavior, you will be saying ‘I do’ immediately after the third set of banns is read.” Ainsley had puffed his chest out, the very picture of the vengeful brother.

“Just a moment, Ainsley.” He couldn’t let this go so easily. “I think I should be able to speak on behalf of Miss Locke and myself.” He turned to Kate.

She stared at him, her wide blue eyes pleading. Almost imperceptibly, she shook her head and mouthed, “Forgive me.”

Marcus’s head reeled. Abruptly, he strode forward, grasped her head in his hands and sank his mouth onto hers. The warmth of her lips spread through him, from mouth to chest and then lower, the most welcome, satisfying sensation he’d ever known. He could do nothing save stand there and devour her. Let the world go hang.

“Humph.” Ainsley gruffly cleared his throat.

Marcus finally broke the kiss, his heart thrumming with contentment when Kate laid her head on his chest. He raised an eyebrow and met Ainsley's eyes over her bright head. "That was for insurance."

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

Marcus stood next to Kate, his chest bursting with pride that he'd managed to marry the most beautiful and loving wife in the world. Their wedding had gone off perfectly this morning and, finally, the wedding breakfast was winding down. They need only wait for their guests to leave, and they could be alone at last.

Now, they chatted with friends and neighbors as the orchestra finished a set of quadrilles, and Marcus awaited a particular piece of music he'd requested.

"Are we to be wallflowers today, my love?" Kate glanced up at him, a saucy glint in her eyes.

"I would never deprive you of the pleasure of a dance, my dear." He smiled down at her. "I am, however, waiting for one particular—"

The strains of a waltz broke through the murmurs of the guests.

"If I may have the honor of this next dance, Lady Haversham, my happiness for this day will be complete." His smile broadened as her mouth pursed for a rebuttal. God, he would love living with her each and every day.

"Perhaps I can think of something else that will complete your happiness later, my lord." Kate narrowed her eyes, and his pulse pounded.

He'd bet she'd make good on that promise.

"Marcus." Letitia approached them, her face wreathed in smiles, a young man at her side. "You know Bertie, of course.

“How do you do, Symmons.” He bowed to the gangly young man and glared at Kate, who seemed to be stricken with a coughing fit.

“Hello, Bertie,” Kate croaked out.

“Bertie’s asked me for this next dance, Marcus.” Letitia beamed, and Marcus caught his breath.

“But it is a waltz, my dear.”

“Oh, I know.” Letitia shifted from one foot to the other. “But I think I would like to attempt it with Bertie.”

Kate’s gasp made him bite his cheek to keep from laughing. Then she clamped down on his hand, and he couldn’t restrain a chuckle.

“Well, my dear, perhaps you should try it at least this once.” Marcus smiled at his sister, who raised on tiptoe to kiss his cheek then accompanied her partner to the dance floor.

Marcus turned to Kate, his grin spreading at her absolute astonishment. “Shall we dance as well, my love?”

“You allowed her to dance a waltz.” Her face glowed with happiness. “I think I must make a new list, my dear. Ten Things I Love about the Earl .”

“You have worked wonders on me, my dear.” He brushed his lips across hers then led her to the dance floor. He must tell her the truth about Letitia and the waltz one day.

Or perhaps not.



THE END

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:04 am*

An excerpt from Book 3 of the Matchmaker's Ball

Unmask Me, My Love

London

May 1820

Jonathan George Horatio Arturus Black, Marquess of Halford—Hal to his friends—sat in his shirtsleeves, cross-legged on the hard floor of the tiny balcony overlooking Lady Hamilton's ballroom, hand on his chin, gaze resting on the twirling dancers below. He yawned and shook his head, trying to stave off drowsiness. The dancing, the parties, the whole damn Season—which had only just begun—bored him to distraction.

The couples, engaged in a quadrille, flowed back and forth as they met, balanced, circled, and leaped about. All well and good to engage in a spritely dance when one had hopes of a particular young lady. Torture when one had none. He'd looked over this year's crop of damsels, freshly out in Society, and wouldn't have given a farthing for the lot of them, much less made an offer to one. So, of course, this would be the year Father got a bee in his bonnet about him marrying. Didn't he realize eight-and-twenty was the prime age for bachelorhood?

The orchestra paused to change sets. Hal leaned forward, scrutinizing the brightly bedecked figures once more, hoping for a new face in the inevitable crowd. Not one.

Sighing, he shifted his head from his left hand to his right.

“Oh.”

The breathy voice made him whirl around. A lovely woman in a fetching white gown stared at him, her brows knitted in a delightful frown.

“Halford, what are you doing up here?” Lady Celinda Grantham, a distant relation of his mother’s family, came toward him, her displeasure transforming into a sweet smile. She shook her head, setting her golden ringlets bouncing.

“Hiding. What about you?” He turned completely around to address her. Celinda had always been a favorite “cousin” of his. She could be exceptionally odd at times, which probably explained the attraction. Like would seek like.

“Oh, I didn’t particularly want to dance this set,” she said, gesturing over the balcony rail. “But neither did I wish to endure the company of Bertie Symmons the entire time.” She wrinkled her nose. “I had thought to matchmake him with my cousin, Kate, but she’d probably have my guts for garters.”

He cocked his head. “Do I know her?”

“I don’t know. She’s Miss Locke, Lord Ainsley’s sister.”

“Hmmm.” He had met her two seasons ago and dismissed her as too strong a personality to deal with. Perhaps, given his father’s decree, he should reconsider. “I could meet your cousin instead. Do you think she would fancy me?” From what he remembered of her, he wouldn’t be bored.

“Huh. She’d have your guts for garters and wear them to the next ball.” Celinda laughed and moved closer to the railing, peering down at the ballroom floor. She scanned the room quickly then her attention seemed to focus on one particular set of dancers.

“Who are you watching?” Hal rose to stand beside her. Who was causing that bright pink blush on her cheeks, like a garden in bloom?

“Kate. She’s dancing with Lord Finley, who’s just now returned from America.” Her cheeks deepened to rose. She flipped open her fan and plied it so vigorously her curls flew back from her face. “It is much hotter up here than I expected.”

“Indeed.” He gazed at her, seeing her truly for the first time in years. She’d changed since her come-out a year ago. Golden curls, flawless creamy skin, a lively personality, and very kissable coral lips. Why had he never considered her as a candidate for his marchioness? Had the answer to his dilemma been under his nose all along?

“Is that why you’re in shirtsleeves?” The color in her cheeks subsided a trifle. “Really, Halford, you are a scandal. You’ll be in such trouble if Lady Hamilton finds you thus—or anyone else other than me, for that matter. Put your jacket on, please.”

“It doesn’t fit.” He sighed. Unfortunate, but so true.

“That seems a matter to take up with your valet, or your tailor.” She turned once again to stare at the dancers below.

“Perhaps it is better said that I don’t fit it, Celinda.”

“What do you mean?” She regarded him with a puzzled smile.

“This.” He waved his hand at the glittering ballroom. “I’m tired of living by the ton’s rules, dictating what I can and cannot do. Why can I not sit in my shirtsleeves without creating a scandal? It’s as if the walls close round me each time I set foot in a ballroom. Neither am I comfortable with all the dancing and flirting—”

“Even though you do it extremely well, from what I’ve observed.” She batted her fan

at his arm, her eyelids closing to mere slits, like a cat waiting at a mouse's hole.

"As do you, my lady." He took her hand, so petite in his large one, and gazed into her angelic face. "I wonder if you can save me from another season of balls and parties and the eternal flirting and courting of ladies I have no interest in." A gentle squeeze of her soft skin set his pulse snapping. "I need a sweet, beautiful, intelligent woman like you, cousin, to help me find my way."

"What are you talking about?" She pulled her hand from his, her blue eyes wide and wary. "You are up to something, Halford, as usual. Remember, I have known you since I was in leading strings." She stepped back, fan raised to ward him off.

He laughed. Celinda had never been one to fall for a handsome face or flattering line. "My father has decreed that his heir must produce an heir before he cocks up his toes." Hal backed away from the railing. One never knew how far a voice might travel.

She followed him, still holding the fan en garde . After a fleeting glance at the dancing couples, she turned her attention to him. "Is he ill?"

"Not that he's said. He certainly looks robust enough to achieve his century." Hal wouldn't mind that. His father had always done well by him, and he'd grown rather fond of having him around, except for his latest lunacy. "I suspect it is either a strange whim, born of some chance article in the Times , or else his cronies at his club have been talking about their heirs having been leg-shackled and setting up their nurseries." He shuddered. Marriage might be palatable, but offspring while he was still in his prime didn't sit well at all.

"Can you not simply tell him you haven't found the right woman?" Celinda's sympathetic tone encouraged him.

"Unfortunately, no. He's like a horse with the bit in his teeth. I've been given the

ultimatum of finding a bride by the end of the Season, or he will arrange a marriage for me.” To even speak the words made his blood run cold. His father was the last person on earth he wanted choosing his wife.

“And you want to marry me?”

He wasn’t sure how to take the strained incredulity in her voice. “I think we would suit better than most couples. We’ve known each other all our lives, as you pointed out. Our families would quite likely declare a national holiday. Or try to.”

She giggled at that. So much the better.

“We do get on well. You have to agree. And you take my eccentricities in your stride.” He gestured to his shirt and smiled. “That alone makes me want to marry you.”

She averted her eyes, her mouth puckering.

Was she about to laugh or cry? He leaned toward her and grasped her hand, determined to press his suit. “Lady Celinda, will you do me the very great honor of becoming my wife?”

After one stricken, blue-eyed glance, she burst out laughing. She turned away, and her white-clad shoulders trembled as she got herself under control.

Not the response he’d hoped for, certainly, but he wouldn’t let it dampen his spirits. It had been a spur of the moment gamble and would’ve been a convenient answer to a worrisome problem. He hoped the music masked Celinda’s hysterics. It wouldn’t do for them to be discovered thus, especially as she’d now rejected him.

“Halford, I’m sorry.” She faced him, biting her bottom lip. Her eyes, bright with tears of laughter, also held a trace of sadness. “Truly I am.”

“It’s quite all right,” he said, assuming an injured air. Let her feel guilty, for a moment, at least. “I’m used to ladies laughing in my face when I propose.” Actually, he’d never proposed to anyone before, but she couldn’t know that.

“Can you forgive me?” She laid her hand on his arm and drew him to a bench set against the balcony wall. “I simply did not expect such a declaration from you, of all people.”

“Well, I trust you do not respond so to every man who asks for your hand.” He tried to look sternly at her, but it kept wanting to turn into a lopsided grin. Apparently, he couldn’t be harsh to Celinda.

“As you have the distinction of being the first man ever to do so, I have to answer yes.” She smiled and squeezed his arm. “Halford,” she said as they sat, moving a little away from him and withdrawing her hand. “I am not unaware of the great honor you’ve done me by asking me to be your wife. And I hold you in the highest regard. You are handsome, witty, kind. Everything a woman would want in a husband. However, I need to have a passionate regard for the gentleman I choose to spend my life with, not merely friendship.”

“That is the fashion, I understand.” Several of his friends who’d married recently had expressed the same sentiment about their wives. “Could passion not grow between us? You are a devilishly attractive woman, Celinda.” He gave her his most charming smile and snared her fingers. “You might grow fond of me, and I’m sure I could grow quite fond of you.” He lifted her hand and placed an ardent kiss upon it.

“I am certain you would, Lord Halford.” She snatched her hand back and rose so abruptly he had to grab the bench to keep from sprawling across it. “I, however, want to know that passion exists before I say yes.” She paced the small balcony in short, sharp strides. “I want to love a man so desperately I’d do anything to be able to marry him.” Her eyes flashed darkly, and the bright spots of color rose in her cheeks once more.

Hal sighed. Tempting as this avenue to marriage had seemed, it appeared a dead end. “Have you found this great passion then?”

She stopped and cut her eyes toward the railing. “Perhaps.” A shake of her head, and she resumed her pacing. “I’m not quite sure. I’ve thought so before and been disappointed. This time, however, I intend to brook no interference from Papa.”

“Parents have that annoying habit, don’t they? I wonder if it is part of their sworn duties?” His father seemed to think so.

She grasped his arm, her smile warm again. “I’m sure I will never so impede my children’s happiness.” Her hand was firm and comforting. “I am truly honored, Halford, that you would make me your marchioness.”

He grinned at her and patted her hand. “Call me Hal. My friends do. And since you’ve turned me down, we’re at least that.” He inclined his head. One last little temptation. “You’d be my duchess in due time as well, don’t forget.”

She nodded. “I know. I somehow think I would not be the best duchess.”

“You will be the best at whatever you choose to be, cousin.” He meant that. Celinda was one of the dearest women of his acquaintance. She would be brilliant no matter if she married a cook or king.

“You are quite the sweetest man.” She darted forward and brushed a kiss across his cheek. “A true Roi Charmant . I cannot wait for you to find your princess.”

“You mean duchess, don’t you?” Either way—princess or duchess—she was right that life with a woman for whom he’d do something desperate would be more than exciting. Like the fairy-tale endings.

“I mean, I want you to find your own true love.” Celinda stilled, her head cocked



toward the balcony. “The music has stopped. I must go down.”

To find her own true love, he’d wager. “Yes, your cousin will be looking for you.”

“Kate?” She frowned, the name seeming a puzzle to her, then her eyebrows rose. “Yes, yes, Kate will want to tell me all about Lord Finley’s dance.” The feverish color had returned to her face. Blushes certainly became Lady Celinda.

“And I suspect you will want to hear every last detail, my lady.” He rose and kissed her hand again, not with passion but a great deal of affection. “Go find your prince, Celinda.”

With a fleeting squeeze of his hand and a flash of a smile, she ran through the doorway.

Hal smiled, moved back to his spot in front of the balcony rail, and settled on the floor once more. Best steel himself to go down and do his duty by all the young ladies. When had his life become so filled with obligation?

“Ah.”

Hal shook his head. “What have you forgott—” He twisted his head toward the doorway and froze.

The young lady who stood before him was definitely not Lady Celinda Grantham. Medium height, with golden brown hair, a face fresh as cream, and perfectly bowed lips, she would’ve been exceptional even without the startling glass-green eyes. Attired in an unremarkable brown dress, she could not be one of Lady Hamilton’s guests, although, with her beauty, she certainly should’ve been.

“Oh, pardonnez-moi , monsieur .”

What was this woman doing here?

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