



# A Bride for the Wicked Duke

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "One month, Aurelia. That's how long you'll learn what it means to be desired—and to obey."

Aurelia needs a husband. Not for love—but to pay off her family's debts before it's too late. Even if that means making a deal with the devil...

The perfect duke by day and a gaming hell owner by night, Gerald always gets what he wants. So when a bold minx demands his help, Gerald makes it clear: he owns her now.

In a month, Aurelia must learn to tempt, tease, and win a suitor. But the more Gerald teaches her, the more he wants her for himself. And claiming what he's owed might ruin them both.

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then A Bride for the Wicked Duke is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 81

## ChapterOne

"My brother will kill me if he finds out what we have planned for later tonight," Lady Rosalind Emerton said, already showing signs of panic that threatened to give the game away long before it even began.

"Do not worry about your brother," Lady Aurelia Hawkins assured her. "If everything goes as I suspect it too, he will never find out."

"But what if he does?" Rosalind continued, her voice rising. "I have never done anything like this before. And for good reason!"

"Will you keep it down," Aurelia hissed, widening her eyes in warning at her best friend. She loved Rosalind like a sister, but sometimes the woman could frustrate her to no end. "For now, there is no reason to worry. But if you speak any louder, I dare say the king himself will be able to hear you."

Rosalind bit into her lip, her brow furrowed tightly. No indication at all that she intended to soften her tone or relax. "I am sorry, Aurelia. Truly, I am. And I know that I am not helping the matter. I just think there must be another way. I mean, to sneak into London on our own and --"

"Rosalind!" Aurelia cried, this time far louder than she intended. That had her grimacing, for she did not wish to draw any attention to herself or her friend. That simply would not do. She lowered her voice and took Rosalind by the hand. "All I ask is that you trust me. Can you do that?"

“I... I do,” she said, not sounding as if she meant it. “Only --”

“No, no,” Aurelia cut over her. “We are through discussing this. Later, once we are alone, you may voice your concerns. For now, please keep them to yourself, lest we are found out.”

“Later?” Rosalind whined. “But... but... but later will be too late. By then we will be on our way, by which point there will be no chance of us changing our minds.”

To that, Aurelia grinned wickedly. “Exactly.”

Rosalind was still looking panicked, but she tried to mask it by snacking on some sweet meats which lined the trays of food on the table where the two girls were hovering. It was a buffet of treats and delicious snacks, a bevy of temptation which ordinarily Aurelia would have happily succumbed to. She was always partial to a snack, after all.

Not right now. Rosalind’s last-minute objections likely went unnoticed, but just in case her exasperated cries carried further than intended...

Acting as casually as she could, Aurelia sipped at the glass of wine which she was carrying, casting her gaze across the ball room in search of the one person whom she was desperate to have not been noticed or heard by. The Tyrant of Grayhill Manor, she whose entire life seemed dedicated to bringing upon Aurelia woe and misery and torment unlike any other. Her mother, of course.

Aurelia laughed softly at the parable, aware that these things she said of her mother were not reflective of her true feelings toward the woman, merely an exaggeration, often made necessary because despite the bonds of love which joined them, they both had a unique tendency to be at one another’s throats more often than not. Such was the state of their mother-daughter relationship.

Thankfully, she found her mother within seconds, sighing with relief to see that she was currently occupied with Aurelia's younger sister, Eveline. Having just turned eighteen, Eveline was a debutant this Season, this here was her first outing, and their mother was dedicating every fragment of her energy to ensuring that her rowdy, often troublesome daughter made a good impression. Good luck with that...

Was it not for her need to speak with Rosalind about what they intended later this evening, Aurelia might have skipped coming here tonight entirely. And that wasn't to say she did not enjoy balls and galas, rather that she had no interest in using them for their intended purpose: to meet a lord who might court and then one day marry her. No thank you very much.

Indeed, had she been so inclined, there was a vast selection of would-be suitors parading about the ball room in a manner that spoke loudly to their intentions. Dressed in smart suits. Chins pointed in the air. Chests puffed out. Aurelia rolled her eyes as she watched one rather stocky lord whom she did not know approach a lady in a yellow gown, taking her hand and kissing it, saying something which had the lady giggling and slapping playfully at his chest. It was all just so fake, she felt. Choreographed and theatrical. But then again, wasn't all romance this way? In Aurelia's brief experience, it was.

"Oh, no..." From beside her, Aurelia heard her friend gasp in fright.

"What?" Aurelia whipped her head about to find Rosalind's face paling and chin wobbling. "Rosalind? What is wrong."

"My brother," Rosalind said. "He is... he is... he is coming this way."

"Your brother?" Aurelia turned to see where Rosalind was looking, caught sight immediately of her brother coming their way, and felt her stomach drop because she sensed the inherent danger that his presence might bring. "Oh..."

His Grace, the Duke of Sutherford was a man who Aurelia knew reasonably well, having been friends with his sister for most of her life. He was a tall, dashing specimen with a thick head of brown hair that clashed brilliantly with his sharp blue eyes, and square features that made him look as if he had been carved from stone.

Not that she ever cared much for these shallow desires, and his being Rosalind's older brother meant that she had little to do with him growing up. What she did know... well, it was enough to convince her from a young age not to waste her time on the man.

He was simply too perfect. A true gentleman, he was liked by all and admired by everyone. She had never heard a bad word said about him. She had never heard even a whisper of negativity or a question concerning his most perfect reputation. This, Aurelia had always thought, to be rather suspicious, as nobody was without a darker side, which meant that he could not be trusted. Better that she have nothing to do with him at all.

"What if he finds out," Rosalind said nervously. "What if he --"

"He will not," Aurelia assured her as she watched His Grace come for them. He walked with a confident stride and a knowing smirk, the journey toward them taking longer than it should have as nearly everyone whom he passed wished to shake his hand and make their greetings. And the duke, ever willing to please and acknowledge, was only too happy to return the greetings. "Just act normal, Rosalind. And say nothing."

Rosalind had a half-finished sweet meat in her hand, but she seemed to have forgotten it. "I will do my best."

"I suppose that will have to --"

“Good evening, ladies,” the duke said as he reached them, stopping only a few feet away. “I thought it was you two who I spied hiding back here.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“Gerald,” Rosalind said with a forced smile that looked suspicious. “I was just coming to find you.”

“Is that so?”

“Y -- yes,” she stammered. “But I bumped into Aurelia on the way, and you know how she is. She could talk the ear off a dead horse.”

“Guilty,” Aurelia said, offering a smile for the duke. “Your Grace, wonderful to see you again, as always.”

“Lady Hawkins.” He gave a short nod to Aurelia before fixing his gaze back on his sister. “Rosalind, what have I told you about eating sweets? It is perfectly acceptable on occasion, but in public like this? A lady should exercise more self-control than that.”

Despite herself, Aurelia snorted at the comment. She did not mean to, but she found the chastisement a little uncalled for, even hypocritical, for she had seen many a lord tonight stuffing their faces with the same treats, caring not for so-called social decorum.

“Something funny?” the duke asked her.

“Oh...” Aurelia balked, wishing to offer a sharp response, but knowing that she should not. Now is not the time to be combative, nor is it the time to draw attention from His Grace. “I am sorry, Your Grace, I simply had something stuck in my throat.”

“Quite,” the duke said, a look on his face which suggested he did not believe her. “Now, Rosalind, I hate to pry you from your friend, but I was hoping you might join me. There are some friends of mine I wish for you to meet.”

“I...” Rosalind looked helplessly at Aurelia. “Must it be now? Perhaps later, I will come find you. I promise that I will.”

The duke gave no reaction. “Yes, Rosalind, it must be now.”

In their world, meeting friends meant that the duke wished to introduce her to possible suitors, men whom he deemed worthy of his sister’s hand. And where this was a common enough practice, Rosalind had told Aurelia of the men who she had so far been introduced to, none of which her best friend had any interest in. That was mostly because they were all a little too similar to her brother.

It was times like this where Aurelia felt grateful that her mother had given up on Aurelia’s potential of finding a suitor worthy of their family name, having since pivoted to Eveline. It meant that she felt no pressure to wed, which meant that she likely never would, as she had no love of the concept. With my upbringing, how could I possibly.

However, seeing her friend caught in position such as this was frustrating to say the least. Rosalind was not a particular rebellious creature – their planned adventure tonight a rare instance of her attempting to break from character – and she was well and truly controlled by her brother, the duke. Although Aurelia had no doubt that he cared for her and only wanted what was best, his perception of what was best aligned in no way with Rosalind’s.

Aurelia should have just kept her mouth shut. The last thing she wanted was to draw attention to herself and risk the duke prying further. But her friend was in need, Aurelia had always had a big mouth and a sharp tongue, and the wine she’d spent the



night drinking was starting to have its effects...

“Perhaps I will join you,” Aurelia said. “If you do not mind, Your Grace.”

The duke frowned at Aurelia with obvious confusion. “Excuse me?”

“These friends of yours,” she continued simply. “If they are as wonderful as I am sure they are, I might be pleased to meet them. As they will be me, I am certain. My mother is always saying I need to make myself more available, and I can’t imagine a better chance than this.”

Clearly, the duke did not agree. “I... I do not think that is such a good idea.”

“Oh?” She fluttered her eyelashes. “Why ever not? Is something wrong with me?”

Aurelia was aware that the duke was not a huge fan of hers. With how proper he was, and with how combative she was known to be, their personalities were fire and water such that she doubted he wanted her anywhere near his friends. If for no other reason than it would reflect poorly on his sister.

“Of course not,” the duke said with a forced smile. “But I have been telling them of my sister, and they are not expecting me to bring a friend.”

“I am sure they will not mind,” she pressed, unable to hide her smirk for she could see how put out it was making the duke. “Two for one, as I see it. They should be so lucky.”

“That is not...” The duke considered, remaining calm and poised as he so often was, even if she sensed his frustration. “Perhaps another time, Lady Hawkins. Now, I would much prefer if it was just Rosalind.”

“And you would just leave me here on my own,” she shot back. “Surely, a gentleman such as yourself would never dream of doing such a thing.”

She could see the side of his lip twitching with vexation. I knew it! For how desperate he is to appear proper and rational, he has a temper like any other man. A dark side. “Perhaps your mother or sisters...” He looked about for them. “I will happily walk you to find them, if it pleases you.”

“It would please me to remain with my friend,” she said. “And perhaps meet some gentleman while I am at it.” She reached out and rested a hand on his arm, feeling him tense under her touch. “My best friend, as it is. I am sure your friends would love to meet she who is like a sister to Rosalind, for that would only reflect well on her. No?”

He eyes her hand around his arm, his lips pressed firmly together. “Another time.”

“Why not this time?”

“Truthfully...” The duke’s calm facade dropped and behind his piercing blue eyes she saw a hint of the duke’s other, more hidden side. “I do not think my friends would appreciate meeting you.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“Why would they --”

“If not for the smell of wine on your breath, Lady Hawkins, the dusting of sugar on your lips.” He cocked an eyebrow at her. “They are proper gentleman, these friends of mine, and where I am sure that some men find your particular brand of uniqueness charming, I can assure you they are not of that same mind. Is that clear?”

Aurelia’s face dropped. Despite herself, she raised her hand to her mouth, breathing on her hand to smell her breath, which indeed had a linger stench of wine. She saw the duke chuckle at the gesture, which had her blood boiling.

“I will have you know --”

“Enough of this.” The duke stepped between them and took his sister by the hand. “As I said, another time.” His smile was smarmy and self-righteous. “As always, a pleasure seeing you, Lady Hawkins, may you have a pleasant evening.”

“I wish I could say the same,” she said under her breath.

Rosalind allowed herself to be pulled, for she had never been much good at saying no to her brother. As she was led away, she looked helplessly to Aurelia, an apologetic grimace. In response, Aurelia mouthed the word ‘later,’ because despite this small interruption, she had every intention of going through with her evening plans.

As to what those plans were? Nothing good, to be perfectly frank. Such a wicked idea, and a most devilish risk taken that she found herself smiling at the thought of His Grace, unaware of what his sister intended, and how stricken he would be if he

was to ever find out.

A part of me wishes that he might, for that would wipe that cocky smirk from his face. A handsome face, mind you... not that it matters. He might be the most gorgeous man in the world and still I would loathe him. Just as I know he loathes me.

\* \* \*

“This is a bad idea,” Rosalind said for the hundredth time. “This is a bad idea. This is a bad idea. This is --”

“Will you stop that!” Aurelia snapped at her friend. “You are making me nervous.”

“You should be nervous!” Rosalind cried. “Perhaps then you will see reason! It is not too late, Aurelia. We can still turn around.”

“You know that is not an option,” Aurelia said.

“But --”

“As I told you, you do not have to join me,” Aurelia cut her off. “And if you wish to go home once we arrive, I will not hold it against you. But I must do this, Rosalind.” She met her friend’s eyes, making sure that she could see the desperation in them. A sense of desperation that colored her tone and added a weight to the air which was heavy. “You know I have no choice.”

Rosalind fretted and bit into her lip. Brow furrowed, she looked at pains with the world, caught in the middle of a storm, not sure if it was safer to proceed ahead or turn around. This is not her world, and I am grateful that she even considered helping me. Such is how much I cherish her friendship.

“I am staying,” Rosalind said with a firm nod. “You need me and...” A final moment of hesitation. “You need me, and I am not going anywhere.”

Aurelia took Rosalind by the hand and squeezed it, smiling as she did, needing her friend to see how much she appreciated her. She might have been here for moral support only, but it lifted some of the weight from Aurelia’s burdened shoulders, instilling her with a sense that this wasn’t the stupidest thing she had ever done. Even if it very much is that, and it’s not even close.

The two girls were sitting beside one another in a carriage as it slowly made its way toward their destination, one which neither was certain what they would find once they arrived. Rosalind was dressed in a cloak, the hood pulled up over her head to hide her face, should she need to. Aurelia, on the other hand...

She was dressed as a man. Boots. Pants. Gloves. A shirt. Her dark hair tucked underneath a hat. She had even gone so far to smear some dirt on her cheeks to hide her rosy glow. A tad extreme, and not a mode of disguise that she was used to. But desperate times and the measures she was willing to take were just as desperate.

The idea had come to her last week, even if the cause for such a wonton act of danger started years earlier. It was her father’s fault, Aurelia knew, a man who was two years dead but still managed to ruin hers and her family’s life in ways that he must have known would have happened, likely having not cared because that was simply the kind of man he had been.

“I cannot believe your father left this on you,” Rosalind said, as much out of nerves than anything else.

“What can you expect,” Aurelia sighed. “He was a gambler and a drunk. If anything, I am more surprised it took me so long to find out about his debts.” She shook her head to herself in dismay. “I suppose my mother was hoping that Violet’s marriage

would solve the problem before it became that. A problem.”

“Why did it not?” Rosalind asked with a hint of desperation. “She married a duke! Surely he should have been able to cover what was owed?”

Aurelia scoffed. “That just tells you how large the debts are.” And then some...It was just last week when a letter had arrived at Aurelia’s home, addressed to her older brother, Daniel, detailing the exact amount, who it was owed to, and what would be the consequence if it was not paid immediately.

“We should not be doing this...” Rosalind was shaking. “You know what these gambling houses are like! It is dangerous.”

“And it is the only way.” Aurelia said with a firm nod. “The types that run them, yes they might be seedy, violent types. But at the end of the day, they care for one thing and one thing only. Money,” she said with certainty. “Daniel is too proud to seek them out himself and ask for an extension of the loan. So, it falls on my shoulders.”

“It is not right!”

“It is that or leave the burden to Eveline...” Eveline was Aurelia’s younger sister, the key to her family’s salvation, as Daniel and her mother hoped to marry her off to a rich lord who would pay out the rest of the debt. A fine plan, but not one Aurelia wished on her younger sister, because only a lord of the most repugnant reputation would take on such a loan as that. “I will not allow it. I will not.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

Rosalind looked to push the argument further, as if hoping Aurelia might agree and have the carriage turned around. But there would be no changing her mind. She had come too far for that.”

“We are here,” Rosalind said after some time. “Aurelia...” She took her friend by the hand and squeezed it. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Not really,” Aurelia sighed. “But I have no choice.”

She bade Rosalind to wait in the carriage for her as she climbed down, finding herself in a dark street surrounded by slovenly buildings and broken homes. She had the address memorized, one which led her down some stone steps to a doorway beneath a random building. A guard stood outside, but he waved her in without any trouble.

The inside of the building was filled with cigar smoke and the stench of liquor. There were tables spread across the room, each featuring a card game of some sort, all attended to by dozens of drunken men. None paid her any mind as she wandered through the tables, her eyes searching for a man she did not know.

That was her plan. To seek the owner of this establishment, he who the debt was owed to, and beg for more time. Was it a well thought-out plan? Did Aurelia have any idea if it would work? No to both. But again, she had no choice.

“He’s out the back,” she heard a gruff voice snarl from behind the bar. “But he’s busy.”

“I don’t care if he’s busy,” a rough looking man snapped at the bartender. “I need to

see him – I got his money! Tell him, I got his --”

“I said he’s busy!” the bartender snarled. “But sit your ass down and I’ll let him know.” The bartender nodded toward a thick-set thug, who was quick to turn and hurry across the room.

That must be it! The owner of this hellish place...

Aurelia followed the thug through the crowded room, toward the back, and then down a short hallway where she spied the thug knock once on a closed door. She came to a stop, her breathing heavy, her heart racing, her good sense screaming at her to turn and run. But the door opened, and the thug walked inside, leaving the door ajar.

She had no choice. This is what she came for. Danger be damned, Aurelia swallowed the lump in her throat, ignored her conscience’s cries please for sanity, and charged for the ajar door, throwing it open and stumbling inside.

“What is the meaning of this!” a voice demanded which had Aurelia bulking. “Who in the devil are you?”

Aurelia saw the man who had spoken. He who was the owner of this establishment. Her mouth dropped open. Her eyes widened. And she wondered for a moment if she was dreaming.

It was His Grace, the Duke of Sutherford, and the last man in all the world who she would have ever expected to find in a place like this. Let alone being its owner.

## ChapterTwo

"Who are you!" The thug came for her. He was well over six-feet tall, as thick as an



oak tree, and as mean looking as a rabid dog cornering a kitten.

Aurelia yelped as she scrambled back.

“Thomas,” His Grace said quickly. “It is fine.”

“Fine!” Thomas swung about in surprise. Aurelia too, could not help but gawk. “No one is meant to be in ‘ere! He can’t just --”

“I said it is fine.” He did not raise his voice. He did not threaten. But the duke radiated command and power in a way that made the savage thug cower and shrink back. “Leave us,” he then ordered.

Thomas didn’t look as if he wanted to. He scrunched his face and looked between Aurelia and the duke, growling as he did, before conceding and lumbering toward the door. “I’ll be right outside,” he said.

“I am sure it will be fine,” the duke said simply. “Close the door. And I am not to be disturbed, is that understood?”

Thomas mumbled what might have been agreement before stepping outside and slamming the door closed behind him.

Aurelia’s heart was racing, and she was sweating through her disguise. The plan had worked, she was alone with the duke, although now she wondered if that was such a good thing. The office was austere, little more than a desk and a fire-lit hearth and a few shelves crammed with books and other trinkets. On the walls were hung various animal heads. But what Aurelia took note of were the noticeable lack of exits...

As for the duke. He was seated behind his desk, dressed down in commoner garb, puffing on a pipe and drinking a mug of ale; both of which Aurelia might have never

expected to see him do. Although she would have never expected to see him here either! He studied her from across the room, a smirk on his lips, his blue eyes dancing in the flames.

“I --” She stammered and coughed, very nearly speaking with her real voice, forcing it deeper. She was a man, after all. “I am sorry for barging in like this.”

“Are you, now?”

“But I needed to speak with you at once.” Her legs were trembling, but she forced herself to walk deeper into the office. “And I knew no other way to contact you.”

The duke said nothing as he studied her. His gaze was piercing, and Aurelia looked away, feeling her cheeks flush. What is he doing here? It was all she could think. His Grace was a man of esteemed reputation, respected by all, never putting a foot out of place because he simply wasn't the type! I knew it was all a lie... although even I could never have guessed just how much.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“Speak with me, did you?” the duke said finally. “Concerning?”

“An unpaid debt, owed to you. It is one which I am here to assure you will be paid. Only, more time is required. Time that I insist you afford me.”

“Is that right?”

“It is.” She forced herself to look at him, her heart still racing. His stare was unblinking, and for a moment she wondered if he could see through her disguise... “My... associate, Lord Grayhill, is whom I represent. He has asked that we come to an agreement. He intends to pay, and he will. But more time --”

“-- is needed. Yes, I heard you the first time.” Again, the duke watched her from across the room, and she could see a smirk pull at the corner of his lips. He took another mouthful of ale. He had another puff of his pipe. Then, he rose from his chair and started around the desk toward her. “I do have one question, which I hope you will humor me with.”

“I...” She forced herself not to retreat as he came closer. He stood nearly a foot taller than she did, twice as wide in the shoulders too. The office was not a particularly large one, and it felt even smaller than that as he reached her. “Of course.”

“I cannot help but wonder, if this request of yours is so urgent...” He looked down at her, his eyes trapping her. “Why did you not bring it to my attention earlier tonight when we spoke? Surely, that would have been far easier than barging into my office like this.”

Her eyes widened before she could help herself. “Earlier...” She stammered. “What... I have not seen... this is the first time...”

“At the ball, is my meaning,” he continued, his smirk growing. “Surely, you did not expect that disguise to work on me, Lady Hawkins? As much as I know you loathe me, I would like to think you have more respect for me than that.”

The color drained from her face and her stomach dropped right through the floor. So much for my disguise... Aurelia’s first instinct was to turn and run, as if that would make a difference. But she did no such thing, only because she reminded herself of why she was here.

What was more, as surprising as it was, the duke didn’t appear angered by the ruse. If anything, he appeared amused by it. Not even a little bit surprised, which was shocking. Maybe that’s because as dastardly as her actions were, his were just as much. If not more.

“I did not wish to ruin the evening, is why,” she said, attempting to appear nonplussed. “Nor did I wish to expose you in front of the ton.”

“Expose me...” The duke frowned, only for his expression to darken. “How dare --”

“I cannot imagine what people might say if they were to find out what it is you do in your spare time. Not to mention those people who you choose to spend it with.” She forced herself to shrug casually. “Reputations have been ruined for far less.”

A shadow passed behind his eyes and he took a step closer to her, standing right over her now. She gasped and held her breath, refusing to back down. “The only reputation I would concern myself with if I was you, is your own.” He reached out and pinched the material of her shirt between his fingers, scoffing at her. “What will people say when they hear of this? Lady Hawkins, dressing as a man and sneaking

into the city on her own.”

“I doubt they will be surprised,” she said. “Just as you so clearly are not. I have no misgivings concerning what people already think of me, Your Grace. A shame the same cannot be said of you.” She raised a challenging eyebrow at him, forcing herself not to look away.

Aurelia had always known the duke to be a perfectly composed gentleman. She had never seen him lose his temper. She had never seen him rise to anger. That simply was not done, and until tonight she might have struggled to even picture it. But now...

She could see the anger building in him. She could feel it radiating off his trembling body. There was a darkness inside of the man, a hidden side which he worked so hard to keep a secret. She saw him now for what he was, a fact which should have elicited fear inside of her. Strange that she felt excitement instead. Although she could not say why.

“Is that a threat?” he growled.

“A statement of fact,” she responded. “I did not expect to see you here tonight, but now that I have, I cannot help but see the advantage.”

He stood over her, a final effort to intimidate. His glare bore into her, his teeth bared, and the growl he let escape his lips was felt in her chest. Alone as they were. Nobody coming to save her. Aurelia felt her body tremble, the danger apparent. But she did not look away...

Surprisingly, the duke suddenly smiled. “Very bold of you. Although I cannot say I am surprised.” He took a step back and she breathed a sigh of relief. “You always were a pest.”

“At least I am honest about it,” she shot back. “Which is more than I can say about you.”

He scowled at her. “What I do with my personal life is nobody’s business. Yours’ especially.”

“It is when it involves my family.”

He groaned and rubbed his eyes with frustration as he turned and stalked back to his desk. There, he picked up the tankard of ale and took a swig, slamming it down roughly, which made Aurelia jump. “You are here concerning your family’s debts.” It wasn’t a question.

Aurelia hadn’t come here completely unprepared. Although she suspected that talking a loan shark out of collecting on a payment might be next to impossible, it didn’t mean it could not be done. For that reason, she had come here tonight with a plan... half a plan... an idea that she had felt not that confident about at the time but now realized might just work perfectly.

“I am,” she said, forcing herself to stand tall and appear in control, even if her body trembled. “My brother --”

“I will not forgive them,” he cut her off. “And no number of threats will make me.” For a moment, he appeared regretful, his brow furrowing as he looked past her. Then he shook his head and focused on her again. “That is not an option.”

“I am not here to ask that, nor do I expect it.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“What then?”

“I...” She hesitated, for now was the time to make her offer. An offer she still wasn’t certain she wished to give, even if she had no choice. “I wish for you to delay their payment, is all. You know of my family’s financial burdens.”

“The entire ton does.”

She grimaced. “Just as you know that they are easily fixed, should certain advantages me afforded us. My meaning...” She grimaced again, her stomach twisting. “My two sisters have already married, their husbands more than happy to pay off the majority of what was owed. If a third marriage is to be secured within our family, I have no doubt that a dowry will be arranged that will more than cover what is owed to you.”

The duke frowned and tilted his head. “You speak of your younger sister, Eveline?”

No, she did not. That plan that she was referring to. One that she had sat with for some time now. One which she had been desperate not to see through but knew she would likely have no choice in. For her sister, if nothing else.

“No.” She swallowed. “I speak of myself. I will --”

The duke laughed. “You! You intend to marry. Of all the twists and turns I have stumbled through tonight, that is by far the most --”

“Why not?” she snapped, angry, even if she couldn’t say why. “Why should I not be able to wed?”

“Oh, I am sure you can,” he said, still chuckling. “Only, and forgive me, Lady Hawkins, but you do not exactly scream marriage material. Nor have you ever intended to, for that matter. The way Rosalind tells it, you have no desire to marry. Nor have you ever.”

“Yes, well...” She glared at him. “Clearly, things have changed.”

He chuckled and shook his head as he crossed the room toward her again. “So, let me get this straight. You wish for me to delay payment owed until you find yourself a groom willing to cover your family’s debts.”

“That’s right. And all things considered...” She swallowed, knowing that this next thing spoken was sure to cause anger. “You should be more than happy to oblige me. Lest I accidentally let slip your secret.”

His eyes flashed with anger, and he stormed right for her, stopping short but putting himself mere inches from where she stood. He was so big. So strong. So powerful. Like a storm crashing down upon her, it was all she could do not to cry out.

“So, I was right. You mean to threaten me,” he snarled.

“I mean to make a deal,” she shot back, her body still trembling as he looked down at her with fury. “You owe me --”

“I owe you nothing,” he hissed. “Nor do I appreciate being blackmailed. You forget, your situation is as imperious as my own. Should I let slip your little secret, regardless of how much you want it, no man will marry you. Then what will you do?”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Try me.”



He was glaring down at her. She was glaring up at him. Their faces were mere inches apart, as were their bodies. The fire crackled in the hearth behind them. The sounds of drunken gambling echoed from through the door. But they said nothing, holding their stare, daring the other to break...

Aurelia had never much liked the duke. Too proper. Too arrogant. Too boring, as she always saw it. But in that moment, despite herself and how wrong she knew it to be, she was beginning to see him in ways she had never thought possible. Ways that made her stomach flip and her body run warm, and her cheeks flush furiously so she wanted to look away. Not that she dared.

“Give me time,” she said, still glaring at him. “That is all I ask. Time to find a husband.”

“To stall, you mean,” he cut her off.

“No,” she said. “I promise --”

“A promise worth nothing,” he snarled. “Your family owes me a rather large amount. I have been more than kind thus far. I want what is owed.”

“The Season,” she said. “Give me the Season.”

“No,” he said. “What I will give you...” His eyes flashed again, more anger, more fury, and something else... a look she did not recognize because she had never seen it before. It reminded her of a hungry wolf, famished and desperate to sink its teeth into its prey... “There is a ball next week, yes?”

“I...” She considered. “I believe there is.”

“I will give you one month.”

“But --”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“And only if by the end of this ball I see proof that you are not playing me for time. That you do intend to find a suitor.”

“Proof? What do you mean? What proof?”

“I will be there,” he said to her. “I will be watching you. And I will be the one to determine if you are true to your word, or if you are playing your own game. Is that understood?”

Aurelia considered the offer. Not the one she wanted. Certainly not one she thought herself capable of achieving. One night? That is how long he expects me to take to find someone? That is insane! Sadly, she also knew she had no choice.

“Fine,” she hissed at him. Her heart was racing, but not from fear. Rather, it was anger that did it. “If that is what you require, consider it done. But I warn you...” She raised both eyebrows at him. “If you lie to me or change the rules or do anything to go back on your word. This...” She indicated to the room. “Everyone single lord and lady in the ton will hear of this.”

“As they will of you,” he snarled. Then, oddly, he smiled and even laughed, shaking his head as he turned and walked back to his desk. “Leave me,” he sighed as he collapsed back in his chair. “Before I change my mind.”

“But --”

“Now!” he roared.

Aurelia didn't need telling twice.

She was quick to turn on the spot, throw open the door, race back through the gaming room, and find herself on the street before taking even a single breath. Thus, it wasn't until she began toward the carriage, parked down the end of the road, that she was able to properly consider what had just happened and whether it was advantageous or not. More like suicidal.

The duke was not what he seemed. Rosalind could never find out. Aurelia had to find a husband at the next ball. And all the while her heart beat inside her chest and her body ran all the warmer as her mind drifted back to the duke and the way he stood over her, the look in his eyes as he glared at her, and how it made her stomach flip with feelings which she refused to acknowledge.

\* \* \*

Aurelia did not sleep very well that night, for obvious reasons. Such that it was the following morning as she made her way to the breakfast room that her mind was very much still on the previous evening and what to make of it.

"... we have no choice, mother," she heard her brother arguing with her mother in the breakfast room. "And I would appreciate your support, rather than your constant bickering."

Aurelia's eyes widened and she came to a stop just outside the room.

"I am not trying to upset you, Daniel," her mother said. "I am simply saying that perhaps it is prudent that we do not accept the first offer that comes our way. Eveline is only --"

"She knows what is expected of her," Daniel snapped. "Just as you should also. Oh,

do not give me that look,” he then sighed. “You think I want her marrying him. Of course I don’t! But he has money, and I know for a fact that he will happily pay what is owed. We have no choice!”

“I know, I know,” her mother sighed regretfully. “I just wish we had more time. Just as I wish your father had not left us in this position in the first place,” she added bitterly.

Aurelia felt a pang of worry stab at her, for she knew exactly what her mother and brother were arguing about. The ball the previous evening was Eveline’s arrival onto the scene, a means to introduce her to eligible lords so that they might find her a match. And not just a match, but a match willing to pay off their family’s debts once and for all.

However, even Aurelia had not expected it to happen so quickly. She had hoped that with Eveline being as troublesome and chaotic as she was, that it would take time, perhaps all Season before she caught the eye of a willing suitor. That at least would give Aurelia time to make good on her promise to the duke. But if they had found a willing suitor already...there is only one type of man who would say yes so quickly. A shudder ran through Aurelia’s body.

She loved her younger sister, even if she was known to cause headaches capable of splitting Aurelia’s skull into two pieces. And the last thing Aurelia wished for was to see her married to a monster, a man who would ruin her life for the sole purpose of saving her family. A situation they should have never been in, in the first place!

It was this love, and this determination, which steeled Aurelia’s resolve for there was one thing she knew she could do. What she had to do.

“Mother, Daniel...” Aurelia walked into the breakfast room. “I need to speak with you both.”

“Aurelia,” her mother greeted with a tired smile. “I am afraid that now is not the time.”

“It will not take long,” Aurelia said. “Just a quick announcement and I will be on my way.” She looked between her mother and brother, making sure that they were listening. “I have been giving it some thought, and I have decided that...” A lump appeared in her throat. “I have decided that in light of our family’s troubles, it behooves me to do what I can to help.”

Daniel scoffed. “Aurelia, this does not concern --”

“I intend to marry,” she spoke over him. “And as soon as I can. In fact, at this coming ball, I plan on doing everything in my power to find a suitor willing to cover our debts.” She swallowed. “No matter who he is.”

As expected, her mother and brother were struck speechless with surprise.

“Eveline is young,” she continued. “She has her whole life ahead of her. What is more, she deserves more than to be married to a man who does not appreciate her. Me, on the other hand...” She shrugged. “I figure that regardless of who I marry, I am never going to be happy. So why not make it count.”

“Aurelia...” Her mother still looked shocked, as if she did not recognize the girl standing before her. “That is... are you sure?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“I am,” Aurelia said, forcing a smile. “So please, whatever it is you have intended for Eveline, I ask that you consider delaying it. For a week at the very least, as that is all the time I will need to find a suitor.”

Daniel scoffed. “What makes you so certain?”

“Just a feeling,” she said.

Her mother beamed, rose from her chair, and swept toward Aurelia, pulling her into a hug. “Aurelia, I am so...” She held her close, kissing her on top of the head. “So proud of you. You have no idea how much.”

“Anything I can do,” she said.

“Hhhmmm...” Her mother pulled back, raised an eyebrow, and looked her daughter over. “Perhaps you might spend this week slimming down, then? If you wish to find a suitor, best that you shed a few of those extra pounds, no?”

Aurelia’s face dropped. My mother might be looking at me as if I have stolen her daughter’s skin, but at least I can be certain she is the same woman who raised me. Some things never change.

### Chapter Three

“How about him?” Rosalind said, indicating across the ball room to Lord Alderwin. He was a slightly older gentleman who was not exactly hard on the eyes, but it made little difference as Aurelia knew the man well enough, the things people said of him,

how he had a reputation for cruelty and sadism among those ladies unlucky enough to find themselves in his path.

“Pass,” Aurelia said. “And really, Rosalind? Do you think so little of me.”

“That is not --”

“What of Lord Chesterfield?” Eveline took Aurelia by the arm and steered her direction ahead, nodding with her head at the back of Lord Chesterfield. He was the complete opposite to Lord Alderwin; young and dashing, fit and athletic, and truthfully a little too handsome for his own good.

Aurelia clicked her tongue. “Perhaps, only I fear he will spend our entire marriage in front of the mirror. Truly, he is so vain that even Narcissus would blush.”

“He is rather pretty, isn’t he,” Eveline agreed, her expression turning dreamy.

“And broke,” Rosalind said. “Everyone knows it.”

“There you have it,” Aurelia said. “Lord Chesterfield is out.”

“Lord Lakeview?” Rosalind was again steering Aurelia’s attention further into the ball room, this time onto that of Lord Lakeview. He was of average height, his features plain, his reputation middling. But he was also known to be wealthy, and to be in search of a bride who he might shower with this wealth. “I have heard he is quite kind,” Rosalind pushed. “At the very least, he should be considered worth approaching.”

“I guess...”

“I still think you should try Lord Chesterfield,” Eveline continued, her gaze still very



much stuck on the handsome lord. “So what if he is poor? You two could simply run away together. No one would begrudge you.”

Aurelia laughed. “I will consider it.”

“Is there anyone else?” Rosalind continued, pulling Aurelia’s gaze from Lord Chesterfield. “You really must get a move on, Aurelia. Time is not your friend.”

“What’s the rush?” Eveline asked. “We have all night. And these things are not to be hurried.”

To this, Aurelia and Rosalind looked at one another but said nothing. They knew well enough why time was of the essence, but had not shared the full details of this endeavor with Eveline as Aurelia did not think she needed to be told. Let her simply assume that I have changed my mind of my own accord, and that I am not doing this for her. If she found out the truth, I dare say she would do everything she could to stop me. Just to prove that she could, if for no other reason.

Having said all of that, it was not as if Rosalind knew the whole story, as Aurelia had not shared with her that His Grace was the one whom she had met with last week. As far as Rosalind knew, the owner of Aurelia’s family’s debts was nothing more than a loan shark who had no connection to the peerage whatsoever. Hopefully, she will never find out.

Regardless of who she owed the debt to, the result was the same, which was why Aurelia had come to tonight’s ball with one goal in mind: to find a husband. Easier said than done.

They had been at it for an hour now, standing toward the back of the ball room, surveying the attendees, searching for the perfect man who Aurelia might deigned to be worthy of her hand. So far, and needless to say, it was not going well.

“What of Lord Harrow?” Rosalind asked. “He has been watching us all night.”

“Who?” Aurelia followed her friend’s gaze and shuddered when she saw to whom her friend was suggesting. He was a spindly man, possessed of a beak-like nose and beady eyes, greasy hair, and a smile on his lips that made her skin crawl. Yes, he was watching the three of them with keen interest, but that was not exactly a point in his favor. “I would rather take a long walk off a short cliff.”

“Ha!” Eveline laughed.

“He is...” She shuddered, daring one more look at the man – who was still watching them – before turning away. “... creepy. And I do wish he would stop staring.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“At least he is interested,” Rosalind pointed out innocently.

“Somehow, I doubt I am the one who has captured his interest,” Aurelia said with a wink, even if there was a layer of truth to her comment that added another less than appealing worry she was dealing with tonight.

Rosalind was, in Aurelia’s eyes, gorgeous. Dark hair. Big brown eyes. Pixie-like features. And a curvy body that she knew men to trip over themselves in pursuit of. Eveline too, short like Aurelia yet skinny, with elegant features that would only grow more beautiful with age. Not that Aurelia wished Lord Harrow to be staring at her, but she was certain that of the three of them, she was the last one he might have wished to take notice of.

Aurelia had always been self-conscious where her weight was concerned. Although she thought of herself as pretty, with her dark hair and deep brown eyes, she was also plump in figure; a body-type which she and her mother argued about constantly, as women of the ton should not allow themselves to get as large as she was. Or so her mother said. It played havoc with her confidence, and although it wasn’t the reason she had abstained from the romantic scene all her life, it certainly didn’t help!

These were fears that she had to overcome and rise above, as she no longer had the luxury of turning her cheek up at courtship. And if she might have gotten cold feet and changed her mind...

“Oh no,” Rosalind groaned.

“What?? Eveline asked.

“My brother,” Rosalind said, exhaling sharply. “Why is he watching us? I told him, I wished to spend the beginning of the night with you. He really does not like you much, Aurelia.” She laughed. “Considering how you two spoke to one another the last time you were together, I guess I cannot be surprised.”

She is speaking about the ball last week. Although she is not wrong either, as I have no doubt His Grace thinks less than little of me. Just as I do him.

The duke stood across the ball room. Engaged of present with several other lords, all of whom pandered to him like sycophantic worshippers, he still managed to keep an eye on Aurelia, ensuring that she saw him doing so.

Seeing him again tonight had brought about strange emotions in Aurelia. On the one hand, she wanted to hate him, as he was the one who had put on her this most harrowing task in the first place. On the other... she could not ignore the warmth which spread her body and made her heart race each time their eyes met. She remembered him standing over her. She remembered the power he had in that small room. She remembered...he has a dark side, more than he lets on. One which, for some reason, I find myself drawn to.

But she could not let herself get distracted. Her family were counting on her. And with His Grace watching, she figured that she had to act now or see her family doomed.

“Lord Lakeview it is,” she sighed with regret.

“Oh, good,” Rosalind said. “I think he is a fine choice.”

“A bit boring.” Eveline curled her lip. “He has a face that you would not recognize if he was standing right next to you.”

“I am going to talk to him,” Aurelia said with a firm nod, forcing confidence which she did not feel.

“I will leave you to it.” Rosalind took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “Good luck.”

“I will find mother, I suppose,” Eveline grumbled as she slunk away.

Aurelia watched her friends go, still working up the courage to approach Lord Lakeview. Again, she caught the duke watching, and she curled her lip at him and widened her eyes to warn him off.

About to make her approach, Aurelia saw movement out the corner of her eye. She followed it to where Rosalind was walking toward the back of the ball room, and then outside and onto the balcony. Likely, she was just getting some fresh air. Thinking nothing of it, Aurelia was again about to work herself up to approaching Lord Lakeview, only to again become distracted. This time it was a distraction that had her gasping.

Lord Harrow was slinking across the ball room, his path fixed on the balcony where Rosalind had just disappeared. He wore a sinister smile as he hurried for it, and when he reached the doorway, he made sure to look over his shoulder and survey those nearby as if double checking that nobody was watching him. His smile grew and he stepped outside.

Oh no...

Rosalind was a most innocent creature, the type who might trust a wolf who invited her into its den without questioning the obvious danger. Aurelia did not know anything about Lord Harrow, but she knew his type, she knew that look in his eyes, and she knew that to leave him alone with her friend was a mistake she was not willing to make.

She did not care that she had a mission of her own. Nor did she care that the duke was watching her. Her friend needed her, and that was all which mattered. And so, Aurelia acted.

Across the ball room, she hurried for the balcony, breaching the door and stepping into the cool night. It was dark outside, the moonless night making it difficult to see. Not that she needed to, for she spied immediately her friend and Lord Harrow. Worse than that, she heard them.

“... a pretty thing like you should not be out here on your own,” Lord Harrow purred. His back was to Aurelia, and he blocked her sight of Rosalind.

“I am perfectly fine, thank you,” Rosalind said, her voice shaking.

“You are now that I am here,” he continued. He stood over Rosalind, far too close, his black coat making him nearly invisible. Which Aurelia figured was the point. “I have been watching you all night, you know. And I pray it is not too bold for me to tell you that I like what I see.” He purred again. “Very much.”

“Yes, well...” Aurelia could picture her friend’s panic. “If you do not mind, I must be heading back inside.”

“What’s the rush.” He moved to block her.

“Please, my brother --”

“Is busy, I am sure. No need to hurry. No need to leave.”

Aurelia would not describe herself as brave, as much as she was short tempered. She often spoke without thinking. She often acted without considering the consequences. And where many a young woman might not dream of inserting themselves into a situation that screamed danger, Aurelia was not one of them. Not when her friend needed her.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Aurelia spoke up, which had Lord Harrow jumping and spinning about. “But I am afraid I must steal my friend from you.”

“Aurelia!” Rosalind cried with relief, hurrying to step past the troublesome lord. “I --”

“Easy there.” Lord Harrow shot an arm out to block Rosalind from passing him. “This doesn’t concern you,” he sneered. “So, I suggest you do the smart thing and turn around and head back inside and forget you were ever out here.”

“The smart thing?” Aurelia said with a frown. “Clearly, you do not know me very well at all. I never was one for listening. Just ask my mother.”

Arm still extended to block Rosalind, his lip curled into a snarl. “I said get. Don’t make me ask again.”

“And if I do?” Aurelia asked innocently. “Make you ask again, I mean. What will

happen? You haven't been very clear."

Even in the dark, Aurelia saw the man's eyes flash with anger. Teeth bared, fury enveloping him, he growled a warning at Rosalind as if telling her to stay put and then he strode for Aurelia, arm outstretched to grab her.

Aurelia's heart leapt through her throat, and she might have cried out was she not suddenly taken by panic. It was all well and good to do the right thing and try and help her friend, but this was the other side of the coin where her boldness often led her. Into danger which she had no way of extricating herself from.

Lord Harrow came to a sudden stop, his body turning rigid and his eyes widening with fear. He balked, chin wobbling, scampering back a quick step in a way that might have suggested that Aurelia had suddenly grown by several feet and was now holding a weapon.

"This looks friendly," the voice of His Grace spoke from behind Aurelia. Calm and poised, there was no anger to it, no sense that he had just stumbled upon a most troubling situation. "I hope I am not interrupting."

"Your Grace!" Lord Harrow stammered. "I... I was just introducing myself to --"

"My sister," His Grace continued. From behind her, Aurelia felt His Grace's presence as he stepped in closer, which had Lord Harrow's eyes turning even wider. "And Lady Hawkins. Although if introductions were what you were after, Lord Harrow, you ought to know better than to find yourself alone with two young ladies."

"I --"

"Have surely become lost," His Grace spoke over Lord Harrow, still perfectly calm. "I might even be willing to believe that you stumbled out here unknowingly, at which



time you saw these two ladies alone and realized that it was best that you made yourself scarce.” A beat as Lord Harrow’s chin trembled with fear. “Now!” His Grace finished with emphasis.

Lord Harrow did not need to be told twice. He yelped and jumped on the spot, then quickly scampered past Aurelia and His Grace as if his coat had caught fire.

“Gerald!” Rosalind cried out with relief, rushing toward her brother. “Thank God you are here. Lord Harrow, he --”

“Is a nuisance and a pest,” the duke spoke over his sister as he walked around Aurelia. He did not turn back to look at her, focusing himself on Rosalind who stopped short before him. “And you ought to know better than to find yourself alone with him.”

Rosalind grimaced and looked away with shame. “I am sorry, Gerald. I did not mean it.”

“Now, wait just a moment,” Aurelia spoke up, suddenly angry. She stepped between the duke and Rosalind, fixing her annoyed gaze on His Grace. “Rosalind did not find herself out here with Lord Harrow – this was not her fault. He followed her out here.”

“Aurelia!” Rosalind gasped.

“And you should be relieved that was all he did,” Aurelia continued hotly. “It is just lucky that I found them when I did, or who knows what might have happened.” Hands on her hips, she continued to glare at the duke.

The duke frowned at her. Not angry at being snapped at. Not apologetic at the mistake made. Rather, he appeared curious, perhaps even amused that Aurelia had suddenly chosen to attack him. A tilted head, he looked down at her, in no way put

out by her glare holding her eyes as he dared her to look away. Which she did do, finding it impossible to match the coolness of his gaze.

“You found them, did you?” he said eventually.

“I did,” Aurelia said. “I saw Lord Harrow following Rosalind and I thought it best that I intervene. A good thing I did to.”

“Rosalind,” he then said. “Is this true?”

“I did not mean it,” Rosalind hurried. “I was just coming outside for some fresh air and --”

“Lord Harrow followed you...” He nodded along as the story fell into place. “And Lady Hawkins here came to your rescue. Do I have that right.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“I am sorry,” Rosalind continued. “I did not mean it. Truly! I should have been more careful.”

The duke said nothing. Again, he looked at Aurelia with a sense of curiosity that she did not fully understand. The curve on his lips was esoteric. The glimmer in his eyes was... again, she had no idea. But whenever she tried to meet them, Aurelia felt her stomach turn in ways she didn't fully understand. She wanted to be annoyed by the duke's chastisement of her friend, but she could not get past the very real fact that he had saved them both.

And the way he did it... I have never seen someone so in control and domineering. Someone so confident that the world seems to move around them.

“Inside, Rosalind,” he said finally. “We will speak of this later.”

“But --”

“Now,” he said, still not angry, but with enough command that Rosalind knew better than to argue. She put her head down and hurried past Aurelia, a quick smile of thanks as she did.

Aurelia thought to follow her friend, but she sensed that Rosalind's dismissal was not for her. In fact, the duke had placed himself in front of her, blocking off her path, making it all too clear that she was not to go anywhere. At least not until he was done with her.

Alone suddenly, Aurelia was again inundated with similar feelings to that which she

had experienced the other night. Not fear. Not worry. Rather, a sense of powerlessness that wasn't nearly as disconcerting as it should have been. She could feel his eyes on her, and she tried to meet them, but his gaze was so overwhelming that she found herself looking away.

"It seems that I am in your debt," the duke said finally.

"What?" Aurelia snapped her head up in shock.

"You saved my sister," he continued simply. "What is more, you did so despite knowing it would impede on your own plans. That is why I followed you out here in the first place, to remind you of what was promised." He chuckled. "And here I thought you had come out here to stall."

"I came to help your sister!" she cried as if he was mocking her.

"Which I have acknowledged," he said, still perfectly calm. He was always that way, she was beginning to realize. So perfectly controlled of his emotions...well, that was until I tried to blackmail him. That dark side which he works so hard to keep hidden. "And am just as grateful for. Again, you have my thanks."

"Oh..." She blinked with embarrassment. "That is... you are welcome."

Silence fell upon them again.

Aurelia, never much good with silences, always having to fill them because she could not keep control of her tongue, found herself unable to do just that. The duke stood over her, staring down, studying her in ways that made her feel uncomfortable. He was just so damn confident in himself, caring not for the way she squirmed under his gaze. Likely, he enjoyed it.

She tried to look at him, again glancing away as soon as she met his eyes. There was a sense that he could see right through her, that he had her in his thrall, a toy to do with as he wished. Likely, it was a power dynamic he was used to.

“The question now becomes, what am I going to do with you,” he said suddenly.

“Huh?” She looked up again.

“On the one hand, we had a deal,” he continued. “A deal which I cannot possibly see you fulfilling tonight.”

Aurelia’s temper seized her. “I --”

“Put my sister’s safety above your own needs,” he spoke over her. “Which is nothing short of admirable. A fact which I am taking into consideration. Believe me when I say that I am.”

“Oh, well, how very kind of you,” she said with sarcasm.

“The truth is, when I saw you ducking out here, I wasn’t in the least bit surprised,” he spoke across her again, his voice still calm. “I never truly believed that you had it in you to find a potential husband in one night. It was a promise made that I was certain to be to my own benefit as you, Lady Hawkins...” He chuckled and shook his head. “Forgive me, but from everything I know of you, the chances of you finding a suitor in a single evening is so ludicrous I find it difficult to believe you even considered it an option.”

There it was again, that anger. “How dare you!” she hissed. “The reason I have not bothered with courtship until this point has nothing to do with --”

Suddenly, the duke stepped into her. So quickly that she didn’t have time to step

back. And as he did, he shot up a single finger, placing it over her lips to silence her. Her eyes went wide as she felt him; both his body on her and his finger to her lips. And her heart... it began to beat so quickly that it hurt.

“It has everything to do with you.” He dropped his voice to a whisper as he leaned over her, his finger still against her lips. “You forget that I know you, Lady Hawkins. Who you are. What you are like. There is a good reason you have remained single all this time, and it has everything to do with who you are. Do not say otherwise.”

Her heart was racing. Her body was running warm. She wanted to argue. She wanted to tell him exactly what she thought of him. But the feel of his finger, the touch of his body, and the way he was looking at her made it very difficult to even breathe, let alone to speak.

“You are a bad bet,” he continued in that same whisper. “One which I would do best to exercise myself from as quickly as I could, for I have no doubt that was I to give you one month or five, it would make no difference. However...” He leaned in closer, his finger leaving her lips, tracing itself down her chin which he then raised so that she was looking right at him. “You helped my sister tonight, meaning that you helped me. That is not something I will soon forget.”

“What... what do you... what are you saying?” Aurelia could barely speak, her mind focused on his finger under her chin, his breath which traced her lips as he spoke, and the look in his eyes which held her like a hand had reached itself out and wrapped about her heart.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

“You asked for one month, so I will give you one month. One month to find a man willing to...” He chuckled deeply and flashed his eyes. “Or able to, is perhaps a better way of thinking about it. A man able to see in you a wife worth attaching himself to, and quickly as I expect you to be married within the month. Not just engaged. Do I make myself clear.”

“And if I don’t?”

He smiled. “You know the answer to that. I am reasonable, Lady Hawkins, do not think otherwise. But my mercy has its limits.”

It was exactly what Aurelia needed to hear. Exactly what she had set herself to achieve this night. But it came with a backhand, his mocking her in a way that seemed to amuse him. He had all the power here, he knew it, and he didn’t mind letting her know it.

He is confident now, but will that confidence last if the ton was to find out his dark secret? The man he really is? I doubt that very much.

“You better hope that I do find someone,” she said, trying to speak bravely, but barely managing a whisper. She even tried to pull her chin free, but the duke followed her with his finger. “Lest your secret accidentally find its way into the public discourse.”

That did it. The duke’s eyes flashed with anger in ways that Aurelia was certain only she had ever seen. Strangely, it excited her. She wanted to see the anger boil to the surface. She told herself it was because she hated liars and would take great pleasure

in the duke revealing himself to the world. But that is only half the reason. If that...

“You play a dangerous game...” His finger stroked her chin, and she trembled. He leaned in closer... closer... closer still and she found her entire body shaking as she pictured what he might do. He moved his mouth to her ear, whispering, “I would be careful, if I were you...”

And then, as quickly as it had started, the duke pulled himself back, straightened, and once again took on the air of propriety. “I suggest you return inside shortly. No doubt your mother is wondering where you have gotten yourself too, and I would hate to see her worried.” With that, he turned and strode inside, not another word said.

Aurelia exhaled, having not even realized that she’d been holding her breath. What just happened! She had gotten what she wanted. The night was a success, anyway she looked at it. Yet she could not dispel that lingering feeling that things would only get worse before they got better.

What was more, she sensed that when they did, the duke would be right there to let her know. That thought excited her even more.

## Chapter Four

“What of this one?” Rosalind asked, holding up a sun yellow dress which was an elegant design but a little busy on account of the frills bursting from the hems and shoulders and all over the skirt.

“I do not think so,” Aurelia said, curling her nose with distaste.

“Oh, it is not that bad!”

“It looks as if a sunflower vomited all over it,” Eveline giggled.



“It does not,” Rosalind protested, looking at the dress again. “I rather like it...”

“Pass,” Aurelia said.

Rosalind sighed loudly and tossed the dress onto the bed, on which there were another half dozen already piled. None of them were particularly bad or ugly, simply not those which Aurelia would ever be caught dead in.

“Perhaps we should choose according to color,” Rosalind mused as she rummaged through her wardrobe. There were still well over a dozen dresses hanging inside, a cornucopia of bright colors and different designs, each of which any young lady should be thrilled to find herself dressed in.

Aurelia was not any young lady. She had a style of her own, one which she was beginning to realize clashed mightily with Rosalind’s. Too many colors, she thought. Too much embroidery and flair. What was more, even if she was to find one that she liked, a quick glance at Rosalind’s tighter frame brought into question the likelihood of the fit. But that was a worry for later.

“This one?” She pulled out a lime green number. It was simple. Clean. Sleeveless. A modest neckline. Gold-trimming but no decoration running up the skirt or body. “I have always said that green suits you.”

“I don’t know...” Aurelia eyed the lack of sleeves, feeling her cheeks flush with embarrassment. She would not say it out loud, but she hated her arms, as did her mother for that matter. And the idea of wearing a dress that showed them off fully was a nightmare to her sensibilities.

“I like it,” Eveline said in agreement. “It is rather slimming, also.”

“Perhaps a little too much,” Aurelia muttered.

Rosalind clicked her tongue as she looked from the dress to Aurelia. “Obviously we can have the size adjusted. What we need to find first is a dress that suits you. Or one you will wear willingly, if such an outfit exists.”

“I do not know why I can’t wear one of my own.”

“I have seen your wardrobe,” Rosalind said rightly. “Which is answer enough.”

“Perhaps we can ask the kitchen if they have any potato sacks,” Eveline joked.

“Surely, they will be able to lend one.”

“Funny,” Aurelia said dryly. “Oh, how you amuse me with your wit, Eveline.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:13 am*

It was two days following the ball and Aurelia found herself in Rosalind's bedroom with an express purpose in mind – a task set which was looking more and more hopeless by the second. And the fact that I invited Eveline along, with her jokes and so-called humor, is only making things more difficult.

In five days' a garden party was being hosted at the Malsbury Estate, which itself would be a perfect opportunity to officially begin her pursuit of courtship. Now that the pressure of having to find a man in a single evening was no longer a worry, Aurelia had decided on a more practical approach. She needed to catch a suitor's eye. She needed to lure him to her. She needed to behave herself as she did, at least for long enough to make him see her as a potential wife and then propose. Easier said than done.

It started with her outfit, a problem as Rosalind had described it, as Aurelia wasn't exactly bursting at the seams with appropriate dresses, having never cared much for dressing up; at least not where catching the attention of men was concerned, anyhow. Thus, Rosalind insisted that she lend her a dress of her own, a sure way to get off to the best start possible. Or so it was thought.

"It is a shame that Violet no longer lives with us," Eveline sighed. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking bored. "She had so many pretty dresses."

"How is she doing?" Rosalind asked of Aurelia and Eveline's older sister. "Married to Duke Aldworth. It must be heaven."

"Oh..." Aurelia shared a quick look with Eveline, a warning to not say anything. "The last we spoke, she is perfectly happy. As is Caroline, for that matter."

“Isn’t it wonderful,” Rosalind said with a dreamy look on her face. “And to think, that will be you soon! Falling in love. Getting married! Children, a family....” The dreamy look in her eyes grew. “Tell me you are at least a little bit excited.”

Rosalind knew Aurelia’s thoughts on marriage well enough, that being that she had no desire to ever marry. This was borne from her upbringing, as her mother and father’s marriage had been a most horrid affair which had poisoned the well in such a way that Aurelia had grown up knowing that she would rather die a spinster than go down that same road.

However, Aurelia’s newfound mission to find a husband must have convinced Rosalind that she’d changed her mind, even if Rosalind knew the true reason behind it. She thinks that if she continues to romanticize the concept of marriage that I might forget why I am doing this. Bless her...

As to Aurelia’s sister, Violet, that was a story which only affirmed Aurelia’s already sullied views. Indeed, Violet was married to a duke, and indeed she was happy, but this happiness was a result of Violet and the duke living separately, as neither liked one another and had no desire to try and make the marriage work. This arrangement was also a secret, which even Rosalind did not know.

Now, Caroline’s marriage might have been a happier story, and indeed her other sister was said to be very much in love with her husband, also a duke. But in Aurelia’s eyes, this was the exception to the rule, not proof of it, and she would not waste time pretending that when she wed that her life might turn out anything the same. I know what is in store for me, no matter who I find myself bound to. So, why pretend at anything different?

“How about that one?” Aurelia pointed at a dress in the wardrobe; it was a darker green, had long sleeves and a high neckline with a corset tied together at the front by intricate lacing.

“Oh!” Rosalind rushed to pull it out. “Yes, this one...” She whipped it from the wardrobe and held it out for them to see. “It is rather pretty, isn’t it. What’s more, I’ve never worn it.”

“At least that way Aurelia won’t look worse in it than you did,” Eveline chuckled.

“Quiet!” Aurelia snapped at her.

“I am just saying!”

“Try it on.” Rosalind shoved it into Aurelia’s chest. “And we will be the judge.”

Aurelia clicked her tongue as she took the dress and held it before her. Again, she really did not want to be doing this, but she caught Eveline turning up her nose and despite how much they argued and fought, she still loved her with all her heart. And if getting married to some uppity lord might save her from a life of sorrow, it was the least Aurelia could do.

“Fine,” she sighed. “But I will not dress in front of you.”

“That is fine,” Rosalind said excitedly, taking Eveline by the arm. “How about you put it on and then meet us in the garden – I will have tea and sweet meats ready.”

“I thought mother told you to lay off the treats,” Eveline teased Aurelia.

“Go,” she said forcefully, widening her eyes in warning at Eveline. “I will be down shortly.”

Eveline opened her mouth to make another joke but Rosalind pulled her from the room before she had a chance. The door closed behind them, leaving Aurelia alone to try on the dress.

“Urgh...” She waded toward the mirror, looking at herself and the dress.

Aurelia had never cared much about what her mother said of her voluptuous figure. Yes, she was a little chubby. And yes, most of the ton might not have appreciated her body type. But Aurelia hadn't given a damn because she didn't waste time worrying about what others thought. And as she never planned to marry...at least I hadn't.

Nonetheless, she busied herself slipped from her dress and then shuffling into Rosalind's. As expected, it was too tight, and she was only able to get it over her torso because she had left the lacework open fully, there to be brought together and tied tightly once she was fully inside the garment. However, now that the dress was up and over her shoulders and her arms were through the sleeves, she began to suspect that to tie the front together at all would take a miracle.

She clicked her tongue and sucked in as she pulled the corset tight, trying at the same time to interweave the laces. Frustratingly, her bosom was too large, refusing to give any room so that she could barely close the front without having to hold her breath.

“Well, this is just...”

A knock at the door had her head snapping up and she released the lace, breathing out so that the corset of the dress opened. She still had her chemise on underneath, so her breasts were not fully exposed, which was the only reason she did not hesitate in approaching the door.

“I told you,” she began as she grabbed the handle. “I will meet you out --” Her words caught in her throat as she opened the door to find the duke standing there.

“I take it this is a bad time.”

Once again, the duke was a little too calm for the situation presented. He did not appear caught by surprise to find Aurelia spilling from her dress. He did not look as if he might retreat or even turn away as most gentleman would do. It was the opposite, in fact.

A picture of coolness, his piercing blue eyes drifted down her body, lingering on her open dress. A smirk pulled at his lips. The hint of a chuckle then escaped them. But still, he remained in the doorway, his large frame taking it up fully so that if she had wanted to escape, she would not have been able to.

“Your Grace!” Aurelia gasped, taking a quick step back into the room as she hurried to cover herself. Of course, she could not, for the tightness of her dress did not allow her to merely pull it across her chest. “What are you --”

“Searching for my sister,” he answered before she finished, even stepping into the room without pause. “Have you seen her?”

“She is not here.” She turned away, blushing furiously.

“Clearly.”

“She is in the garden,” she continued, still with her back to the duke. “I am sure you can find her there.”

Was it anyone else, Aurelia was certain they would have apologized and left quickly.

And a man of the duke's reputation almost certainly should have. But that is not who he really is, which is why I should not be surprised by the way he lingers...

Indeed, lingering is exactly what he did.

With her back turned to the duke, she could feel him watching her. It should have angered Aurelia, enough that she might have turned around and snapped at him. That is what she would have done was it anyone else! Still, she reminded herself how she was supposed to feel about this man, how she had always felt about him for as long as she had known him. But that did her little good.

The duke was not what she had thought, nor was he what he seemed. And where she did not like him, she could not escape that same feeling that had infused her the last time they were alone together, and the time before that. A helplessness which she was drawn to. Trapped and at his mercy... only in a good way. Whatever way that might be...

"I take it that it you are finding a dress to wear for the Malsbury garden party?" the duke said finally.

She scoffed. "That is hardly any of your business."

"On the contrary..." Behind her, she heard the door close, which set her heart to racing. "It is entirely my business. Until your debt is paid, as far as I am concerned, I own you."

Her eyes widened at the comment, the presumption of it! Despite the situation, and her less than appropriate fitting, Aurelia turned about and glared at him. "You most certainly do not."

"Not in the literal sense." He walked toward her, still wearing that same knowing



smirk. Her first instinct was to back up, but she held her gown and pointed her chin up in defiance. “But I am invested in your success, Lady Hawkins. Far more than my sister is, at any rate.”

“I do not need your help,” she sneered at him for no other reason than she felt she should. He was trying to intimidate her, and she would not let him.

“Are you sure about that?” He chuckled as he raised an eyebrow and looked down at her. “From where I am standing, you need all the help you can get.”

“I --”

“This dress...” He spoke over her as he so often did, clicking his tongue as a hand reached up. She gasped and froze, no idea what he meant to do. Her heart leaping through her throat, the urge to scream upon her, clashing brilliantly with another, far darker thought... “It is not the one.”

“What do you --” She stammered as his fingers wrapped around the lace of the corset. “What do you mean?”

“It does not suit you,” he said, still fingering the lace. “Or your body type.”

Again, rage infused her. “How dare you!”

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Everything,” she hissed. “It is funny, Your Grace, but all this time I have hated you for the wrong reasons. My belief being that you were far too proper and therefore boring for my liking. Now, I see it is the opposite.”

“Oh?”

“You are a wicked sort,” she continued hotly. Deep down, she knew she should have taken a step back and then told him to leave. But she stayed where she was, right in front of him, almost on him. “Not becoming of your station. A stain on it, as I see it.”

He frowned. “And this comes from you?”

“What does that mean!”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

He clicked his tongue, his fingers still playing with the lace. "I never much liked your friendship with my sister. She is a kind soul, a boon to her name. While you..." He twirled the lace through his hands, his eyes fixed on them as if he could not look away. "You are trouble."

"I am --"

"Never mind the things you say," he continued, not raising his voice because he did not have to. "You dress as a man and sneak into town. You blackmail me. You..." He chuckled. "You walk right into danger where most women would run. It is no wonder you have remained single all this time."

"I am single because I want to be."

"An easy excuse," he said. "One that sounds acceptable but only cuts to half the matter. As to the other half..." Again, he clicked his tongue, this time stepping in closer. His eyes lifted from her chest and met her own stare, which he held for just long enough to have her body trembling. "It begins with this dress."

"And I told you, I do not care what you think."

"It is too tight," he continued as his other hand lifted, taking more lace. "You have a beautiful figure, Lady Hawkins..." Her eyes widened and she felt herself blush. "This does nothing for it. Here, allow me to demonstrate."

"What do you – ow!"

Without waiting for permission, the duke seized both sides of the dresses' corset and yanked it tightly together. She gasped as the duke pulled her into him, forcing the corset to close. This had her bosom squashed and then pressed up, spilling over the front. Or it would have, was the dress not holding it in place.

"You see..." His fingers held onto the lace, keeping the dress closed. "Far too tight. If you are to meet a man who might deem you worthy of marriage, I suggest you find something more appropriate."

She didn't know what to say. Or what she could say! He held her into him, their bodies pressed together. He looked down at her, perfectly calm, no sense at all that he was doing anything inappropriate or scandalous. It was as if they were having a conversation about the weather, such was how composed he was. Aurelia, on the other hand, was trembling.

"You... unhand me," she stammered, breathing heavy.

"Do I make you uncomfortable?"

"I thought you a gentleman," she said, forcing herself to meet his eyes.

"I am," he said, still holding her together. "A gentleman who wants what is best for you."

"I do not want your help."

He licked his lips as he looked down at her. His eyes then drifted downward, over her lips, to her chin, down her neck, and onto her heaving bosom which struggled beneath the corset of her dress. Again, he licked his lips, and he did not need to speak for Aurelia to know what was on his mind.

That alone should have had her crying for help. Perhaps slapping him across the face because this was beyond inappropriate. Aurelia knew she was in her right to do so. That she wanted to be free of this man! And yet...why can I not bring myself to pull away.

She knew why, of course, not that this made things any simpler. What she did not know was whether the duke was doing it on purpose, or if she was simply reading into his actions. She must have been, as there could be no way that he...he is not like that. Surely, not.

Ultimately, the duke made that decision for her.

He released her suddenly and stepped back. Then, he turned and strode toward the door. "That dress will not do," he said as he reached it.

"I don't care what you --"

"I will have one sent to you in its stead." He threw the door open and turned around. "A more appropriate garment that is befitting of you. Make no mistake, Lady Hawkins, I am invested in your future, whether you like it or not. And where you might not want my help, my help is exactly what you are going to receive." He raised an eyebrow at her, expecting her to argue.

All she could do was stare.

He smiled then and nodded, pleased that he had managed to bully her into silence. After that, he stepped through the door and closed it behind him, at which point Aurelia gasped.

She had no idea what to make of what had just happened. No way to comprehend not just how the duke had acted, but how she had responded. Common sense told her that

the duke was simply toying with her, that he enjoyed making her uncomfortable because she was the only person he knew who had seen the true side of him. And yet...

There is more to it than that. I am sure of it. The way he treats me, the way I react, it is almost as is...

She shook her head and dispelled that notion. For it was ludicrous. His only concern for her was the money her family owned, and thus the husband she found for herself. That was where their relationship started and ended. And if she needed another reason to find a suitor and quickly, the chance to expel the duke from her life fully was an added bonus.

## ChapterFive

"I still cannot believe that dress!" Rosalind said as her eyes moved up and down Aurelia's body.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“What of it...” Aurelia’s tugged awkwardly at her dress, not at all liking the way that Rosalind was gaping. And that wasn’t to mention the other guests at the party she had noticed doing the same.

“If you had it this whole time, why did you bother asking me to borrow one?”

“I simply forgot about it, is all,” Aurelia lied.

“I don’t see how. And I can’t remember having ever seen you wearing it before.”

“Yes, well, if I had then I likely would have remembered.”

“It is quite beautiful,” Rosalind said with sincerity. “Truly, I am simply stunned, Aurelia. Stunned!”

Aurelia blushed furiously. Where she appreciated the compliment, again she was not used to such things. “Thank you,” she said quietly, not willing to be so open about how much she liked the dress also, as she had still not come to terms with how she had acquired it and she feared that to show too much interest would be to admit how grateful she was. And how good I know it looks on me...

It was a dark green number, because indeed the green went well with her alabaster skin and darker hair and eyes. It was also simple, no frills or thrills or flair of any kind. Slimming in a way, for it hugged her body, it was not tight, nor was it suggestive. Rather, it was straight cut, with a sash tied around the waist which pulled it under her bosom and accentuated her curves in a more appropriate manner. And yes, it was sleeveless. And yes, its neckline was rather low. But somehow it worked.

Truly, she had never felt so beautiful before.

Of course, she could not tell Rosalind where it had come from, having to lie, which she hated doing. She had even considered not wearing it, surprised in fact when it had arrived at her home two days prior. But to not wear it would have been seen as an affront to the duke, which would have caused a whole host of problems not worth the hassle.

“Your mother is busy,” Rosalind said with a knowing smirk. “I take it that she liked the dress also.”

Aurelia scoffed. “A little too much – it might have been the first time ever that she did not comment on my weight.”

“As does Lord Littlefield, I think...” Rosalind was still smirking as she nodded across the garden, toward Aurelia’s mother. “He has not been able to take his eyes off you.”

“Do not remind me.”

“He is handsome,” she said.

“Is that all which matters?”

Rosalind shrugged. “It is better than nothing. If you are to be forced to marry, better that it be to a man who is nice to look at. No?”

Aurelia pressed her lips together in a showing of dismissal, even if she could not help but agree. At the very least a handsome husband will make it easier for me to hide my disapproval of the marriage, which can only be seen as a positive.

Aurelia had tried her best not to take note of her mother today, for she found it better



to ignore her entirely as if she did not know what her mother was up to. But she found herself glancing across the garden, through the crowd which populated it, until she found her mother and Lord Littlefield.

The Malsbury garden was teeming with guests, steadily growing busier as the day wore on. Most conjugated in small groups, drinking and laughing together. Others wondered to and fro, introducing themselves, making their faces known; Aurelia spied more than a few fathers leading their daughters about in a bid to find them a male suitor. Others played games. Some were already dancing. It was a hive of activity, which Aurelia was happy to stand apart from.

Her mother was among them, currently engaged with Lord Littlefield, a baron who was ten years Aurelia's senior, short but muscular, balding but by no means unattractive. With Aurelia's known desire to find a suitor, her mother was doing everything she could to nominate a potential candidate, and from the way she spoke with Lord Littlefield, constantly drawing his attention toward Aurelia, Aurelia guessed she had found one.

It should have thrilled her to see, saving her the effort of the approach as she did not care who she married, so long as he could help her family with their debts. And yet...

The duke was still on her mind, as he had been all week. She did not want him there. She did not want to think of him at all! But wearing his dress, their last interaction still fresh in her mind, more than once Aurelia found herself thinking about him, his hands on her, his eyes looking right through her. And whenever she did, she found her body flushing warm and her legs tingling...

"Gerald," Rosalind said suddenly.

"What!" Aurelia's eyes widened with fear, thinking at first that her friend was able to read her mind.

“Good afternoon,” His Grace said with a friendly smile as he approached the two ladies. “How are we enjoying the festivities?”

“Let me guess,” Rosalind sighed. “You have some friends you wish for me to meet.”

The duke chuckled. “Do not sound so excited about it.”

Rosalind curled her lip. “I thought you said I could have fun today. No expectations.”

“Did I say that?”

“Yes!”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

His Grace hardly even glanced at Aurelia as he spoke with Rosalind. He was his usual charming self, friendly in manner, proper in statue and air. Nothing about him to suggest the darker side which Aurelia had seen, and no sense at all that it even existed. The way he spoke in front of Aurelia, it might have been another man entirely who had accosted her in that bedroom.

She frowned as she looked at him, searching for the hidden side which she knew to be there. But he was so good at hiding it. So damn good at pretending to be perfect!

“Do not fret, sister,” the duke said, still smiling. “I am not here for you.”

“Oh?”

“It is Lady Hawkins whom I wish to speak with...” He turned to look at her finally, offering her a pleasant smile that gave nothing away. “And I must say, Lady Hawkins, that is a lovely dress.”

Aurelia felt her face flush and she was rendered speechless, looking away so that Rosalind would not see.

“Isn’t it,” Rosalind agreed. “Does she not look beautiful.”

“I could not agree more,” the duke said. “A true beauty...” She could feel his eyes on her, but she could not bring herself to look at him. It was as if he was testing her, teasing her to see if she would break. “Which is why I wondering if she would do me the honor of a dance.”

“What?” Aurelia snapped her head up before she could stop herself.

“A dance,” he repeated simply, still smiling in a friendly manner because his sister was there. “If it suits you?”

She might have liked to tell him to take his dance and shove it up his...easy, Aurelia. Now is not the time. Rosalind did not appear surprised by the suggestion. The duke continued to look at her with a simple expression that most would think to be friendly. To say no would now appear odd, and Aurelia did not wish to have questions asked.

“I would love to,” she said, unable to hold back the sarcasm.

“Wonderful.” The duke offered her arm, which Aurelia had no choice but to link. “Do not fear, Rosalind, I will have you friend back in one piece.”

He laughed as if he had made a joke, then he led her through the garden party and toward the dance floor nearer the back. To get there, they had to walk through the crowd, and Aurelia took note of the heads turning and the mouths muttering to see them together.

“What are you doing?” she said under her breath, doing her best to appear casual.

“Helping you.” As he walked, he looked ahead, smiling and nodding at those who caught his attention. “You wish to attract the attention of a suitor? What do you think will happen if you are seen dancing with me?”

“I might catch fire suddenly?” she scoffed.

He laughed. “That is one way sure to gain attention.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, searching through the facade for the truth of this request. But he gave nothing away, likely because he was telling the truth. After all, he had every reason to wish to see her find a suitor, so perhaps in this instance he was being truthful. If such a thing is possible for him.

They reached the dance floor just as the music died down and those already dancing came to a gentle stop. This gave them time to find their place beside the others. The duke took the lead immediately, stepping into her, one hand on her side, the other taking her right hand so that he could lead.

She gasped as he pulled her in close. He flashed his eyes at her and the look that she saw behind them was reminiscent of the man she was starting to know. That which nobody else did.

“It really is a lovely dress,” he purred. “Not too tight. Not too loose. Showing just the right amount of...” He eyes drifted down, lingering on her bosom. “Skin.”

Aurelia was about to offer a sharp reply. Something to do with him keeping his eyes to himself, unless he wished to see them bruised by her fist. But before she got the chance, the music started, and the duke just about lifted her from her feet as he began to lead her.

“Woah!” she gasped, finding her feet finally, struggling to keep his pace in what was a rather upbeat waltz.

“What’s the matter?” he asked with a grin. “I would have thought you an adequate dancer. Even more than that.”

“I can dance just fine...” She found the rhythm finally, which required her to relax and let the duke lead. Their bodies were pressed. His hand on her waist was tight. And every few seconds, she would catch his eyes drop below her neckline.

“There we are,” he said as they began to move together as one. “Much better.”

“What is this?” she asked him accusingly. “I do not believe for a second that you are merely... what exactly? Showing me off?” She glanced about the garden party, seeing immediately that more than a few of the guests were watching. More than a few men at that.

“A rather crass way of putting it,” he said with a shrug. “But in a fashion, yes. Trust me, as things stand, your stocks are low. If you are seen with me, however...” He shrugged.

“You think an awful lot of yourself. You know that don’t you?”

“Most seem to.”

She scoffed. “Most don’t know the real you.”

As with the last two times she had mentioned the other side of the duke, she expected to see anger flash behind his cool facade. It was so obvious to her that he hated being reminded of this side of himself, or perhaps he feared it? Either way, she braced for the anger.

Instead of that, he smirked, and she saw what looked like excitement take his visage. He licked his lips and glanced about the crowd, dropping his voice then and leaning in close. “You know, there is more to dancing than simply being seen.”

“Is that right,” she said dryly, ignoring the way her heart began to beat because there was something about his tone which caused excitement.

“Oh yes...” His smile grew and she gasped when she felt his hand slide down her waist toward her buttocks. “When you find a partner, as I am sure you will, a dance like this is a perfect time to learn the measure of a man.”

“What...” She could feel his hand now, placed firmly on the top of her rear end. Not so low that those watching might notice, but low enough that she could feel its intent. “What do you mean?”

“Come now, Lady Hawkings...” He chuckles and the grip of his stray hand tightened. “I know you say you wish to marry only so your family’s debts might be covered, but we both know the real reason.”

“What reason – owe!” she yelped as his hand strayed a little bit lower. “What are you doing?”

“Your husband, whoever he will be, should not wish to marry you for propriety's sake only.” His hand squeezed and she felt a moan escape her lips. “He should want you, as you want him.”

“I don't...” She could barely speak, her attention on his hand and how it felt as it held her. Heart racing. Body flushing. She tried not to let it show. “I do not know what you mean.”

“I think you do,” he growled and pulled her in so close that his lips grazed her cheek as he spoke. “A gentleman is all well and good, but what you need, Lady Hawkins...” He gave her another squeeze. “Is a firm hand to keep you in line.”

Her eyes widened and she was without speech. Her legs very nearly gave out. Her breath left her. And her mind... it went suddenly to places that it never had before. The duke with his hands around her corset the other day. The duke now, his hand on her buttocks. The look in his eyes. The hunger on his lips. Is he... surely, he is not suggesting what I think.

“Or not...” As quickly as it started, it ended. He slid his hand back up and began to lead her normally once more. “But it is something to consider.”

She had no idea what to say. In fact, she was terrified to say anything, lest she give herself away. She could feel her skin prickling. And she knew that in her eyes, the duke surely saw exactly what was on her mind. Such that when he looked at her, he chuckled and winked, his delight in making her so uncomfortable readily apparent.

He was teasing her, she was sure of it. That she knew the real side of him, she had no doubt that he was simply testing the limits of what he could get away with. Likely, he



enjoyed making her so uncomfortable.

But there was more to it than that. There had to be. That sense that through the jokes and the teasing, beyond the joy he took from unsettling her, that the duke...is he playing with me? Or is this the real side of him, one that I can't help but find myself drawn to.

The waltz came to a steady stop and Aurelia was glad for it. She needed air. She needed time to think! She needed to collect herself and assess what was going on, because she truly had no idea.

"And where do you think you are going?" the duke said as she started to pull away.

"I..." She hesitated. "The dance is over."

"I did not say you could go." He still held her by the hand, and he looked at her with that same commanding expression that she could not deny, even if she wanted to. Which she found that she did not. "And I would like one more dance, now that you have the feel for it."

"Oh..." She looked toward her mother, who was watching with curiosity. Then to Rosalind, who also wore a frown. It was dangerous to do. It was wrong. But Aurelia always had been one to act without thinking of the consequences, so why stop now. "I suppose I can," she sighed as if it was a most painful thing.

"There she is," the duke laughed. "Look who is starting to learn."

She rolled her eyes and scoffed, all the while trying to hide her smile. She wanted the duke to think that she despised him and wished to be as far from him as possible. But that wasn't even close to the truth.

And thus, they danced again. And this time, Aurelia gave herself to him fully, caring not for the stares or how it might look. As the duke had said, being seen dancing with him could only help her chances. Which is the only reason I am doing it...

## ChapterSix

It was the following day when a most unexpected visitor called on Aurelia. She was sitting at her writing table, staring blankly out the window, her thoughts drifting and then focusing on the one person she wished they would not do.

I cannot stop thinking about His Grace! I want to hate him. And I want to believe that all he has said and done was merely a means to upset me – as he so clearly likes to do. But there is more to it, I am sure. What I am not sure of it how it makes me feel.

“Aurelia!” she heard her mother call suddenly. “Aurelia!”

Aurelia’s eyes turned wide and she jumped from the seat just in time to see her mother burst through her bedroom door. She wore a smile on her face, one which reached her eyes, delighted beyond exception at whatever it was she had come here to tell her daughter.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Mother!” Aurelia cried, looking about with bewilderment, panic taking her as if there was a chance her mother might be able to read her mind. “What are you --”

“Quickly, Aurelia. Quickly...” She rushed to Aurelia, taking her by the arm and lifting her to her feet. “You need to get dressed. Something appropriate – do you have another dress similar to that which you wore yesterday?” She swept to the wardrobe and threw it open. “Rosalind was so nice to lend it to you. If only you had asked for another!”

“Mother, what is going on?”

“He is here, is what,” her mother said with exasperation. “As I knew he would be.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think! After yesterday, I had no doubt he would come. Oh, this is good news, Aurelia. An unexpected visit like this one! It can only mean one thing!”

Despite herself, Aurelia’s mind went to the one place that she wished it wouldn’t. It was ludicrous, she knew. Totally unlikely and thus not worth fixating on. But her eyes drifted to her diary, her mind drifted back to her dance yesterday with the duke, and she could not help but wonder...no. There is no way. His Grace... he is here to see me?

Aurelia found her heart racing at the thought.

Not that this brought her happiness. Not that she wished for it to do so. She would

have rather had snarled to hear his name, perhaps felt sick with grief at the prospect of having to see him. But dammit... the way her body flushed suggested a different desire.

“Is something the matter?” her mother said as she fussed through her wardrobe, noting the smile Aurelia wore. “You are not sick, are you?”

“What? Why would you say that?”

“Your cheeks and chest dear. They have turned bright red!”

“They have...” Aurelia felt her stomach drop and she turned away, trying to cover herself. Why is my body reacting like this! “I am fine,” she then added desperately.

“Good.” Her mother said as she turned back to the wardrobe. “It would not do to be taken ill. And after Lord Littlefield has come all this way.”

“Wh -- what!”

“Lord Littlefield,” her mother said as she yanked from the wardrobe a pale pink gown with a big bow-tie ribbon on the front which Aurelia hated. “He is here, and he wishes to see you. Now, put this on and meet us downstairs at once.”

Aurelia’s expression was horrorstruck, which her mother thankfully assumed was on account of the horrid dress.

“Oh, it is not that bad,” she sighed. “Believe me, Lord Littlefield will love it. Now, on it goes and quickly, Aurelia!” She swept across the room and toward the door. “This is your chance, dear. I spent all yesterday singing your praises to Lord Littlefield. All you need do is not embarrass me!”

Easier said than done.

Aurelia cursed herself for being so foolish. Of course His Grace had not come to see her. Why would he! And of course it was Lord Littlefield who had done. Which was a good thing, she then reminded herself. She did not wish to see His Grace – or be anywhere near him. Still, she detested the man, for he was arrogant and a liar and not at all what he pretended to be. The less she had to do with him, the better.

And that her heart continued to race as she pictured his eyes, his smile, the way he had grabbed her when she was wearing that dress and tearing it open...no, that is nothing to fret over. Perhaps I am getting sick after all?

It was thus that Aurelia put on the hideous pink dress and made her way downstairs and outside to the garden where her mother, Lord Littlefield, and Eveline were waiting. She wore a forced smile as she did, repeating in her head again and again and again to be on her best behavior. Do not think about the duke. Do not think about how he makes you feel. That is not important.

What was important was impressing Lord Littlefield, which Aurelia got about doing as soon as she appeared.

“There she is!” her mother said with over-the-top joy as Aurelia crossed the garden. She and her sister and Lord Littlefield were sitting by a small table underneath a large oak tree which grew across the garden’s back corner. The three of them rose to see her coming. “And doesn’t she look wonderful!”

“Lady Hawkins...” Lord Littlefield stepped around the table to greet her. “It is so nice to finally meet you. And I must say, that dress...” He took her by the hand and gave it a kiss. “Is stunning.”

Behind Lord Littlefield, Aurelia heard Eveline snort.

“As it is lovely to meet you, Lord Littlefield,” Aurelia agreed. “I am so pleased that you have decided to come visit.”

“How could I not,” he said. “After all the delightful things your mother was telling me of you yesterday, I simply had to see if she was prone to exaggeration or if her daughter was indeed the prize that she led me to believe.”

“Shall we guess what the answer is,” Eveline muttered just loud enough for her mother to hear. This saw her widen her eyes at Eveline in warning, which had Eveline grinning.

“Please, sit, Lord Littlefield...” Their mother swept in and quickly led Lord Littlefield back to his seat. “We have so much to talk about, and I know Aurelia will be thrilled to answer any questions you might have.”

“Tickled pink,” Eveline agreed.

This time, Aurelia was the one who looked at her in warning.

The four of them sat around the table, at which point a member of staff poured them each a cup of tea. There was a tray of sweet meats on the table to nibble upon as they drank, but as soon as Aurelia eyed them – she did love sweet meats so very much – she caught her mother glaring at her not to dare.

As noted yesterday, Lord Littlefield was not an unattractive man. Despite his short stature and balding head, he was physically fit and powerful of frame, had a strong chin and intelligent eyes, and even a kind smile. There was nothing objectionably wrong with the man, and Aurelia did her best to focus on that. And not compare him to the duke.

“I will cut straight to the point,” Lord Littlefield began once they were seated and comfortable. “For that is how I am. No sense dancing about the subject when it is there to be tackled.” He took a sip of his tea and smacked his lips. “Your mother tells me that you wish to marry – and quickly. Within the month, as she told it.”

“Oh...” Aurelia blinked in surprise, not expecting this level of forthrightness. To her right, she saw her mother nodding along, to her left she saw Eveline pulling faces. “Yes, I...” She swallowed nervously. “That is what I hoped – but I do not wish to rush you,” she then added, although she could not say why she did.

“And I do not consider myself rushed,” he said. “The truth is, I have been searching for a bride for some time now, a fickle business at the best of times, and to be

perfectly honest, nothing but a headache.”

“I could not agree more,” Aurelia’s mother stepped in, while flashing Aurelia with another look of warning to not say the same thing. “Try having five daughters and then speak to me about headaches!”

“I cannot imagine,” Lord Littlefield laughed.

“You want a headache, trying staring at the dress,” Eveline muttered, pretending to block her eyes.

“Eveline!”

“I am only joking, mother,” Eveline said with a feigned smile and a battering of her eyelashes at Lord Littlefield. “The truth is, I think my sister looks lovely.”

“Ah... yes,” Lord Littlefield said, unsure how to react.

“Within the month sounds perfect,” Aurelia’s mother interjected, laughing awkwardly to try and dispel the tension created by Eveline. “That is not to say we are desperate – certainly not.” More awkward laughter. “Just that we have decided recently it is time Aurelia wed, and as they say, no time like the present.”

“Perfectly put,” Lord Littlefield agreed.

“Aurelia...” Her mother cleared her throat at Aurelia. “Tell him about yourself.” Her smile grew. “Go on then, dear.”

All eyes turned on Aurelia. Tell him about myself? I wouldn’t know where to begin! And that, I am realizing, is because I don’t know the man. Not even a little bit.



The idea of a quick marriage should have appealed to Aurelia. It was exactly what she needed, and Lord Littlefield's eagerness was a boon any way that she looked at it. Regardless, there was something not quite right about this situation. His desperateness. The suddenness of it all. Not only was it surprising, having caught Aurelia utterly unprepared, but it felt... off.

Was she just having cold feet? After all, what did Aurelia care about how much she knew her husband when she wasn't marrying for reasons beyond his fat purse. Or was there another reason, one which had only begun to surface within the last few days...

"I am pleased to hear that you are so eager, Lord Littlefield," Aurelia said, not at all sure what she should say. "As to telling me more about myself, I cannot help but feel that there will be plenty of time for that."

"This is true," he chuckled.

"And I promise I do not usually dress so garishly," she then joked, which had her mother gasping.

"I quite like the dress."

"You are a terrible liar," she said without thinking, which had him frowning, which had Aurelia grimacing. "Unless you are not lying. In which case... thank you?"

"Perhaps a potato sack would have been a better option," Eveline muttered.

"Shall we talk details!" their mother interjected, saving Aurelia from having to say anything else. "Dates? Expectations? Dowries...." She raised both eyebrows at Lord Littlefield.

“Oh, yes, I suppose we can do. I did make a point of speaking straight to the subject, didn’t I.” A nervous laugh, one which again had Aurelia’s suspicions growing.

Nonetheless, the next thirty minutes or so were spent speaking of the upcoming marriage. Both parties agreed that a few days would be needed before anything was finalized and put in writing, but as far as things looked, Aurelia and Lord Littlefield would soon be man and wife.

Aurelia said little during this conversation, choosing silence – rare for her – as she tried to come to terms with how she was feeling. Relieved, she told herself. Grateful. It was done, she had no regrets, and her sister Eveline could now be free to choose a man who suited her. She had a chance at happiness. And that wasn’t to mention Daniel, who might finally calm down now that the stress of debt was removed from his shoulders.

Yes, this is undoubtedly good. And I am happy. Or I think I am. I know I should feel that. I want to! And yet...

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Aurelia could not get past the way her stomach twisted as if with regret. That sense that something wasn't quite right. She could not say what it was, and she refused to try and find the cause. This had to happen, she had no choice in the matter, so best to simply accept it and make her peace.

On the plus side, at least I won't have to deal with His Grace anymore. An added bonus, as it is.

### ChapterSeven

Although the justification for what she was doing was weak, Aurelia was still determined to see it through. It had to be done. It was, in every way imaginable, the right move. And by the time this evening had ended, not only would her family be free of their debt, but she would be free of the duke.

I want the duke out of my life once and for all. More than that, I want him to know that he does not own me. And once I am through here, if all goes to plan, I will never have to speak to or see him again.

This thought made her smile, satisfaction had at holding one over the duke as he had done to her so many times before.

The hour was late. The night was dark. And Aurelia stayed low as she hurried across Sutherford Estate, glad for the cover of the night because she did not wish to be seen. Rosalind, she knew, to be an early sleeper, so there was little chance that she would be caught out by her best friend. But it was better to be safe than sorry.

Under Aurelia's arm was tucked a box, in which she had folded the dress that the duke had bought her – brought to further her excuse for being here. She needed to return it, to rid herself of it, a means by which to show the duke that she no longer needed him. As well as that, she wished to say it to his face so that there could be no confusion.

That was why she had snuck out tonight. Stealing a horse from the family's stables – it was tied up outside the gate of the estate – she reasoned that now Lord Littlefield had proposed to her, it was best to alert the duke to this arrangement so that he would know their debt would soon be cleared. Again, so that she could free herself from his power and his influence once and for all.

And yes, perhaps this news could wait. Really, there is no rush to tell him. But I need to do this. I need to commit to this marriage, and this right here is the best way to ensure there will be no going back.

She knew the Sutherford Estate well, having been here a dozen times or more. Thus, she did not hesitate in taking a side entrance into the home, not at all surprised to find it cloaked in silence as most of the staff were sure to be in bed. She crept through the manor, up the staircase, careful not to make a sound. Few candles burned in the ceiling, providing more cover for her to sneak down the hall, her sights set on the study at its end.

The duke's study. She could see light coming from under the doorway, confirmation that he was still awake and at work. What was more, that he was alone...

Was this the stupidest idea of all time? About to knock on the door, she paused and wondered at that question as she had been doing all night. To sneak out as she had done, to put herself alone in the room with the duke, it would surely cause anger and alarm and even repudiation. But perhaps that was a good thing? Again, he needs to know that I am not the type he should be spending any more time with than is

necessary.

She took a deep breath and knocked on the door. And then, before waiting for him to call her, she turned the handle and pushed the door open.

“Lady Hawkins!” the duke gasped when he saw her slip through the door and close it behind herself. “What are you – what is this!”

“We need to talk,” she said. “And it cannot wait.”

He was sitting behind his desk, hard at work it appeared, but upon seeing her barge into his office, his quill went down, and he was on his feet. Although she shouldn’t have been surprised that he didn’t appear angered by the sight of her. Rather, he looked intrigued, even amused as was often his way when they spoke.

“And you thought this was the most appropriate way?” He stepped around his desk. “How did you get in?”

She shrugged. “I have been here enough times to know my way without causing alarm. And I did not think it would be such a good idea if I was spotted.”

“Which tells me you know how inappropriate it is that you are here.” He walked to the center of the room and might have continued right toward her if she did not take a step back and hold the box out before her. He eyed the box curiously. “What is this?”

“It is for you,” she said, holding her chin up, not wanting to appear scared or unsure. “Take it.”

He frowned as he took the box. “I wish I could say I was surprised, but from what I know of you so far, you make a habit of doing the wrong thing. I almost think that you enjoy it...” He trailed off as he opened the box to find the dress. “And this

confirms it.”

“It is the dress you gave me,” she said. “I wish to return it.”

“I know what it is.” He exhaled sharply from his nose. “Please tell me that you did not sneak from your home and ride here on your own simply to return this dress...” Again, he looked amused, not angry. “Again, there is that sense that you take pleasure in seeing how far you can push the expectations of propriety and decorum --”

“There is one more thing,” she hurried to speak over him, needing to get it out so that she could leave. Which I will do! As soon as I say my piece. “The dress is not the only reason I am here, I mean.”

“Oh good,” he said dryly. “And here I was, thinking that you had lost your mind.”

Aurelia hated how handsome he was. This would be so much easier if he was hideous.. Tall and imposing. Confident and just a little arrogant. Mostly, it was his eyes that Aurelia found herself the most besotted by. The way they watched her, saw through her, read her like a book so that she felt utterly exposed around him.

Still, Aurelia did her best to put all of that aside, focusing on how much he annoyed her instead, as that was just easier. “I have some good news.”

“Oh?”

“You will be pleased to hear that the debt which my family owes you will soon be paid, within the allotted time frame no less. Meaning...” She raised an eyebrow at him. “That you and I, we are done.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

The duke tilted his head as he studied her, and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. She almost hoped that she saw a look of regret cross his face, as if this news might upset him. Sadly, there was no such indication.

“Is that right?” he said with a smirk.

“It is.”

“Does this mean you have found yourself a suitor?”

“It does.”

“And who is the lucky man, if I may ask?” His smirk grew. “He who has stolen your heart as well as your innocence... or rather, who will be.”

She looked at him flatly. “I would say that it is none of your business, but as you are going to find out sooner or later, there is no sense in hiding it. It is Lord Littlefield. Just today, he and my mother --”

The duke began to laugh.

“What!” The anger inside of her flared at his mockery. “What is so funny!”

“Tell me you are joking,” he continued to laugh. “Although if you were, I cannot imagine you would have come all this way to see me. Unless that was simply a ruse...” He winked. “What happened? Haven’t been able to get our dance out of your --”

“I am not joking!” she exclaimed with anger, even if the way her cheeks flushed was caused by something else. “Lord Littlefield and I are to wed. And within the month! Which means that you and I --”

“Will be seeing a lot more of each other,” he said, still chuckling lightly. “I am sorry to say, but despite this late-night assault, and how eager you clearly are to be rid of me, nothing has changed. Except for the fact that I now have a new dress, of which I have no need --”

“What do you mean!” Aurelia snapped. “Did you not hear me? I told you, Lord Littlefield and I are to be wed. And as part of my dowry, he has promised to cover our debts to you.”

The duke snorted. “I am sure Lord Littlefield promised you the world and everything in it, such is his desire to marry. But have you stopped to wonder why he has not married until this point? And why the sudden urge?”

Aurelia frowned, not liking where this was going. “I... what do you mean?”

“Lord Littlefield is hopelessly in debt,” he said. “To me, in fact. He can no more cover your debt to me than can the horse which you rode here on.”

“No...”

He shrugged. “I do hate to be the bearer of bad news, alas, it falls on me to tell you. Marry Lord Littlefield or don’t, the result will be the same. You and I...” He raised an eyebrow at her and continued to smirk. “Are still very much involved, I am afraid.”

“That is... it can’t be,” she stammered as the world began to crumble.

This cannot be happening. He must be lying! But why would he? Surely, he wishes to



have this debt paid as much as I wish to pay it? There is no reason for him to do anything but tell me the truth.

Aurelia felt the room turn around her. She felt her knees tremble. She felt like being sick, the excitement she had been feeling, the resolve which had carried her, dashing against the wall and smashed into a million tiny pieces like a pane of glass dropped from a great height.

It was hopeless. This deal she had made. This desire to find a husband to marry. Worse that she did not even wish to be wed! To be upset by something that she did not want in the first place was... it was... it was more than she could bear.

She stumbled back and very nearly fell.

“Easy there.” The duke went for her, quick to wrap an arm around her back and steady her.

“Get off me!” Aurelia snapped, slapping the duke’s hand away.

“Excuse me?”

“You...” She glared at him, anger infusing her. None of this was his fault. Not really. But he was the face of it, and she was sick to death of how damn reasonable he was being. How cocky. How arrogant! “You are glad this has happened, aren’t you!”

He frowned. “Is that what you think?”

“Of course you are,” she continued hotly. “Oh sure, you pounce about the ton, pretending at being the perfect gentleman. You like that people see you this way. But I know what you really are! I know the true you!”

“And what is that?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“The devil in a nice suit,” she snarled. “Taking advantage of innocent people – holding over their heads the money they owe you. You don’t care about me or my family or anything but what we owe you. It gives you power and control and that is what you love most.”

“Is that what you think?”

“I think you are... that you are... that you are the most wicked, despicable, evil man I have ever met. A rakish scoundrel who if the world found out about then...” She widened her eyes at him, anger boiling to the surface. “I do not even know. But maybe we should find out.”

His expression hardened, as did his tone. “Is that a threat.”

“You want to keep me under your thumb?” She scoffed. “Perhaps it is time you found out what that means.”

As always, he remained calm, even if she could see the anger bubbling beneath the surface. “I will remind you that I am not the one who put your family in debt. That was your father.”

“But you are the one who --”

“Has done everything he could to help you,” he snapped. “I did not have to. Better that I not help you, for it has brought me nothing but pain.”

“I --”

“Am insolent,” he continued, this time stepping into her. Aurelia was so incensed that she did not back down, rising her chin to meet his eyes, wanting him to see how angry she was. That she wasn’t afraid and that she was through being taken advantage of. “You always have been. Since I first met you, you have been nothing but trouble. More than she is worth.”

“At least I am honest about who I am.”

“The good that has done you,” he continued, hissing at her now. He stood over her, their bodies mere inches apart. Aurelia felt the urge to step back again, not liking how close he was... “You wonder why you cannot find a man willing to marry you? You wonder why you are in this predicament in the first place – why I must help you? Perhaps you should look at yourself.”

“There is nothing wrong with me. You are the one who --”

“We are not talking of me,” he spoke over her. “You are the one who needs all the help she can get.” Somehow, he stepped even closer to her. Their bodies pressed together, his hand moved to her waist and snatched it. She gasped and tried to wiggle free, but he did not let go. “Help which I have been willing to offer you. Although why I do...” He scoffed. “I know a hopeless case when I see one. Better that I amputate now and save myself the hassle.”

“I am not...” She tried to wiggle free, but he held her. “I still have one month. Don’t you dare even think about cancelling our deal. Your promise.”

“A waste of time,” he said. “You and I both know it. Give me one good reason why I should bother.”

She curled her lip. “Why waste my breath? A man like you? As if I could trust anything you say.”

He closed his eyes and groaned. “You...” A deep breath which she felt wash over her. “You really need to learn to keep your mouth shut. It does nothing but get you into trouble.”

“Do not tell me what to do.” She widened her eyes at him, trying to ignore the way his hand held her. The duke continued to look down at her, a look now in his eyes that she didn’t recognize but made her heart race.

“Why not? Until you pay me, as far as I am concerned, I own you.”

“You do not! And stop saying that you --”

The duke moved on her before she could stop him. Before she knew what was happening. Her mouth was open to reprimand him, which saw him pull her in close, lean his head down, and plant his lips on her open mouth.

It was as if a fire lit itself inside of her. As if it rose from her stomach, engulfed her heart, and then spewed from her mouth. But the duke swallowed it, accepted it, taking it on himself as he continued to kiss her passionately. Both hands now held her. Even if she wanted to, she would not have been able to pull away. And she did want to... she did not enjoy kissing him... although the way her tongue played inside his mouth, the moans that escaped her lips, and the tingling sensation which ran down her body and spread to her loins suggested differently.

She hated this man. Oh, how she did! And yet... she could not help but imagine her reaction had it been Lord Littlefield kissing her instead. Would it have felt the same? Would she have been so enraptured by it? Somehow, she doubted that very much.

As quickly as it started, it ended.

“There,” the duke said, still holding her, smirking to himself because he seemed to

take pleasure in her shock. “That is one way of shutting you up.”

“How dare --”

“Quiet,” he snapped, which had her shutting her mouth. “What am I going to do with you...” He clicked his tongue, his hands squeezing her waist. “Make no mistake, I want nothing more than to be done with you. You vex me...” He groaned, his hands still squeezing. And that wasn’t to mention the throbbing she felt at the front of his pants... “But I am correct about you. As you are, no lord in his right mind will have you.”

“I don’t care what you think,” she snarled, even if her heart wasn’t in it. Her mind was fractured. Her thoughts in a million places. And it was all she could do not to stare at his full lips.

“You should,” he said. “If you really do wish to be done with me. Or was that a lie?” He raised an eyebrow.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“I never want to see you again.”

“And you won’t,” he assured her. “Once you find a husband. Which you won’t be able to do in your current state.”

“I --”

“Will require instruction. Etiquette lessons. Someone willing to teach you how to behave, at the very least to control that tongue and that temper when in the presence of a gentleman. So far, I see no evidence that you have the self-control for either.”

“You...” She bulked, not certain what he was saying. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure...” The duke studied her again, the hunger in his eyes gone, curiosity taking them instead. “But I will.” Then, he stepped back, releasing her suddenly, turning and walking toward his desk. “We are done here.”

“What?” she stammered, taking her first breath in what felt like a lifetime. Her body was running hot. Her legs were trembling. And as to that kiss... it lingered on her lips so that she could still taste the duke. Not that I want to! I... I... I don’t!

“Leave me.” He walked around the desk and sat down. “I have much to think on, and you being here is a concern that we should be glad to escape before anyone finds out.”

She still did not understand. She was still frozen to the spot. She stared stupidly, dumbstruck as she tried to figure out what was going on. What had just happened! “I

don't --"

"Lady Hawkins," he said simply, perfectly calm, as if he hadn't just kissed her. "I am asking you to leave. Nicely. Do not test my patience." A raised eyebrow in warning...

Aurelia could not remember leaving the duke's office. Or his manor. Or his estate. It wasn't until she was back on her horse, riding home, that she came back into herself, her mind finally fixing back on what had happened between her and the duke.

They had kissed. He had kissed her... and she had kissed him back. All this time, Aurelia was convinced that she hated the duke and wanted nothing to do with him. I still don't! The less I see of him the better! This was a truth, at least, although it was a truth for all the wrong reasons.

What on earth had Aurelia gotten herself into?

## ChapterEight

"It was pathetic, really," Victor, the Duke of Blackwood chuckled sardonically. "I am not even exaggerating when I say that the man had tears in his eyes. I almost felt bad for the poor sod. Well, almost," he snorted. "Pitiful."

Gerald wasn't paying his friend any attention, knowing even before the story began that it was one which he would not like to hear. So, he nodded along as if he was listening, while doing what he could to ignore it.

Not that such a thing would have been hard to do, even if he was trying to listen. Such was the frazzled state of Gerald's mind right now, and how fractured were his senses and ordinarily stalwart composure.

"Needless to say, he will be making payment by the end of the week," Victory



continued proudly. “If not, as he now knows, I will happily see his kneecaps broken. A tad harsh, perhaps, but it is as I told the man. Do not gamble with money you do not have, and such measures will not be taken.” He chuckled and took a sip of his ale. “Is it wrong that a part of me almost hopes he fails to make payment? Let us call it perks of the job.”

“Yes,” Gerald said, still not paying attention. “Nice work.”

“Nice work?” Victor asked, only just now noticing that he was not being listened to. “Gerald, have you heard even a word that I have said.”

“Right, I agree.”

“Urgh.” Victor slapped Gerald on the shoulder, forcing his full attention finally. “Honestly, man, where is your head at!”

“My head...” Gerald blinked, noting the annoyed look on Victor’s face. “What do you mean?”

“All evening, your mind has been elsewhere. Ordinarily, I do not mind it, as it saves me having to put up with your faux-self-righteousness. But I have an amusing story for you, man, and the least you can do is pretend to listen.”

“Concerning broken kneecaps?”

“Ah, so you were listening.”

“Just a guess,” Gerald sighed, turning away from his friend, his mind again drifting. “Such is how predictable you have become.”

From the corner of his eyes, Victor scowled, which had Gerald chuckling. Few men

could talk to Victor like that, not if they didn't want to find themselves on the wrong side of his wrath. Gerald being one of them, because for all of Victor's posturing, the two men needed each other and it behooved them not to become too antagonistic.

Where Gerald was indeed the brains behind this operation, Victor had long since proved himself to be the much needed muscle. It was this power dynamic that allowed the two to work together without their relationship descending into argument and violence. And Victor was a violent man, let there be no doubt about that. Although Gerald supposed that was why he was so good at the job.

The two men sat together by the bar of Gerald's gaming house, watching over the patrons who had filtered through the front door tonight, their goal seemingly to lose as much money as they could possibly afford. And often far more than they could. As far as businesses went, there wasn't another in existence that was so assured of success and profit, even if that was mostly to do with how lowly the entire endeavor was.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Gerald did not like the fact that he owned such an establishment as this. It was beneath him. It was morally reprehensible. It forced him into situations he did not like being in, questions of his character constantly rising to the surface, the black and white code that he lived his life by called into disrepute more often than he had ever intended.

That was why he had Victor, a man with no such scruples as that.

“I was surprised to see you here, this evening,” Victor continued, taking another large mouthful of ale. “What’s the matter? Keeping an eye on me?”

“Do I need to?” Gerald said, not looking at him. He watched the floor, keeping an eye on the patrons as they had a tendency to turn rowdy if not kept in line.

“By now I hope you know that you do not, and I should be insulted that you think you do.” Although Victor was a duke, one look at him might have you thinking him more of a common thug. He was big and brutish, grizzled and mean looking. The type that if you saw walking down the street toward you, you would likely cross to the other side of the road. Just in case.

“I am not here for you,” Gerald assured him. “No need to get upset.”

“Then why are you here?” Victor demanded. “I know how much you hate this place. Or rather...” He chuckled wickedly. “How much you claim that you do. For a man who despises coming here, you are here an awful lot, you know.”

Gerald curled his lip at his friend but said nothing.

Victor was right in what he said. Gerald hated coming here and liked to avoid it as much as he could. That was why he put up with Victor, knowing that where Victor lacked certain social decorum, he knew how to keep the patrons in line and collect on debts. Better than he ought to have.

Technically, the men were partners. His acquiring of this gaming house had been a necessary evil, a weight he had not wished to bear, which was why when Victor found out about it, rather than panicking that his secret would be out, he offered for him to join in on the enterprise. Victor did not hesitate.

One day, Gerald hoped to be free of this place. Sadly, that would not be today.

“I needed to get out,” Gerald offered under Victor’s harsh stare. “Cooped up at home for far too long, is all.”

“Ah yes, that old story,” Victor sighed. “Can’t say I blame you.” He snorted. “For you, especially. Having to play the role of perfect duke day in and day out. It must grow tiresome.”

“I am not playing anything,” Gerald snapped. “That is not what I meant.”

“Yes, yes,” Victor chuckled knowingly. “I forgot. This here is the role that you play at...” He winked and took another sip of his drink. “While the perfect duke, loved by all, is the real you. How silly of me for suggesting differently.”

Gerald glared a warning at his friend, which had little effect. Victor took pleasure in ruffling Gerald’s feathers, constantly trying to goad his darker side to the surface, for no other reason than he found it amusing. But Gerald was being truthful when he claimed that this was not the real him. He was a good person. A morally astute character. A bastion of his station and title! At least that is what I tell myself, for it makes it easier than admitting how effortless it is for me to slip into the role of loan

shark. Why that is... I refuse to even consider.

In this instance, at least, Victor was wrong about Gerald's reason for being here. Yes, it was to escape his home in the hope that he could clear his mind. But it had nothing to do with that side of him.

It might be easier if it did. At least that is something I understand, even if I do not like it. What troubles me right now... I don't even know where to begin.

It was thoughts of Lady Hawkins which plagued him. Just as they had been doing all week. Ever since she stumbled into his office dressed as a man, begging to have her debts forgiven, behaving in a way that wasn't a surprise to him, for he knew what she was like, but didn't disgust or upset him nearly as much as it should have.

On the surface of it all, Gerald's reasons for involving himself with Lady Hawkins were righteous. She was a lady of the ton, the debts on her family were not her fault, and he wanted to help her. He certainly did not wish to see her fall into peril. So, he offered her his help, hoping this would sort the matter out quickly.

Typically, it only made things worse.

He could not understand why he felt the way he did about her. Why he could not get her out of his head! She was just so abrasive. So coarse and rough around the edges. So argumentative and chaotic that he should have loathed the very sight of her. And a part of him did that. The other part...

The kiss they had shared was an accident. He had not meant to do it. But as they had been bickering, he had felt that same fire erupt in him that came whenever she was in his presence. That need to put her in her place. That needed to assert himself, to let go as he never could around other ladies of the ton. To behave himself! It had come over him before he could stop it. And then... the kiss.

He felt his blood begin to pulse hot through his body. His leg began to shake. Thoughts now of what might have happened if he had not had such self-control. How he might have lifted her onto the table. How he might have spread her legs. How he might have dropped to his knees and dove his head between her –

No! Gerald forced those thoughts away. Just as he forced his manhood to soften, as he could feel it growing stiff in his breeches. Now was not the time for that. Or ever, for that matter.

The only thing that Gerald was certain of was that it could not happen again! Which meant that he needed to rid himself of Lady Hawkins as soon as was possible. Still, he would help her, as that was the right thing to do. But he needed to be careful around her. He needed to control himself!

“How goes your sister,” Victor asked suddenly.

“What?” Gerald turned on Victor, feeling a fire blaze inside of him.

“Your sister,” Victor said simply. “How is she? I have not heard you mention – woah!” Victory held his hands up as Gerald took him around the scruff of the neck. “What is the matter with you man!”

“What have I told you about speaking of my sister!” he growled.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Just a question,” Victor said, smirking as he loved to see this side of Gerald. “Were you not telling me you had been searching for a husband for her? Can I not ask, as a friend?”

Gerald fixed him in a glare. “She is not your concern.”

“Clearly,” Victory chuckled. “Next time I have a question concerning her, I will leave it be.” He leaned back, pulling his shirt collar free of Gerald’s grasp. Then he straightened it and flashed his eyes wickedly. “I would hate to see you... snap.”

Gerald glared at him once more and then turned away.

His sister was another problem which he was yet to deal with. Although, and he was also aware of this, helping Lady Hawkins had the added benefit of helping his sister also. He did not like them spending time together. He did not like the influence Lady Hawkins had on his sister. A tad hypocritical, perhaps, but that’s just how it was.

Gerald planned on finding his sister a husband, but he reasoned he could not do it so long as Lady Hawkins was a part of her life. What decent fellow would marry a woman with a friend like that? None who my sister deserves, that is for sure.

If he wanted to find a suitor for his sister, first he had to find one for Lady Hawkins. She was what mattered right now... but only as it concerned her debt to him, and his sister. He had to control himself around her. He had to be proper. He had to be the gentleman everyone saw him as and not let the darker side of him out. Easier said than done...

“There is one more thing,” Victor then started. “I thought I best run it by you, as I know how much you like to pretend to care.”

“What?” Gerald said with warning, sensing still the man’s desire to antagonize him.

“Lord Grayhill,” Victor said, which had Gerald’s stomach twisting. “His debts have become... a problem.” He looked flatly at Victor. “The man owes us more than what he can hope to pay. My feeling is that it is time that we deal with it.” He raised an eyebrow. “And by that, I mean –”

“No,” Gerald said quickly.

“Excuse me.”

He swallowed and pretended to look disinterested. “I am aware of the Grayhill’s debts, just as I am aware of the endeavors they are taking to make payment.”

“And these endeavors are...?”

“Not your problem,” Gerald said with warning. “I am keeping an eye on them. That is all which should concern you.”

Victor frowned at Gerald with confusion and Gerald worried that his friend would push the matter. Aurelia’s family’s debts had been a talking point between them for some time, and until a week ago they had both agreed the time was now to collect. But things had changed; things which he could not discuss with his partner.

“Have it your way,” Victor sighted. “You know best, I suppose.”

Gerald breathed a sigh of relief. I need this matter with Lady Hawkins dealt with at once! As to how he was going to help her – if such a thing was possible! That was



why he had come here tonight, to try and puzzle out a course of action.

How to find a suitor for Lady Hawkins and as quickly as possible. How to tame her for long enough so the first man I find for her won't turn and run screaming? An impossible take, it felt like, but one that Gerald had no choice in.

## ChapterNine

For the second time in less than a week, Aurelia found herself sneaking onto the Sutherford Estate. The only difference from the last time was that tonight, she was expected.

The letter had come for her earlier today, delivered privately so that her mother and sister and brother did not see. She had known right away who the letter was from, now that she could have guessed its contents.

Tonight, my study, the same time as the last.

It was all that the letter had read. No signature. No indication as to why she was needed on such short notice, or at such a suggestive hour. Just that she was to be there. And Aurelia, where she would have loved to have denied the duke, just to prove that she could, she also wasn't that foolish.

So it was that she hurried across the estate, using the cover of night to conceal her, making for the same side entrance that she had the last time. No idea what the duke might want, knowing it couldn't possibly be good, both nervous and excited because of it.

Maybe he has found for me a suitor? Was that not what he told me he would do? But then why the subterfuge? Why the secrecy? And why do I need to see him alone...

Still, that kiss they had shared lingered on Aurelia's lips and in her mind. She had been thinking about it non-stop these last few days, not wanting to – or rather, wanting to have hated that it had happened. But whenever it came to mind, she would feel her body flush and her thighs tingle. She would taste the duke on her lips and remember his hands around her body. She would bite her lip and wonder what might have happened had he not stopped... what she might have done.

It was easy to say that she wished to be done with the duke and his influence over her. It was harder to believe it.

Thus, as she reached his closed office door and prepared to knock, Aurelia made herself a promise. She needed to behave tonight. To control herself. And above all, she needed not to give the duke an excuse to rise to anger and do as he did the last time. No matter how much I want him to.

“Come in,” the duke called as soon as he knuckles brushed the wood of the door.  
“Quietly.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

She slipped inside to find the duke sitting behind his desk, waiting for her. She paused in the doorway as if a barrier stood in front of her, her breath catching as memories of the other night flooded her and her heart began to pound.

“Close the door behind you,” he said simply.

“Oh...” She shook her head and did as she was told. But she remained by the doorway, careful not to walk further inside.

A tense silence fell between them. Or perhaps it was only tense for Aurelia. Whenever she was with the duke, she felt as if she was being judged. He was always looking at her, studying her, seeing through her as if he didn't believe who it was that stood before him. Pressed against the door as she was, she felt her heart beating and sweat beading through her pores. It was as if he was waiting for her to break. As if he knows what he is doing to me...

“Thank you for coming,” he said finally. “I was not certain that you would.”

“Did I have a choice?” she shot back sharply, only to catch her tongue and grimace. Do not rise to his bait.

“No, you didn't,” he agreed with a smirk. “But that does not mean your acquiescence was a sure thing. We all know how much you enjoy pushing the limits of what you can and cannot get away with.”

“I just want this to be over,” she said carefully. “Thus, I figured the sooner I come see you and find out whatever it is that you need to tell me – that could not wait for a

more appropriate hour, the sooner I can leave.”

“An appropriate hour?” He frowned and tilted his head. “And here I was assuming that an hour this late would suit you perfectly. At least in my experience, it always has.”

She looked at him flatly. “Why did you ask to see me? Or rather, why did you command that I come and see you?”

The duke nodded and then went to stand, only to hesitate and reconsider. She could see him working through something, his face scrunched tight as he fought with himself over... she had no idea. But whatever it was, a decision was made, and he stayed seated.

“I have been thinking a lot about you lately – concerning the debt you owe me,” he hurried to explain, his composure dropping for a split second. “Circumstances beyond your control have brought us together, and despite what you might think, I have no desire to laude this debt you owe me over your head. I want you to be free of it.”

She scoffed. “If that is the case, release the debt. It is that simple.”

“Is that what you think?”

“You are the one who my family owes money to, yes? So, it seems to me that it is as simple as I just said. You want to help me? Let us go.”

He shook his head and where she might have imagined it, he almost looked regretful. “I am afraid it is not that easy, Lady Hawkins. If it was, then I simply would do.”

“But why --”

“It is not your concern,” he said sharply. Her eyes widened at the change of tone, he glared at her with warning, and then his expression softened again. “As I was saying, I want to help you. And I intend to. Assuming, of course, that you wish to be helped.” He chuckled. “If such a thing is even possible.”

Aurelia studied him closely for a moment. She was long past the point of believing everything that he said, as a part of her had always suspected he enjoyed the fact that she owed him this debt. That he liked using it against her. And she still believed it so. However, his change in tone just now indicated that it wasn’t so simple. Was it possible that this debt went beyond his control? That he was trapped, just as she was?

“I want your help so long as it is help.” Carefully, she pushed herself off the door and walked into the room. But only a few feet, still careful not to get too close. “That you are not using me.”

“Using you for what?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Whatever it is you loan sharks do, I have no idea. Further to that point, it might be easier to accept your help if you were not so condescending every time you spoke to me.”

He chuckled. “But you make it so easy.”

“There!” she snapped. “Right there.”

He held up a hand to silence her. “Point taken.” His brow furrowed and he came to a decision, finally standing, at which point he walked around his desk. But he did not approach her, choosing instead to sit on the edge of his desk and fold his arms across his chest. “From this point on, I will endeavor to be more... accommodating, where your feelings are concerned.”

She scoffed. "I suppose that is a start."

"With that in mind, we come to the topic of how I may help you. I want your debt paid, which means that I want you to find a suitor willing to pay it. But for this to happen, you must be..." He chuckled and shook his head. "Do not take this as an insult, Lady Hawkins, for it is not meant as such. But to find a worthy suitor, you are going to need to make some changes."

"Changes?" she scowled defensively. "Changes how? What is your meaning?"

"Well, right there is a good start," he said simply. "Your temper. Your tone. Your general sense of hostility which follows you like a bad smell. To find a suitor you will need to behave like a lady who any suitor would be thrilled to court. And as sad as it is to say – again, this is not an insult. But as things stand, you are far from the ideal candidate for such a thing."

Aurelia scrunched her brow and scowled harder. How dare he!

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

She wished to snap at him. To show him exactly what it meant to be angry, seeing as that was how he saw her anyway. And she might have, was she not careful to stay calm so as not to provoke him as she had the other night. That was what mattered the most.

Also, even Aurelia had to admit that at times she could be a tad... rough about the edges. She had a tendency to speak without thinking. She hated being talked down to. And having grown up in a household of six siblings also, two of whom were the apple of her mother's eye, it stood to reason that she found it difficult not to speak her mind. If for no other reason than a need to be heard for a damn change! And that is not even to mention my mother and the enjoyment she seems to take from fat shaming me.

All of this was fine when she had no desires to ever marry a man. But now that she did, even she had to admit that it made things rather difficult.

“What do you have in mind?” she asked simply.

The duke smiled, clearly happy to see her not rising to anger. He pushed himself off the table and walked toward her, only to stop suddenly, leaving half the room between them in a way that felt purposeful. “We do not have time for a complete make-over, nor do I think such a thing is necessary. We are not trying to change you, merely...” He considered with a click of his tongue. “Merely mask some of your more verbose tendencies.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that I am going to instruct you,” he said, letting the statement sit between them for a second. “Privately.”

Aurelia didn’t know if she should be insulted or grateful. “Instruct me? What does that even mean? I am not a pet dog.”

“I never said that you were,” he assured her. “And again, I am not trying to cause offense --”

“Perhaps you should consider not being so offensive then,” she snapped, again catching her tongue a second too late.

The duke stopped talking and looked at her. There was a warning in those eyes, a silent reprimand which she sensed he wanted to vocalize but was working hard to keep at bay. Again, the dynamic of tonight was different to the last time, a noticeable effort from the duke not to let her get to him.

I should take this as a good thing. At least it means he likely realizes that the last time he went too far. Only... would it be so bad if he went that far again?

“Think of them as lessons,” he continued once he was sure she would not interrupt. “Nothing too taxing, I assure you. Simply a means to refine some of your more...” He chuckled and shook his head. “Your more peculiar habits.”

“Such as?”

He tilted his head as he looked at her. “I am wondering now, growing up, did your family have a governess? Someone to instruct you.”

Aurelia grimaced with embarrassment. “We did not. It was...” Her cheeks flushed. “It was not an option.”



“Why is that?”

“Why do you think,” she snapped again, this time not caring.

For once, the duke was not put out by her anger. He nodded understandingly, his tone softening. “I take it you could not afford one.”

She did not answer, looking away with shame.

“It is nothing to be ashamed of, Lady Hawkins.” He took a step toward her, she caught her breath, he stopped. “Nor is a governess entirely necessary. But it does explain a few things.”

She snorted. “I am aware.”

“Your sister, especially,” he joked. “I see now where she gets it from.”

Aurelia laughed before she could help herself. “Eveline is... well, she makes me seem tame, doesn’t she.”

“Perhaps when I am done with you, I might provide her with lessons also. Although by the time I am done with you, I dare say you might be able to instruct her.”

She rolled her eyes. “You might as well teach a cat how to fly.”

“Anything is possible.”

“She is not as bad as she seems,” Aurelia said softly, feeling guilty now for making fun. “And she does try her hardest – she wants to do what is best for us. She has a kind heart.”

“Something she also gets from you, no doubt.” He sounded as if he meant it. And when she looked at him, she could see in his eyes that he did. “It has not escaped my attention, the reason you are doing this.”

“I told you why.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“No...” He shook his head as he took another step closer, still leaving several feet between them. A gap he looked careful not to close. One I wish he would... “Not because of your family’s debts, but because you do not wish for you sister to be burdened with finding a husband who might cover them. A man willing to marry someone as young as that, with such high debts...” He curled his lip in disgust. “It is not a man worth marrying, by my estimation.”

“I...” She didn’t know what to say, feeling embarrassed by the revelation. “I do not mind. I am happy to.”

“I know you are,” he said.

Another silence fell between them, this one nowhere near as tense as before. Rather, there was an understanding that seemed to hover between them now, as if the duke was seeing her properly for the first time. What was more, she was seeing him.

All this time, she had simply assumed him to be a liar. Or perhaps a sneak who wore a fake mask to hide a darker side which he was terrified to see revealed to the ton. But that wasn’t him at all. She met his eyes and she could see the concern he held for her situation, and how impressed he was at what she was doing. He cared, she realized in that moment. He cared more than anyone ever had for her or her family.

They continued to stare at one another. The room shrunk around them. The silence grew. The space between them was several feet but it felt like mere inches. It wasn’t as charged as the last time they were alone. She didn’t expect him to grab her and pull her into a kiss. But she wanted him to come to her. She wanted to feel his protective hands on her...

“I think that is enough for tonight,” he said finally, breaking the silence.

“Oh...” she balked in surprise, letting her disappointment show.

He frowned and tilted his head, a smirk behind his eyes. “Do not tell me you are enjoying my company all of a sudden, Lady Hawkins?”

“What? No. Of course not!”

He laughed and walked around the desk. “Good. I would hate to imagine such a thing might be possible.” He stayed standing, looking at her once more. “Now, unless there is something else?”

There wasn’t. And Aurelia knew now was the time to leave. Yet there was an energy between them, a pull she could feel holding her in place. Gone was her hatred of this man. Gone was her feigned disgust. And with that came a new sensation, one she had been hiding from despite its ever present desires.

“Y -- yes,” she stammered, snapping herself out of the moment and forcing a step back. “Yes, I think... our lesson? When will it be?”

“I will let you know,” he said. “But something tells me I will be seeing you soon.”

“I hope not,” she said, although she could not hide her smile.

He laughed. “Good night, Lady Hawkins.”

She nodded, still smiling, cheeks flushing, and turned and hurried from the room. Unlike the last time she left, her mind was nowhere near as frazzled and confused as it had been. In fact, it was as clear and focused as it had ever been. Not that this made things less confusing. If anything, it only complicated the matter.

It would be easier if I was to never see him again. Only now, I don't want such a thing. Not even a little bit.

## Chapter Ten

"Is something the matter?" Gerald asked Rosalind, sensing in his sister a building frustration which she was hesitant to voice.

"Why would it be?" his sister said, a little sharply. Very much not like her.

Gerald raised an eyebrow at her. "That response is answer enough, I think. Now, come on, what is the matter? You can tell me."

Rosalind pushed her lips together, looking away. "Can I, though?"

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind..." The two were walking together and in a bid to put a stop to the conversation, Rosalind increased her speed.

Gerald sighed and hurried after her. "Rosalind," he said as he came in beside her, then stepping in front to cut her off. "I do not wish to argue with you."

"Yet you seem so insistent on it."

Gerald's expression dropped and his first thought was to remind her not to speak to him like that. And he just might have too, had he not seen the upset look in his sister's eyes. Something was so clearly on her mind, and he knew for fact that he was the cause. He hated fighting with his sister, and he hated thinking that she was upset with him.

“Please...” He reached out and touched her arm gently. “Tell me what is wrong. I know that we do not always get along as you might like, I hope you know that I only ever want what is best for you. Please, understand that at least.”

She grimaced apologetically. “I know you do.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Then what is it,” he pressed her on. “Will it help if I promise not to get upset?”

She laughed. “You getting upset is not what worries me.”

“Meaning that what does worry you is...” He raised an eyebrow at her, sensing her guard dropping. Enough that she was sure to finally explain to him the cause of her worry.

It was a beautiful day, certainly too gorgeous to be arguing with his sister. A trend that had been developing rather often of late, more than what was common when she was younger; before she had reached womanhood. Not that Gerald did not know the cause of this turn in personality, as he had spent more than enough time with her best friend to understand the influence Lady Hawkins was surely having on her.

This might have annoyed him, had he not gotten to know Lady Hawkins better. Yes, she was a little... rambunctious. Certainly verbose and outspoken. But she was kind also, a good friend to his sister, and she seemed to have a big heart which was open to those she loved. Not nearly as bad an influence as I once thought.

As for today? Gerald and Rosalind were on a promenade, walking through London Gardens together because the day was too nice to be spent cooped up indoors. The park was typically busy, and already they had run into several companions of Gerald's, and a few friends of Rosalind's also.

But Gerald hadn't suggested the walk because he wished to socialize, as was often the point of these things. The truth was, he was feeling guilty. Having spent so much time worrying about Lady Hawkins, he had neglected his sister, and those times he

was with her his mind had always turned to her future. She was of the age now where she needed to consider meeting a future husband, one worthy of her. Gerald had promised he would not pressure her but...I know if I do not, she might never marry. And that I cannot abide.

“I...” Rosalind bit into her lip. “I do not want you to get upset.”

“I already told you that I would not.”

“It is just that lately I have felt...” Again, she bit into her lip, nerves growing. “I have felt smothered by you, Gerald.”

Gerald frowned. “Smothered? What do you --”

“We don’t talk anymore,” she said, desperation coloring her tone. “Not like we used to. Not like when we were children. Now, the only time we ever do, it is always with an agenda.”

“Oh...” Gerald knew immediately what she meant, hence his earlier guilt.

“I understand that you wish for me to marry. And I understand that you worry about me and who I might end up with. But I just feel so pressured,” she said, desperation growing; he could see it in her eyes. “And this pressure frustrates me, even if I know it should not. And when I feel frustrated, I grow angry. And when I grow angry --”

“You make sure I know it,” he said, laughing gently so she could see he wasn’t upset.

She grimaced. “I do not mean it. And I do not like fighting with you. But... but take today, for example.” She indicated to the park. “You told me you wished to go for a walk, but already you have introduced me to three of your friends. Men whom I know are single and you are interested in courting me.”



“That is not...” Gerald hesitated, for it was only half true what she said, but true enough that he could not argue. It had not meant to happen, but his friends had appeared, his sister had been there, so why not introduce them? “That is not entirely accurate.”

“I trust you,” she said. “And I hope you know that. But you also need to trust me, Gerald. You must trust that I will not try and escape my fate simply to spite you.”

“Rosalind...” He felt extreme guilt.

“I do want to marry. And I do appreciate your help. But please, you need to stop treating me like a child. Or worse, like an obligation.”

He winced. Everything his sister said was true, even if he might not have agreed with the phrasing. And where he hated to hear it spoken so bluntly, he also appreciated it. What was more, he sensed that her friendship with Lady Hawkins was the cause. She really has had her influence, hasn't she.

“Are you finished?” Gerald said gently.

“I...” She considered. “I am.”

He smiled. “I hear you, Rosalind. What is more, I understand completely.”

She blinked. “You do.”

He laughed. “Of course I do. I know I can be a tad overbearing, but I hope you know I only want what is best.”

“I know it,” she said quickly. “Truly, I do.”

It was then that Gerald looked over Rosalind's shoulder, spying someone who he should have expected to see today as fate seemed designed to force the two together. She was walking with her sister and her mother, enjoying the day as was everyone else. She was, however, yet to see Gerald and Rosalind.

Gerald smiled to see her, an idea coming to mind. "To prove my point, I have a suggestion."

"You do?"

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“I see a friend of mine...” He indicated to his right, where another friend of his was walking down the path, one who was sure to want to speak with him. “Whom I am going to speak with quickly.” Rosalind grimaced, expecting him to drag her along. “As I do, I suggest you make yourself scarce...” He winked.

She frowned. “Scarce. What do you...”

He indicated over her shoulder. “I spy someone who I am sure you would rather spend your free time with.” Rosalind’s frown deepened as she turned, spying Lady Hawkins who was now waving, having just spotted them. “Go,” he said. “Before I change my mind.”

“Truly?” Rosalind beamed. “You do not mind?”

“Not even a little bit.”

Once, he might have. Not so long ago, he hated seeing his sister spend so much time with Lady Hawkins. But that was then, and a lot had changed. And once he and she had their lessons...if they do any good, for I sense it will take a lot to break Lady Hawkins of her bad habits.

Not that Gerald wasn’t going to try. In fact, a part of him was looking forward to it. Just as another part was dreading it for reasons he tried to not think about. Even to see her now, their eyes met briefly, he held them as he did not wish to look cowardly or nervous, but the way she looked down so quickly, her cheeks blushing, told him all he needed to know. That she felt the same as him.

He gave his head a shake, again not wishing to ponder such nuisances. He and Lady Hawkins had an agreement. And that is all it is. Perhaps he was attracted to her. Perhaps he thought about her in that way more than he should have done. But it made no difference! If anything, that was more of a reason to wish to see her gone from his life.

It was thus that as Rosalind hurried to meet with Lady Hawkins and her family, that he turned to his left and strode down the path in the direction of Lord Marlow, an old friend of his who was in the company of a pretty young lady whom he assumed to be the man's younger daughter.

"Your Grace," Lord Marlow greeted him with a friendly smile. "It is so good to see you on this day."

"As it is you, Lord Marlow." The two men shook arms and parted. "What brings you here?"

"The same as you, I imagine," Lord Marlow said. "The day is too wonderful to be wasted indoors, and my daughter wished for some fresh air. Speaking of which..." He turned and indicated to his daughter. "May I introduce you to Lady Scarlett Wainright."

"Your Grace." She smiled and curtsied. "It is an honor to meet you."

"As it is you, Lady Wainright."

Lady Wainright couldn't have been any older than eighteen, indeed attractive, and with the same white-blond hair as her father and light blue eyes. She held those eyes on Gerald, probing him suggestively and Gerald caught his friend looking between them with a knowing smirk.

“The truth is, I was glad to run into you,” Lord Marlow said.

“Oh?”

“My daughter...” He smiled proudly. “She has just debuted this Season and I promised to introduce her to men of worth – it is all she has spoken about, truth be told. And who better than a duke.”

“Is that right?” Gerald said, sensing now what he had found himself in the middle of.

Gerald had to resist the urge to stifle a groan. Is this how it was when he pushed Rosalind on his own friends? That expectation that was brought in meeting an eligible lady whose only goal seemed to be to find a suitor. It was awkward, Gerald felt, and not at all something he was in the mood for.

“It is, Your Grace,” Lady Wainright said, holding him in her stare. “I am so pleased to meet with you. My father has told me such nice things about you and --”

Lady Wainright was cut off by the sound of high-pitched laughter coming from down the path. As one, they all turned to find the source, and Gerald wasn’t at all surprised to see that Lady Hawkins was the cause. She had the attention of his sister and her own younger sister as she gesticulated wildly with her hands, causing the two girls to laugh along with her, even if her own shrill laughter rose above theirs’.

Gerald watched them for a moment, finding himself smiling to see how his sister was enjoying herself. More than that, he smiled to see Lady Hawkins in her element. She wasn’t guarded as she so often was around him. She wasn’t antagonistic. She was relaxed and having fun, caring not for what was proper or what people might think. Being herself, because that is when she was at her best.

“Urgh,” Lady Wainright sighed. “She really is uncouth, isn’t she?”

“What was that?” Gerald turned around.

“Lady Hawkins, is that her name?” Lady Wainright had her nose upturned. “Forgive me for saying, Your Grace, but I am surprised to see you allow your sister to spend so much time with her. Surely, she ought to know better than to be seen with the likes of Lady Hawkins.” She giggled. “I would not let my horses near her, let alone a member of my own family.”

Gerald’s mood darkened, which it should not have. Technically, what Lady Wainright said was correct. At least regarding how crude and uncouth Lady Hawkins was. Times were that he would not have even noticed the comment, even agreeing with it! And yet... he felt himself grow angry, and he could not say exactly why.

“I appreciate your concern for my sister, Lady Wainright, but better that she spend her time with a friend who makes her laugh and reminds her why life is worth living, than with a cold shrew as I find so many young ladies of the ton tend to be.”

Lady Wainright’s eyes widened in shock, and her father blustered in surprise as if he had begun to choke.

“It was good to meet you, Lord Marlow.” Gerald offered a short bow. “And you, Lady Wainright.” He fixed her with a curt smile. “But I am afraid I need to be with my sister. To keep an eye on her, if nothing else, seeing the company that she keeps.” With that, he turned and strode away, leaving behind Lord Marlow and his daughter. And good riddance to the both of them.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

It was so unlike Gerald to act that way. All his life, wherever he went, he was always so careful to say the right thing so as not to offend. He had a reputation to uphold, one which was prized by all as the most pristine in all of London. Insulting lords and their daughters was certainly not his way.

However, hearing Lady Wainright insult his sister... and Lady Hawkins, even if that shouldn't have mattered, had annoyed him. Who were they to say such things? They didn't know Lady Hawkins one bit. And if they did, they would certainly think differently.

Besides, Gerald would be lying if he had said he didn't enjoy the look on Lord Marlow's face just a little...

"Did I miss something funny?" Gerald said as he approached his sister, Lady Hawkins, the younger sister Eveline, and their mother the dowager countess.

"Your Grace!" the dowager countess said with surprise, rushing around her daughters to greet him. "Please, ignore my daughters." She shot them a look of warning. "They have a tendency to forget sometimes that they are in public and ought to behave as such."

"It is perfectly fine," he assured her with a smile. "To live in a world where one should apologize for laughter, well..." He shrugged. "That is not a world I wish to live in."

He looked past the dowager, meeting the eyes of Lady Hawkins. She was frowning at his comment, which had him raising his eyebrows at her. She rolled her eyes and

shook her head, he smiled, which saw her smile sheepishly and look away as if embarrassed.

“How was your friend?” Rosalind asked, the implication clear as she likely thought it was yet another suitor whom he wished to introduce her to.

He shrugged. “Fine, but I don’t want to talk about him right now.”

“Oh...?”

“No...” His mood was surprisingly high. There was just something about the day, and who he was with, that made Gerald feel better than he had in a long time. Relaxed and comfortable beyond what he so often was when with people of his own class. That desire to put on his usual facade of propriety didn’t feel as necessary as it so often did, and there was no need for him to guess why that was.

Rather, Gerald found himself looking beyond where they were all standing, finding an iced-creams vendor not too far away. Although it was a rare delicacy, on days like this they were known to be available in sections of the park where the peerage would conjugate. Gerald didn’t have a sweet tooth, and he was often at pains to curb Rosalind’s, as a lady ought to know better than to indulge in such things. Today, however...

“What say we get you a treat,” he said to Rosalind.

“A treat?” she blinked, unsure of what he meant.

“Yes,” he laughed and nodded toward the vendor.

“Who are you and what have you done with my brother,” Rosalind said.



“Is that a no...?”

She rolled her eyes and then turned to Lady Hawkins. “Aurelia, shall we? My brother’s treat.”

“I did not say that!”

“I want one!” The younger sister, Eveline cried. “Mother, can we?”

The dowager countess clicked her tongue. “I don’t think so girls...” She looked noticeably at Lady Hawkins who was still looking away with embarrassment. “You know how I feel about such things.” Again, a look at her daughter, the implication clear.

Again, Gerald found himself annoyed. He had noticed by now that Lady Hawkins was a tad shy about her weight and voluptuous figure, a fact which frustrated Gerald as much as anything. He did not care how she looked as much as he cared how she acted. And as he had since decided, her heart was too big to worry with such things as weight.

“It is count,” Gerald assured the dowager countess as he strode through the group, putting himself beside Lady Hawkins. “Isn’t that right, Lady Hawkin?”

She frowned at him, a look that suggested that she did not understand what he was doing. Which made sense, as even he did not know. “I am not...”

“Come now,” he chuckled. “Don’t make me beg.”

Still she studied him curiously, which he responded with an honest look. Why he was doing this? Why he felt this sudden need to defend her? I wish I knew. I am attracted to her, clearly. But this feels like something else...

“Well, I would hate to see you bed,” Lady Hawkins said finally with a chuckle.

“Somehow, I doubt it,” he laughed.

The dowager countess still protested, albeit with less enthusiasm. And with Eveline crying out that she wished for one, and Rosalind joining in, the protestation quickly disappeared and soon they found their way toward the iced-creams vendor.

As they did, Gerald made sure to have a quick moment alone with Aurelia. “I have been thinking about our lessons.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Oh...” She was careful not to look at him, pretending to look through the offerings from the vendor.

“Tomorrow evening,” he said. “The same time. Same place.”

He saw her eyes widened suddenly, only for her to force normality. “That sounds agreeable.”

“Wonderful,” he said. “I will see you then.” Then he stepped around her and went toward his sister, where he helped her to select a flavor.

As he did, however, he was sure to catch Lady Hawkins eye once more. She was watching him curiously, a look which suggested she did not recognize him. He smiled and she looked away, only to cautiously look back. Gerald wasn’t surprised by her caution, as he hardly recognized himself in that moment.

Not that he cared either. This was the best he had felt in a long time, and where he wasn’t quite ready to admit to why that was, he was starting to get an inclination.

### ChapterEleven

"Sisters!" Violet, the Duchess of Aldworth beamed as Aurelia, her two sisters, her brother, and her mother, walked into the foyer. “And mother,” she added as she came for them all, her arms spread open. “I am so glad you all made it.”

“We would not miss it,” their mother said. When she reached Violet she took her by the hands and held her back to study her. “You look well.”

“I feel it.”

“Married life suits you.”

“Clearly, it does.”

“Will your husband be joining us?”

This had Violet’s face dropping, joined by her letting go of their mother’s hands.

“Mother...”

“I am simply asking a question!” their mother cried out as if she was the one being attacked. “Is that a crime now?”

Violet scowled at her with warning, not willing to pursue the topic, but not willing to let it pass by either. Their mother, ever the stubborn sort who always thought she was in the right, even when she was not, simply looked back as if waiting for an answer.

“Good evening, Violet.” Aurelia stepped in beside her mother. “Sorry we are late.”

“Aurelia,” Violet sighed with relief, her smile returning. “Not at all. The other guests only just arrived.”

“Who else is here?” Eveline asked sharply. “Tell me your friend Diana has not come. Gosh, she can be a downer.”

“Eveline!” Violet widened her eyes at her sister before glancing over her shoulder as if to check that they were alone. They were, of course, the foyer being empty. But Aurelia could hear the dull murmurs of the other guests in the adjoining room. “Do not say such things.”

“What!” Eveline looked aghast. “She is! The last time I saw her, she spent the entire night in tears.”

“She is widowed,” Violet hissed. “Can you blame her for being upset?”

Eveline clicked her tongue. “I guess not. But that does not mean I am wrong.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “It is lovely to see you. And you, Iris...” She stepped around Aurelia and crouched down to better see their youngest sibling, Iris. “My, look how you have grown.”

Iris was fourteen years old, but she was small for her age, and rather shy because of it. There was no denying that she was the favorite of the sisters in their mother’s eyes, but she was coddled because of it, treated as a precious thing that might just break if the wrong thing was said. Aurelia had always thought it stunted her, keeping her sheltered from the world so she would never have a chance to grow. She and her mother argued about it often.

“I have not...” Iris’ cheeks flushed; noticeable as her skin was paper white, almost translucent.

“You have,” Violet said rightly, then pulling her into a hug. “Oh, I have missed you.”

“And me?” Eveline asked with a grin.

“You wish,” Violet laughed.

“Good evening, sister.” Daniel was the last of them to approach Violet, and he did so in a typically removed manner. Hands folded behind his back, he offered her a short smile and a nod of his head.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Daniel.” Violet, knowing her brother would hate it, pulled him into a hug. As the two oldest siblings, and easily the most well-mannered, they had always been close, and Violet was the only person who Aurelia had ever seen make Daniel laugh, or even smile. “I am so glad you came.”

“I would not miss it,” he said sincerely. “I have been saying for too long you ought to invite us over. Well overdue, I think.”

“I could not agree more.

It was early in the evening, the same day that Aurelia and gone for a promenade with Eveline and her mother. As had been planned for weeks now, Violet had invited them and some of her closest friends to her home for a small get together, known as a drum. Aurelia had always been fond of these drums as they came with no expectations. No need to worry about suitors. Expectations of decorum at a minimum. It was an intimate affair, featuring drinks and games and often just good conversation. And quite frankly, I could use the distraction.

Aurelia had spent all day thinking about the park earlier, and how the duke had been behaving. He was still very much the man who she knew him to be, only not so much. His mood had been peaked. His demeanor had been relaxed and forthcoming. He had behaved around her and her mother and sister as if they were old friends, relaxed and comfortable in ways she had never seen before.

What was more, he had asked her to see him tomorrow evening for their first official lesson together. An expected affair, and not something that should have made her feel so nervous. Only, I am. What is more, I am looking forward to it for all the wrong

reasons...

Needless to say, she needed tonight to relax and stay out of her own head. And, most importantly, to not think about the duke!

“Come then,” Violet said, linking her arm with her mother. “The others are waiting.”

“I do love this home,” their mother mused as they started across the foyer. “Quaint but still roomy. Surely enough room for His Grace to stay, if he was so inclined.”

“I will pretend I did not hear that.”

“I am just musing, dear. Simply musing...”

Violet and her husband did not live together. A secret, as only Violet’s closest family knew – no doubt she had told those here tonight that he was simply away on business. Violet seemed happy with the arraignment, and she had told Aurelia as much. But their mother... she simply could not help but bring it up, as if her constant bickering might see Violet change her mind. Good luck with that!

Her mother was also in an uncharacteristically bad mood. It was just yesterday when it was learned that Lord Littlefield would not be able to marry Aurelia, as he had no money to cover her dowery. Fury had reigned supreme from their mother that day as she huffed and puffed and shouted about time wasted, no honor among men, and how Lord Littlefield would pay for the slight!

As for Aurelia? She was forced to pretend that she was just upset, even if she had known already. Even if she was thrilled by it...

“Attention,” Violet announced as they entered the drawing room where the other guests were waiting. “The last of our guests has arrived – oh, no.” Violet grimaced.

“Sorry, we are still waiting on one more.”

“Who?” Eveline asked.

Before she was answered, the other guests came for them like a swarm of locusts.

The dowager Diana was there, and she was the first to greet them. There was also Lord and Lady Hargrave, both close friends of Violet’s as Lady Hargrave was of the same age. Only three of them, but with the Hawkins mob now involved, there were nine altogether. A perfect size for a quaint evening of drinks and games.

The evening started slowly, with the group sitting about the various couches and chairs, some standing, and Eveline sitting on the floor before the fire with her legs crossed. Violet had indicated that they would play games soon, but there was still one more guest to join them. Nobody thought to ask who, and Aurelia didn’t pay it much mind. Likely just another of Violet’s friends.

It was during this short period that she found herself speaking with the dowager Diana, a conversation which was abjectly miserable, if not laden with warning.

“Your mother tells me you are looking for a suitor?” she asked, forcing a smile but sniffing as she spoke.

“Oh, yes, I am,” Aurelia said, careful not to say the wrong thing as she did not wish to upset the woman. “At my age, it is time for such things.”

“I envy you,” Diana sighed. “I remember when I first met Nathan...” She sniffed again. “Oh, how in love we were – a rare thing, I know. But Nathan was sweet and kind and...” She sniffed again, holding her hand to her nose. “Sorry, I --”

“It is fine,” Aurelia assured her. “Truly, no need to apologize.”



“Do me a favor.” She turned serious all of a sudden. “When you find a husband, hold onto him. Do not let go. Cherish it as I wish I had because you never know when it will end.”

“Ah... I will try.”

“And marry for love,” she continued, taking a deep sip of wine. Aurelia was beginning to suspect the woman was drunk, which she personally could not blame her for. “For love is a most splendid thing and although my heart aches for what I have lost, I would not trade it for anything.”

“That is...” She frowned, not sure what to say or how to say it. “Good advice.”

“And a final piece of --”

“There they are!” Violet cried out, thankfully cutting through Diana’s final piece of advice, which was sure to create even more awkwardness.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Aurelia breathed a sigh of relief, turning to see who had come. When she did, her stomach dropped, her heart beat increased, and she wondered if maybe she would have been better off staying in conversation with Diana.

It was the duke of all people, striding into the room in a way that suggested he owned it. He showed no awkwardness at becoming the center of attention, a commonality for him, Aurelia was sure. He was not alone, of course, for Rosalind trailed behind him.

“Sorry we are late,” the duke apologized as Violet reached him.

“Not at all, not at all,” Violet said with huge smile. “And Rosalind, it has been too long!”

Aurelia stared wide eyes, her pulse rising, doing her best not to look caught off guard or as if the duke being here was causing her to panic. It should not be. And there is no reason I should care one way or the other. But the duke looked about the room, saw her watching him, smirked at her, and her cheeks flushed brilliantly.

“Aurelia...” Rosalind came to her. “Is something the matter?”

“Why did you not tell me you were coming tonight?” she hissed under her breath, careful not to pull attention their way.

“Did I not?” Rosalind frowned. “I could have sworn I did.”

If it was anyone else, Aurelia might have thought that her friend was playing a trick

on her, as if she knew how Aurelia was feeling and wished to see her squirm. But that was not Rosalind's way, and likely the woman had just forgotten.

Nonetheless, Aurelia decided quickly that she would need to avoid the duke tonight, just to be safe. Whenever they were together, lately especially, their conversation always steered toward trepidatious waters, the wrong things being said, Aurelia's tongue and temperament getting the best of her. With so many eyes here tonight, she did not trust herself to behave.

What is more, I do not trust the duke to behave, for I know how much he enjoys testing my limits and seeing how far he can push me.

Thus, Aurelia made no move to approach him like others did, happy to stay out of the way, hopefully for the rest of the night. If only such a thing was possible.

"A game!" Violet announced once everyone was settled. "Let us play a game."

"What did you have in mind?" her mother asked.

"A word association game," Violet said excitedly. "You know the one we used to play as children. Teams of two. The most connections made in thirty seconds wins. And those watching will be the judge – if a connection made it too outlandish, it shall be called and the round ends. Understood?"

"What do we win?" Eveline asked.

"It is for fun," Violet said. "There are no prizes."

"Oh, that is boring."

"We must pair off," Violet announced, at which point her mother took her by the

hand. “And it looks as if I have found my partner...” she added said sullenly.

Aurelia’s eyes widened in panic, and she turned to her left, expecting Rosalind to be there. Alas, Eveline had swept in and stolen her. To her right next, settled on Diana for she was better than nothing. But Daniel and she were together! Oh no...

Panic began to rise. Aurelia looked about the room desperately as the teams were formed. Lord and Lady Hargrave together. Iris nowhere to be seen – likely in the washroom. And that meant...

“It looks like you and I are paired.” The duke spoke from over her shoulder, a touch of amusement to his voice.

She swallowed and turned around, pretending to look nonplused. “Lucky me.”

“Do not sound so happy about it,” he laughed.

“Oh, I am,” she said, her stomach fluttering as if a swarm of butterflies had been released. “I just did not take you as one who played games.”

He shrugged. “I am full of mystery, it seems.”

“And you understand the rules?”

“I am a fast learner.”

“And rather arrogant to boot,” she said before she could help herself.

The duke’s smile widened. “You know me so well. A boon for this game, as we are sure to win.” And then he winked, which had her blushing all the harder.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

The way the game was played was simple. The team whose turn it was sat in the middle of the room by the fire as the others stood in a circle about them. A clock on the wall was used as a timer, and the game began when one of the coupled pairs said their first word.

The first team was Violet and Aurelia's mother. They sat themselves down and the circle formed around them. The duke stood by his sister and Aurelia made sure she was across the other side, away from him. A problem, she realized immediately, as that put her directly across from him, and he watched her with a curious smile that suggested he knew what she was doing.

But what am I even doing? Is it not a better idea to act aloof, as if I do not care? The way I am acting I may as well scream at him what is on my mind.

"Flower," Violet began simply.

"Garden," her mother said back quickly.

"Manor."

"Marriage," her mother said with a smirk,

Violet's face dropped and she fixed their mother with a glare. Nothing said, all eyes on them. Their mother raised an eyebrow, Violet's expression hardened.

"Violet..." Lady Hargrave prompted. "It is your turn."

“Misery,” Violet said just as the clock ticked over thirty-seconds.

“Four connections,” Diana announced.

“It was five!” Eveline cried.

“Misery?” Diana looked at her. “I think we can all agree that is not a proper connection.”

Violet was glaring at their mother as the two rose, replaced next by Diana and Daniel.

“Horse,” Daniel said in a tone that suggested he was bored.

“Rider,” Diana shot back.

“Destination,” Daniel said.

“Gala.”

“Dancing.”

Diana opened her mouth to respond but seemed suddenly unable to speak. Her chin began to wobble. Tears started to well in her eyes. “Rom... rom.... romance...” she stammered eventually, just as the clock ticked over to thirty seconds, which saw her burst into tears.

“That’s five!” Eveline cried, oblivious to the poor woman’s sadness.

Diana sniffed and apologized, hurrying from the circle. Daniel sighed and walked out also, still appearing bored and disinterested.

“Aurelia, your turn,” Violet pressed her.

“Wh -- what?” Aurelia stuttered.

“Who is your partner?” Violet asked.

“Oh...” She blinked and looked about awkwardly, as if to say who it was would give her away. “I... I am with... my partner is...”

“It is I,” the duke stepped into the circle. “Although I do hope my partner’s tongue will become untied before we begin.” He raised an eyebrow at Aurelia, which had the small group chuckling.

As was so often the way with Aurelia, the best means to get her to do anything was to anger her. The duke watched her with a smug smirk as he sat down, and she narrowed her eyes as she sat across from him. They said nothing at first, holding one another in their stares as if daring them to begin.

Silence fell upon them. The crackle of the fire was all that could be heard. There were half a dozen people in that room, but Aurelia found her attention fixed completely on the duke. She looked right at him, he looked right at her, and the tension of the moment built.

“King,” the duke said finally.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Queen,” she shot back immediately.

“Duke,” he responded with a coy smile.

“Power,” she said without thinking.

“Control.”

“Submission.”

“Defiance.” He flashed his eyes at her suggestively.

“Bravery.” She flashed her eyes right back.

“Arrogance.”

“Independence.”

He chuckled, still staring right at her. They did not blink. They did not look away.

“Marriage.”

“Expectation.”

“Desire.”

Her heart began to beat. “Longing.”



“Craving,” he said instantly, licking his lips.

“Hunger.”

“Thirst.”

“Itch.”

“Tingle --”

“Time! Time!” Violet was saying loudly, and by the looks of it she had been saying it for some time now.

Aurelia snapped herself out of the moment. Her heart was racing. Her body was flushed bright red. She was so entranced and locked into the game that she had completely forgotten where she was.

Awkwardly, she looked about the circle, grimacing to see all eyes on her, most with a curious expression as if they weren’t sure what they had just seen. Her mother, especially, rubbing her chin as she looked between Aurelia and the duke.

“That was...” Violet cleared her throat. “Rather impressive.”

“Seventeen connections!” Eveline cried. “That has to be a new record!”

“Well look at that,” the duke said, smiling as he continued to look at Aurelia. “I told you I was a fast learner.”

Aurelia said nothing. She could hardly bring herself to even look at him! Or anyone for that matter. She mumbled something which might have been a ‘well done,’ as she rose quickly and scurried back to the circle. There, she stood at the back, away from

the duke, away from Rosalind, and away from her mother. She was mortified. Embarrassed beyond belief. And worse than that, only too aware of what had just happened and what it meant.

She and the duke. More than adversaries. More than merely partners in a cause. There was a connection there, one that she felt like nothing she ever had before. She glanced up, unsurprised to find the duke watching her, which had her looking away, but smiling because of what she knew it meant.

That only raised more questions, of course, ones with no clear answers. But ones that she sensed would become readily apparent tomorrow evening when they had their first lesson. A lesson which as things currently stood, she was looking forward to. So very much...

## Chapter Twelve

"I am sorry that Lord Littlefield did not work out the way you hoped," the duke said with what sounded like sincerity.

Unable to help herself, Aurelia scoffed. "Liar."

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

He chuckled. “Well, maybe not too upset. But only because I do not think he was right for you. I know the man well, remember, and he is not at all what he seems.”

“Coming from you? That is rich.”

“Odd choice of words,” he teased. “For someone who does not know the meaning of them.”

Her face dropped. “Now you go too far.”

“My meaning is, he is very good at pretending to be what the ton expects of him. But he is a hopeless gambler, a coward, and worst of all, he is cruel – not in a way that suggests violence, but with his words. He likes to make others feel small so he can feel big.” He laughed. “Which is needed for someone as short as he is.”

She could not help but laugh. “It sounds like I escaped a most tormented marriage then. Lucky me.”

“It will be...” He looked at her in that way he always did, as if he could see right through her. As if he knew what was on her mind, even when she was not so sure. “Once you find someone worthy of you.”

Aurelia felt her cheeks flush and she looked away. “We can only hope.”

It was the night of their first lesson together and so far it wasn't at all what Aurelia was expecting. Or maybe it is? The truth is, I didn't know what to expect. As much as I think I know the true side of the duke, I find that I am still trying to figure him out.

She had sneaked to his office in the same way she had the last two times. And as before, he was sitting behind his desk waiting for her. She had wondered then if he would do as he had the last time, keeping his distance and being careful not to say or do anything which might be deemed inappropriate. Or rather, that might lead to their tempers peaking and words said which would only get them into trouble.

Aurelia half hoped he would, at least that way she would have her questions answered. Although they had kissed that one time, it had been an aberration and there was nothing to suggest he would do so again. Having said that...

He rose as soon as she entered. He walked to her, caring not for the space between them. Then he led her toward the desk, sitting on it as she stood before him. Arms folded, he was more comfortable than he had been the last time, more sure of himself. Where she had no idea what to expect, she felt as if the duke had come to terms with himself and was through playing games.

But what games? What does he want of me?

“I have been thinking quite a bit about this evening,” the duke said, his arms still folded. “And how we are to proceed.”

“And what conclusion have you come to?”

“I am not looking to remake you,” he said. “Nor to change you wholly. The simple fact is, there isn’t time.” He considered her. “More than that, I wouldn’t want to. You’re unique, Lady Hawkins – and I mean that as a compliment,” he hurried when he saw her about to react. “And that uniqueness is an asset that any lord should be happy to share in.”

“Oh...” Aurelia was blushing furiously under the weight of his compliment. She searched through it for the sarcasm, perhaps a joke. But when she met his eyes, quick

to look away as it made her heart race, she realized that he was being truthful.

“Having said that...”

“Here it comes,” she snorted.

He laughed. “Your problem, as it stands, is your inability to hold that tongue of yours. You have a quick wit, paired with a sharp tongue, which is a dangerous combination.”

She grinned. “A fact which you can attest to personally, I think.”

He winked. “It is just lucky that I am so easy going.”

“Yes,” she snorted. “A true gentleman.”

It was clear that something had changed between them. Even more clear was that the duke was no longer trying to deny it. When this change had occurred in him, or how, was unknown to Aurelia. Nor did she care. There was tension between them, but it was not awkward. Rather, it felt strangely natural, as Aurelia was rarely able to speak with others in this manner.

I was wrong about the dark side, I think. Rather, it is a natural aversion that he holds to the proclivities of the peerage, as if he resents that he has to act a certain way.

This, she began to understand, was the real duke. And it was a duke which she very much liked. And she could tell he liked her.

“Now...” He pushed himself up suddenly, standing over her. But she did not back down, looking up at him and raising an eyebrow. “The question becomes, how are we going to train you to keep control of that tongue.”

“If you make a joke about treats or training a puppy or anything like that, I will not hesitate to --”

“Nothing like that,” he chuckled. “Although you are not as far off as you think.” He grinned mischievously and she widened her eyes in warning. “What you need is a trigger. Or rather, a reason not to say the first thing that comes to your head.”

“You mean...” She swallowed and she felt her heart pound. “A punishment?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

It was subtle but she saw something pass behind the duke's eyes. She had described it as hunger once, and that felt as apt as anything. Wicked thoughts, they looked like, enough that he licked his lips quickly, his eyes trailing down her.

Aurelia was dressed rather simply tonight. As she had been forced to travel to get here, she wore a full-dress, one which covered her completely and was not at all tight. In the back of her mind, she had done so as a precaution, almost a last-minute rebellion against her more amorous desires. As if it would make a difference. Now, she wished she had worn something a little tighter, showing a little more skin, perhaps giving her bosom room to breathe because she had noticed more than once how the duke enjoyed staring.

"A punishment..." He let the word drip from his tongue. "That is not a bad idea."

She swallowed again. "Wh -- what sort of punishment?" The urge to take a step back, but she resisted it.

"Nothing painful," he chuckled as he continued to look down at her. She could see his mind at work as the corner of his mouth curved into a smirk. "But it needs to be something that will repulse you. That the very idea of it will be enough to make you stop and reconsider what you are going to say. That way, in the future when you find yourself talking to a gentleman, you will remember the trigger... the punishment," he growled. "And hopefully, it will cause you pause."

Her heart was racing. Her body was flushed so hot she was starting to sweat. Alone in this room, the duke mere inches from her, she could not imagine anything he might do that would repulse her. On the contrary, she could imagine many things he might

do that would cause the exact opposite reaction.

“What to do, what to do...” He clicked his tongue as his eyes roamed her. Somehow, she knew that he had an idea ready. Now, he was just teasing her. “It will have to be extreme, no doubt about that. Abhorrent, even.”

Her skin began to tingle and she forced herself to roll her eyes. “Oh, just say it already. I know you have something.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I do. But you must know, this is an extreme circumstance, so...” His eyes flashed and he licked his lips. “So please, do not read too much into what I am about to say.”

“I will do my best...” She squirmed just a little in anticipation.

The duke held her eyes. He let the silence build to a point of intense discomfort because he seemed to know what it was doing to her. And then, he spoke. “I’m going to kiss you.”

Of all the things Aurelia was picturing, that was perhaps the last thing she might have guessed. Her eyes widened. Her breath left her. She stammered, leaned back, half-laughed as if a joke was made, but caught it when she saw how serious the duke was.

“What?” she said. “I don’t -- you are joking...” She couldn’t bring herself to look at him.

“I told you it must be extreme, didn’t I,” he said with such a casual cadence it was as if he had asked her for the time. “And I cannot think of anything more extreme than that.”

“Yes, but...” She tried to meet his cool blue eyes, but the look he held her in was so



intense that it was like staring into the sun. She could feel it on her skin, in her heart, piercing her as if he was reaching into her chest. “I --”

“I am doing this for you,” he said. “Do not think otherwise.”

She scoffed. “Are you sure you are not doing this for you?”

“Ah...” He raised an eyebrow. “And there it is. As expected...” He stepped forward and she leaned back.

“What are you doing?”

“As I said...” He reached down and took her right hand. Then, still looking into her eyes, he brought the back of her hand to his lips and placed a soft, wet kiss on it.

The sensation pulsed through her body. She shuddered. A moan nearly escaped her lips, but she caught it just in time. “What was --”

“A kiss,” he said, still holding her by the hand. “As I said I would.”

“Oh.” She blinked, disappointment crashing through her. When he said that he would kiss her, she had thought...or rather, I had hoped it might be a different sort of kiss. Of course it isn’t. And aren’t I the fool for thinking otherwise. “Right, I just... yes, I see. That is sure to convince me to keep my mouth shut.”

He chuckled and released her hand. “Do not sound so disappointed.”

“Disappointed? Relief, is what I feel.”

“Is that so?”

She looked at him flatly. “Thrilled, in fact. For the idea of you kissing me is not something that brings me particular joy. Revulsion is the word that comes to mind.”

“And there she is again...” The duke chuckled. “You cannot help yourself, can you?”

“What do you mean?”

He did not speak. Standing over her, looking down at her, he moved his right hand to her chin, his finger stroking down it gently before resting underneath. Then, just as gently, he raised her chin and turned her face to the side, exposing her neck. “You need to learn to control that tongue of yours, Lady Hawkins, for it will surely get you into trouble.” He leaned in and breathed against the skin of her neck, which had it breaking into gooseflesh. She shuddered and then gasped as he brought his lips to her neck, another soft, wet kiss placed right at the nape.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

She moaned and her knees buckled. She shut her eyes and bit her lip. She almost moved to kiss him herself, taken completely by the sensation, the moment, the thoughts which besieged her like waves crashing on the shore.

“Now, I hope, you are starting to better understand,” the duke said as he released her chin and stood back up. “The consequences of your actions, Lady Hawkins.”

Aurelia understood well enough by now. Just as she understood that the duke hadn’t specified if the consequences were good or bad. If she wished to take his lessons seriously, then she could have very well tried to keep her mouth shut or not rise to the bait that he was laying. She was not a simpleton. She knew how to keep herself from saying the wrong thing.

On the other hand, Aurelia always had been a rather slower learner...

“Perhaps a little...” Aurelia made sure to be looking up at the duke as she spoke, her voice dropped to a whisper, the intent clear in her eyes. “But I have always been a slow learner.”

“Is that right?”

“Or perhaps you are just not a very good teacher,” she offered instead. “Why should I take all the blame myself?”

He clicked his tongue. “Again, you simply cannot help yourself can you?”

“What are you going to do about it?”

A knowing smirk crossed his lips, for he must have seen what she was doing. What was more, nothing about the way that he looked at her suggested he wished for her to stop. He reached up again, taking her under the chin, turning her face to the side as if he meant to kiss her neck once more.

She held her breath in anticipation. She closed her eyes, waiting for it. Only, it never came...

“Wh -- what are you doing?” she asked, opening her eyes to find the duke still studying her.

“I told you that I would kiss you, but I did not say where or how I would.” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

She frowned. “What does... I do not understand.”

“You are insolent,” he said. “Purposefully antagonistic. You...” He moaned and took a breath, and she could see his body shaking. All this time Aurelia had been so concerned with what the duke was doing to her, she hadn’t considered what she was doing to him.

I’ve never had to before. I’ve never considered that I might have any effect on a man’s self-control and amorous desires. Just the thought that I do... Her thighs began to tingle.

“A simple kiss won’t be enough,” he said.

“Are you sure about that?”

Still smirking, he took Aurelia by both hands as he stepped to the side, forcing her to turn around so that the desk was behind her. Then, quickly, he stepped into her,

forcing her back. The desk hit the back of her knees and she stumbled, forced to sit down. And still, the duke came for her.

He was between her legs, his hands going for her thighs. He grabbed them and squeezed, and she gasped.

“What are you --”

“Teaching you a lesson you will not soon forget.” He raised his eyebrow at her once more. “That is unless you promise to start behaving.”

Aurelia’s entire body was shaking now. She could hardly breathe from the anticipation. Her mind searched for answers to what the duke intended. Her tongue salivated. Her heart grew inside her chest. What is he... surely he is not... there is no way...

“I think we both know the answer to that,” she said, swallowing the lump which rose in her throat.

“Just as I thought.”

The duke took command of the moment without another word spoken. Still between her legs, he dropped to his knees suddenly, his hands squeezing her thighs tighter. On instinct, she attempted to scramble back, but he held her in place as he shuffled in as close as he could.

“You must promise me something...” Slowly, his hands moved down her legs to the bottom of her skirt. His fingers traced her ankles gently as he began to lift her skirt above her knees and toward her thighs. “The next time you even think of speaking out of turn or....” He moaned as he raised the skirt of the dress to her knees. She held her breath, spreading her legs because she saw now what he meant to do. The kiss he

planned on giving her. “You are to remember this moment, and what it will mean if you do so again.”

“I thought...” She took a breath to try and calm herself. “I thought this was supposed to keep me from speaking out.”

He chuckled deeply as his fingers began to trace inside her thighs. “It will do,” he said. “As I expect the next time you think of this moment, you are going to have more than a little difficulty speaking at all.”

“Is that right?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Make sure you let me know, won’t you?” And with that, the duke spread her legs apart, lifted her skirt the rest of the way, and dove his head between her thighs.

It was a kiss unlike anything Aurelia had experienced.

She caught her breath as she felt his lips press against her womanhood. And then she held it as she felt his tongue spread her lips as he began to lick her. It was soft and tender and wet. Careful and gentle. He massaged her lips apart as he licked up and down, his tongue not entering her but teasing around the edges so that her legs began to shake.

“Oh... Your Grace... that is... oh...” Her hands gripped the edge of the table, and her body turned stiff.

That was when she felt his tongue inside of her. She could feel it exploring her. She could feel it licking at her walls as if he was devouring her. As if he could not get enough of her taste. Aurelia leaned back and opened her legs further, caught between shutting her eyes tight and giving herself over to the pleasure which began to roll up her body, or keeping them open because the surprise and shock of it all had her in a stare of apoplexy.

How this had happened, she had no idea. What the duke meant by doing it, she was at a loss. But she tried not to think of that right now, for what did it matter why it was happening? Only that it was.

The duke’s lips suddenly wrapped around her pleasure center. She gasped and cried out as he began to suck. Slowly at first, he increased his speed to the rhythm of her

breathing, the way her body shook, and the noises which escaped her mouth.

“Oh... yes... that is... do not... please do not stop... Your Grace!”

Pleasure erupted across her entire body. It spread like a fire through her. It started right where the duke's lips were, building and cascading over her until she felt that she might explode. Her legs clamped shut around his head. One of her hands grabbed a hold of his crown. She was breathing and panting as his lips worked her continuously, and her entire body vibrated.

“Right there...” she commanded, not even knowing what she was saying. Only that I know I do not want it to stop. “Yes... like that... oh...!”

Aurelia was aware of the concept of sex and love making. She knew of the pleasure it was said to bring. But she had never experienced it herself, just as she had never experienced the explosion that came when she reached breaking point.

It was like a flower opening to the sun. It was like a powder keg catching light. It was the sun chasing away the moon. It was... it was... it was... “Oh, God!” she screamed as the explosion took her entire body. Her legs clamped tighter. She lurched forward and screamed loudly. She began to spasm, caught between pushing the duke's head away and keeping it right where it was. “Yes! Yes! Your Grace! That! That! Oh!”

The duke pulled his lips away suddenly and she collapsed backwards onto the desk. Her head spun. Her vision was blurred. Her body ebbed from warm to cold, covered in sweat, she had never felt this way before.

“There...” The duke stood up and wiped his lips; on which he wore a knowing smirk. “Now, what do you have to say?”

She said nothing, for she could not speak. Still shaking. Still lost in the moment and



the pleasure as it seeped from her body, Aurelia's mind was blank and all she could do was stare at the ceiling, smiling to herself because this night had turned out unlike anything she had imagined to be possible.

"Just as I thought," he chuckled. "Rendered speechless. Who knows, Lady Hawkins, there might be a chance for you yet."

## ChapterThirteen

Gerald did not escort Lady Hawkins from the manor and to her horse as he should have done. He felt guilty about it, as he did wish to ensure that she made it home safely, even if these lessons of theirs' were supposed to be kept a secret. I could have walked her to the door, at the very least. The right thing to do.

The truth was, he needed her gone from his sight as quickly as was possible. He needed her scrubbed from his mind, for her she sat firm in its center and despite his best efforts he could not stop thinking about her.

He was sitting at the desk in his study, the same where he had only just now finished pleasuring her with his mouth. He had not meant for things to go that far. Dammit, he had not wanted them to! His invitation for her to come see him tonight was given in good faith, as he did truly mean to help her learn to better herself so she could find a husband. That is the entire point of all of this!

And yet...

Gerald licked his lips, still able to taste Lady Hawkins on them. So sweet. So insatiable. He ran his fingers over his lips and then sucked them, moaning as he remembered the feel of the woman writhing and shuddering and screaming as he devoured her.

What had happened just now, that isn't who Gerald was. He was a proper gentleman. He was a bastion of his class and title. He was one who others looked up to, respected by all, not the type to seduce an innocent woman in his office for no other reason than that he couldn't control his own damn urges!

On the one hand, he had long since admitted that he was drawn to her peculiarities in ways that shouldn't have surprised him as much as it did. Having been surrounded for his entire life by well to do lords and ladies of the ton, it was refreshing to meet someone who was just so different to the norm. The way she spoke without care. Her quick wit. Her devilish tongue. Her tendency to always say the wrong thing... Gerald chuckled to remember.

Then there was the other nagging problem. That being, the attraction that he felt for her. Lady Hawkins was not his type at all. He preferred slim, dainty creatures. Elegance was his supposed preference. But there was just something about Lady Hawkins voluptuous figure that drove him wild. And that is an understatement.

Sitting alone right now. Remembering how she had tasted. Picturing her screams of pleasure as she exploded in his mouth. Gerald felt himself grow stiff and rigged. Blood pumping to his groin. He moaned and leaned back, his hand moving to his crotch. Images of Lady Hawkins in his sister's dress, when she had been spilling out the front, came to mind and he could not help but wrap his hand around his bulge and --

No! Control yourself!

Wasn't that the problem in the first place? That he wasn't able to control himself around Lady Hawkins. Laughable, as Gerald was a pinnacle of self-control. But this was something else entirely.

The only positive that Gerald was able to take from all of this was that it proved

beyond anything else the need to find Lady Hawkins a husband. And as quickly as he could do! But not so that her family would pay his debts – he did not give a shit about that! He needed to find her a husband so that he could cut her from his life once and for all. For her own sake, as well as his own.

As to how Gerald was going to do that...

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

It wasn't enough to simply give her lessons and hope that they might somehow see her take on the necessary characteristics required for her to find a husband. If she had the entire Season, sure. But one month? Less than that now. No, if Gerald truly wished to see Lady Hawkins married off and out of his life, he would need to take further action.

A dinner party, perhaps? He knew many a young eligible lord eager for marriage – dammit, he had introduced his sister to enough of them. What if he was to host a party with the express purpose of helping Lady Hawkins to find a mate? Yes... and that will have the added benefit of redirecting Lady Hawkins' probable assumptions that I am interested in her.

Tonight was a mistake, and it cannot happen again. It will not happen again.

Never mind that the thought of hosting a dinner party to help Lady Hawkins find a suitor made Gerald feel suddenly ill, sickened by the idea of watching other men fawn over her. Jealous even as he pictured this faceless lord doing to Lady Hawkins exactly what he had just done. Never mind that! The end result was what mattered, that was all.

Once that was done with, Gerald could focus on what really mattered. Or what he told himself did, anyhow. Rosalind was in need of a suitor of her own, as she was now three Seasons past her debut and it was time for her to move onto the next stage of her life. And Gerald also, as loathe as he was to admit it, would one day need to find himself a wife. As a duke, it was expected, since put on hold because he told himself he wished to focus on Rosalind's future first. An easy excuse to tell those who ask, but a harder one for me to swallow.

Lady Hawkins came first, and Gerald forced himself to forget what happened tonight so that he might focus on what mattered. This was no easy thing to do, for his manhood was still painfully erect and all he wanted to do was release it and pleasure himself with thoughts of Lady Hawkins. What was more, he suspected that she might wish to share in this pleasure so the two could devolve into animalistic stylings of lust and --

No!Gerald rose from his desk and strode from the office, determined to put those thoughts out of his mind. He needed a drink. He needed... what he needed was to forget about Lady Hawkins and how easily she unmanned him.Easier said than done.

## ChapterFourteen

Aurelia was in desperate need for something to distract herself with. It had been two days since her evening with the duke and needless to say there had been little on her mind but what had happened between them.

I cannot sleep. I can barely eat. And every time I am given even a moment of silence, my mind strays to thoughts of his head between my legs.

It was for this reason that when a letter arrived earlier today, sent from her sister Caroline, inviting Aurelia and Eveline to have lunch with her at her home, that she was thrilled for the excuse. The only downside was that the letter also insisted that they bring Rosalind, not ordinarily a problem as Rosalind was her best friend, but with all that had happened Aurelia feared that to take one look at her friend might see her devolve with memories of her brother. Again.

She needed to be careful. She needed to keep her mind focused. And most importantly, she needed to not do or say anything that might allude to what she had been getting up to with the duke.

Focus, Aurelia. You cannot let them know or even suspect that anything happened. As far as they know, you hate the duke. And he hates you.

“... Aurelia?” she barely heard the voice of her best friend speaking from beside her. “Aurelia? Are you even listening?”

“Huh...” Aurelia was not listening. She and Eveline and Rosalind were riding in a carriage to her sister’s home, and she was typically lost in her own thoughts – exactly the opposite of what she was meant to be.

“She has been like this for the last two days,” Eveline said with an eye roll. “Mother worries she might be getting sick.”

“Oh no.”

“I am not getting sick,” Aurelia said, pulling her attention back inside the carriage. “I am merely distracted – I mean, I have a lot on my mind.” Her sister and best friend looked at her quizzically and Aurelia’s eyes widened. “With my search for a husband, I mean,” she said a little too quickly. “That is what I meant. It is causing me stress, which is why I am so distracted. Yes, that is all it is.”

“There is no need to worry,” Rosalind said with sincerity. Taking Aurelia by the hand. “You still have plenty of time.”

“I know I do,” she sighed.

“Perhaps you will be able to ask Caroline if her husband knows of anyone,” Rosalind continued. “Surely he has friends he can introduce you to.”

“The Cruel Duke?” Eveline snorted. “Not likely.”

“Oh, that is just a nickname,” Rosalind chastised her. The moniker was one given to Caroline’s husband by the ton, since proven not to be nearly accurate as all the girls had met him several times and had since agreed that he was a lovely man not deserving of such a terrible nickname. “Clearly, there is no truth to it – your sister has said as much.”

“Perhaps he has her sworn to silence,” Eveline teased. “Threatening her to keep her mouth shut.”

“You are being silly,” Rosalind said. “Aurelia, tell your sister she ought to know better than to feed into rumors.”

Aurelia was back to not paying attention. Her mind drifted to the duke, as she had lately begun to wonder if her search for a husband might not have been as difficult a thing as she had initially thought. Is it possible that he has been right before my eyes this entire time? She did not want to think on it too much, as that would only lead to disappointment. But what if --

“Aurelia!” Eveline shook her. “Stop doing that!”

“Oh...” Aurelia found her sister and friend watching her again. Rosalind looked worried. Eveline appeared annoyed. “Sorry, were you saying something?”

There was an irony here that Aurelia could not help but notice. The duke’s ‘lesson’ had been an attempt to teach Aurelia how to control her more impetuous nature and keep her mouth shut when it ought to be. Now, since this lesson, she was so distracted that even if she wished to join in on conversation, she found herself unable. It looks like his lesson worked after all. She chuckled at the thought.

It was only a few minutes later when the girls arrived at Eggleton Estate to find Caroline waiting in the driveway for them.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“She looks good, doesn’t she,” Rosalind commented when they spotted her. “Marriage suits her.”

Eveline leaned over to get a better look. “Perhaps her husband has warned her that she needed to look her best, so that we won’t suspect --”

“Eveline!”

It had been over a month now since Aurelia had last seen Caroline, for she and her husband had been away on a trip, having only returned the previous day. She had always been close with Caroline too, the middle sister who wasn’t nearly as proper as Daniel and Violet and was nowhere near as troublesome as she and Eveline.

Again, Aurelia focused on the needed distraction. What she hoped from today was conversation about anything other than herself and what she had been up to. No mentions of the duke. No allusions to her own would-be marriage or anything that touched that subject. And most of all, she had to be present.

“There you are!” Caroline swept toward them when the carriage came to a stop, and they climbed down from inside. “I was about to send out a search party.”

“Are we late?” Aurelia made for her sister, taking her hands when they reached and pulling her into a hug.

“No,” Caroline laughed. “I was simply bored. Anthony has gone into town to visit friends, and I have found myself with nothing to do.”



“Oh no,” Eveline teased as she came in and gave Caroline a hug also. “A whole morning without your husband, how awful.”

Caroline did not take the bait. “I wish he was here, if for no other reason than to keep you in line.” She stuck her tongue out. “Perhaps I should rent him out to mother.”

Eveline snorted. “I am not scared of the duke.”

“Not yet,” Caroline winked.

The two of them laughed and then Rosalind joined in, hugging Caroline and kissing her on the cheek. Then, once greetings were made, Caroline led them inside and to the dining room where lunch was already being served. Nothing too heavy, as lunch was not a common meal and the girls did not wish to fill themselves before supper later, but some light snacks to sate their appetites as they caught up. Well overdue.

“So, what have I missed,” Caroline began. She beamed at the girls, excitement taking her expression. “Tell me everything – Rosalind, I hear that you are in the hunt for a suitor?”

Rosalind curled her nose. “Who told you that?”

“Anthony said that he heard something to the effect. You know how small the ton is. One lord or another is approached about courting a young lady and suddenly everyone knows it.”

“Urgh,” she sighed. “You can blame my brother for that.”

“Oh?”

Hearing the duke mentioned, Aurelia did her best to focus on the cucumber

sandwiches that her sister had served her. She hadn't eaten much these last few days, having even skipped breakfast this morning. She should have been starving but found herself unable to even feign an interest in the food on offer. Which itself was a rare thing.

"I love my brother, you know that I do," Rosalind said earnestly. "But this Season especially, he has been a constant presence like I have never known before. Everything that I do, everywhere that I go, and everyone whom I speak with..." She sighed again and shook her head. "He refuses to leave me alone."

Caroline giggled. "Welcome to the life of courtship."

"It is worse than that," Rosalind continued. "I understand well enough that he wishes for me to find the best possible suitor. And I know how important it is to him. Only..." She scoffed. "He treats me like a child, as if I am incapable of making my own decisions. It is beyond frustrating."

Aurelia did her best to ignore the comment. She really did! And she as much as anyone was aware of how involved the duke had been in trying to find his sister a suitor. Once, she might have agreed with Rosalind too, very much of the same mind that her brother was an overbearing force who needed to be reined in. But she knew better now.

She saw the duke for what he was. She understood how much he cared. And most of all, she knew that he would do anything for his sister, and she felt a sudden need to remind Rosalind of this fact. Even though I know I really ought not to...

"He is only doing what he thinks is best," Aurelia said before she could stop herself. She spoke softly, looking down at her plate, but her words were heard clearly none the less.

“Excuse me?” Rosalind asked as if she hadn’t heard her.

Aurelia grimaced. “I just don’t think it is fair to blame His Grace, is all. He cares for you, Rosalind. And all he wants is to see you happy.”

Rosalind looked confused. “Well, yes, I know that. But that does not mean he has to be so forceful. And so involved. Anyone would think that it was his marriage on the line.”

“To be fair, who you marry will reflect on his life,” Aurelia continued, again knowing better than to do so. “So in a way, it does concern him as much as it does you.”

“I...” Rosalind looked as if she could not believe what she was hearing. She was not typically argumentative, and Aurelia could not think of a single instance when the two had fought. It looked like that was about to change soon enough. “I appreciate the comments, Aurelia, but you know that my brother oversteps. You have said so yourself.”

“Maybe I was wrong.”

“Oh, this is good.” Eveline was sitting up, her eyes wide with excitement as she looked between the two, eager to see them argue.

“Wrong?” Rosalind laughed. “You know that is not the case. Just as you know my brother needs to learn to keep his nose out of my affairs.”

“Now, that is not fair.”

“It is!” Rosalind cried, getting flustered. “I am only twenty-one years of age, but he treats me as if I am an old maid, desperate to marry. What does it matter if it takes me a few more Seasons. He is unreasonable.”

“He does it out of love.”

“He does it for himself,” Rosalind snapped back. “Anyone can see it.”

“Is he looking to marry also?” Caroline cut in between the two best friends, eager to put a stop to their bickering and change the topic. “I have not heard anything.”

Rosalind was glaring at Aurelia in warning, and Aurelia glared back. She was angrier at herself than she was at Rosalind, because it was not as if Rosalind had said anything untrue. What was more, Aurelia should not have gotten involved, only making things worse. Typical of her, really.

“He should be,” Rosalind answered Caroline eventually, giving Aurelia a final look

of warning to make sure she would not say anything further. “But that is half the problem. We have spoken of it before, and he himself has admitted to me that he intends to find a bride as soon as he is able...”

Aurelia found herself perking up at the comment. She tried not to look too interested, but once again that same thought she’d been having recently reared its head. That of the duke and marriage, the very unlikely idea that perhaps the suitor she was after wasn’t so hard to find after all.

“... but this last Season he has not given any indication that he intends to marry,” Aurelia continued, curling her nose. “And I know why – he thinks I do not, but I am more than aware.”

“What do you mean?” Aurelia asked casually.

“I am what matters most,” she explained to the group. “And until I have found myself a husband, he seems to not care one bit about his own future. Which might sound like a nice thought, but it explains too why he is so insistent that I marry.” She sighed. “The whole thing is frustrating to say the least.”

Eveline snorted. “Can you imagine the bride he would take also? She would have to be the most proper of sorts. Prim and elegant and walking about as if she had a stick permanently wedged up her --”

“Eveline!” Caroline cried.

“She is right,” Rosalind giggled. “My brother would not settle for anything but the best, which might explain why he has given up. Such a lady as that does not exist. The search for perfection in an imperfect world.”

“Elegantly put,” Caroline laughed.

Aurelia did her best to appear mildly interested by the comment, but inside she felt her mood souring at the thought of this imaginary lady of perfect propriety. So not what the duke would want.

What Rosalind said just now made perfect sense, and if Aurelia was being serious with herself then she would have admitted it long ago. In the eyes of the ton, the duke was the perfect gentleman, and when he found himself a bride, she would need to be the perfect lady. For appearances sake if nothing else. But he isn't the perfect gentleman. That's not the real him at all.

Only Aurelia knew the real duke. And only she seemed to understand that the type of woman who most assumed he was suited for would not work with him one little bit. He wasn't the upstanding bastion of propriety as everyone said he was. He had a dark side. A wicked side. A side that was funny and scathing, that was playful and mocking. A side that was, to be perfectly honest, exactly what Aurelia had always wanted in a man.

She felt her mood crashing and she did not care how it looked, such that when the topic found its way to her own sordid life, she hardly even noticed.

"You should have seen how furious mother was," Eveline laughed. "When she learned that Lord Littlefield was broke. The way she was screaming had the entire household staff in hiding."

"Oh dear," Caroline gasped.

"I think it's for the best," Rosalind said, trying to cheer up the mood. "There was always something not quite right about him. And I have no doubt that when Aurelia finds her future husband, he will be perfect. Isn't that right, Aurelia?"

"Wh -- what?" Aurelia looked up to find the table watching her. Her mood was still

crashing. She wished to be anywhere but at that table. Yet she forced a smile and laughed it off. “Yes, he was... too bald for my liking.”

Eveline snorted. “And short.”

From there, the conversation devolved into a discussion of men, particularly what the girls wanted from a husband. Superficially, of course, as without the weight of expectation on their shoulders, that was all which really mattered.

As Rosalind and Eveline compiled their lists enthusiastically, Aurelia sat in silence, unable to find the enthusiasm to join in. All she could think about was the duke, still soured about how the girls had spoken of him. He wasn't what they said or what they thought. They didn't know him at all! Even Rosalind, his own sister, was blind to the man he truly was.

As to why she could not get past this, for it shouldn't have bothered her nearly as much as it was doing... she preferred not to consider.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

She did notice at one point her sister Caroline watching her with clear concern, such that she wondered if she should join in, if for no other reason than to disparage her sister's worry. But again, she simply could not be bothered. My mood should be one that has me singing to the heavens! After all, with what the duke and I got up to the other night, I should have no reason to be so upset. But isn't that the problem...

The day wore on and when it was finally time to leave, Aurelia found herself grateful. The two sisters and Rosalind said their goodbyes to Caroline by the carriage, but it was as they turned to leave that Caroline pulled her to the side.

"Aurelia, might we speak for a moment?"

"Oh..." Aurelia frowned, thinking to say no but seeing the worry on her sister's face.

"Yes, of course. Concerning?"

Caroline pulled her away from the girls and waited until they had climbed inside the carriage so there would be no risk of being overheard.

"Is something the matter?" she asked her.

"What? No..." Aurelia forced a smile. "Why would you say that?"

Caroline fixed her with a look of worry. "You have been quite all day, is why. It is just so unlike you."

"I am perfectly fine, Caroline." Aurelia forced her smile to grow. "I am simply tired."



The lie did not work, which wasn't a surprise. Caroline and Aurelia had always been close, and Caroline was a most perceptive creature. Never the center of attention, she was rather good at noticing when others were in need of a shoulder to cry on; a task that used to fall on Aurelia when Caroline was having a bad day.

"That is good to hear," she said, taking Aurelia's hand and giving it a squeeze. "But you know that if anything is wrong, you can always talk to me. I am here for you."

"I know, sister," Aurelia assured her. "But as I said, nothing is wrong. Perhaps I am just a little distracted, what with my search for a husband."

Caroline laughed. "Oh yes, a most tiresome affair, I am sure. I cannot imagine how it must be going – how mother is behaving, is my meaning."

Aurelia snorted. "She is fine. Or rather, she is not as bad as she could be."

Caroline squeezed her hand again. "If there is anything else..."

Aurelia very nearly broke down then and there. It had occurred to her already that there was no one whom she could talk to about her problems, as Rosalind was certainly not one who would wish to hear about Aurelia and the duke's most secretive activities. Caroline was a safe ear to speak with, and she would understand better than most what Aurelia was going through.

Yet, she resisted that urge, not wanting to voice it for do to so would give it life. The duke was little more than a distraction right now, and not one worth voice or pondering on or pretending that it meant anything. Best to do what she could to ignore it entirely.

"I appreciate it," she said. "But as I said, it is nothing worth worrying over."

“Just making sure...” Another squeeze of her hand. “And I will be seeing you in two days, yes?”

Aurelia frowned. “Two days...?”

“The duke’s dinner party, of course.” She watched Aurelia closely for a reaction. “I assume you are going.”

“Oh...” Aurelia blinked. “I... I had forgotten.” And by forgotten she meant that she hadn’t known about it. With all that had been happening, she must have missed being told. Likely in her own head when her mother or Rosalind had brought it up. “Of course...” She smiled but it was awkward. “I will see you there.”

The duke was having a dinner party. That was...more exciting than it should be.

Aurelia found herself smiling as she made her way back to the carriage, if for no other reason than in two days time she would be seeing the duke once more. Still, she refused to admit why that excited her, determined to play her confused emotions off as little more than arduous curiosity. But deep down, she knew too that this was a lie she could only keep going for so long...

## Chapter Fifteen

"Remind me why I came here again?" Victor sighed as he took a sip of brandy.

“I would say it is because you are my friend,” Gerald said. “Although now I am wondering if you are even that.”

Victor chuckled. “I came to make you look good.”

“Ah yes, improvement by comparison. People will see me standing next to you and

think to themselves, well at least he isn't nearly as bad as the Duke of Blackwood."

"That is not what I meant," Victor scoffed. "My meaning was that with me here, it will be at least considered that you have a few friends of social worth. I look about and I see what? A viscount? A baron or two? Anearl." He sighed. "Honestly, Gerald, you really need to work on your social circle."

“If I did that, you wouldn’t be here.”

Victor laughed and took another sip of his brandy. “Careful now. If I had feelings, I would say that you are starting to hurt them.”

Gerald laughed dryly but did not respond. If he had his way, he would not be speaking with Victor at all – in truth, he was regretting inviting the man, having only done so because it would have seemed odd not to. After all, tonight was supposed to be a gathering of friends, and most knew he and Victor to be close. They don’t know why we are, which is how I plan on keeping it.

It was all a charade, this entire night, its true purpose, and why Gerald’s home was inundated with a dozen guests, none of whom he particularly wished to see or speak with. Of the dozen people here, there was but one whom he wanted to talk with, she who he had spent the entire evening avoiding for that same reason.

He was standing by the fireplace, appearing casual as he spoke with Victor. Taking a sip of his own glass of brandy, Gerald glanced quickly across the room, spying Lady Hawkins in deep conversation with the viscount Lord Mildenhall. They had been at it all evening, since the two sat across from each other for supper, a pairing which Gerald had endeavored to promulgate but was now regretting.

“That reminds me,” Victor started. “Will I be seeing you this week?”

“Hhmm?” Gerald pulled his attention back on Victor. “This week? What are you speaking of?”

Victor raised an eyebrow. “Do you wish for me to say it out loud?” He gestured to the room, in which there were a dozen others. “I was trying for subtlety.”

“Oh...” Gerald’s face dropped. “Right. Yes. I... I am not sure. What for?”

“No real reason,” Victor said. “Simply that I have not seen you there for over a week. And do not get me wrong, Gerald, I do not miss your presence. But you are technically in charge, as you are always at pains to remind me. It behooves you to at least show your face every now and again.”

Gerald clicked his tongue with irritation, annoyed that Victor would choose this moment to bring up the gaming house which they operated together. An operation which nobody save themselves, and Lady Hawkins, was aware of. And for good reason.

The truth was, Gerald had not given much thought to that part of his life of late. He was far too preoccupied for such things. His sister, for one, and his never-ending quest to find her a suitor. And, of course, his current affixation with Lady Hawkins, which had started merely as a means for him to acquire payment owed but had since transformed into a new sort of beast which was playing havoc with his conscience.

That’s what tonight was all about – a night that if it was successful would finally free him of distraction. Which is exactly what I want! Even if my intolerable lust filled thoughts suggest otherwise.

This dinner party was called for the precise reason of finding Lady Hawkins a suitor. He had not told her as such. Nor had he told the five men whom he had invited that he thought might be worthy of her hand. Nor had he told his sister, Lady Hawkins’ mother and brother and sister, Lord and Lady Eggleton, or the few others who he had invited to make tonight appear like a casual affair without sinister intent.

It had seemed like a rather good idea at the time too. The men whom he had invited were those who he had introduced to his sister at one time or another, none of them making the cut, but each perfectly adequate in his eyes. And each with more than enough money to pay the debt that he was owed.

What was more, it was going even better than planned! Which is precisely the problem. Another glance across the room at Lady Hawkins, his stomach twisting to see her laughing at something that Lord Mildenhall said, and Gerald was forced to question for the hundredth timewhy Lady Hawkins was able to undo him like this.

He knew the answer, of course, he just wasn't ready to admit it...

"Your Grace..." Rosalind came in suddenly, a smile on her face as she greeted Victor. "It is lovely to see you again."

"My thoughts exactly," Victor said as he took Rosalind's hand and gave it a very wet kiss. Gerald narrowed his eyes at his friend, for he hated Victor speaking with his sister. "Lady Emerton, you grow more beautiful by the day."

"Why thank you."

"Clearly, you do not get your looks from your brother."

She giggled. "As I have always said."

"Victor..." Gerald warned him.

Victor rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, I was just about to fetch myself a drink. I would ask if Lady Emerton wants one..." He winked at her. "But I would not waste my breath, for I know I'd be better off asking you."

Rosalind giggled again. “And you know what the answer to that would be.”

Gerald looked at his friend flatly, a warning in his eyes. Victor flashed his eyes back, grinning wickedly before walking away and toward the drinking cabinet.

“He is rather amusing, isn’t he,” Rosalind said.

“I would prefer it if you did not speak with him at all.”

She sighed. “He is your friend.”

“That is one word I would use, but not the preferred terminology.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

She shook her head at him. “I just wished to see if everything is going well tonight. So far, everyone agrees it to be a raging success. In fact, the only person here who does not seem to be having a good time is you.”

Gerald grimaced. “Hosting duties, sister. Too much stress to enjoy myself.”

“Is that right?” She raised a disbelieving eyebrow at him. “In my mind, you look distracted.” Her eyebrow somehow rose higher, and for a moment Gerald wondered, and worried, if she could see right through him.

Luckily, his need for a response was cut short by the sound of high-pitched laughter. There were a dozen people in the room, each chatting loudly in small groups, but the laughter echoed above it all, enough that most turned to see its source.

Gerald was one of them, smiling to himself to see that it had come from Lady Hawkins. He had been watching her all evening, noticing with some regret that his lessons with her had worked a treat. At supper, she had been a picture of politeness, staying her tongue and not once speaking over Lord Mildenhall or responding with her usual sharpness. It should have made him happy to see...

What did make him happy, rather, was that finally she was reverting to her old self. The way she cackled was unseemly and Gerald knew more than one gentleman who would be thoroughly turned off by the over-the-top response to whatever joke had been made. Frustratingly, this was not the case.

Lord Mildenhall appeared delighted by her response, chuckling along with her and beaming. He was a plain-looking sort, not unattractive, just so normal and forgettable.



The same could be said of his personality, which had Gerald wondering what he could have possibly said to make her laugh like that. She must be faking it. Maybe she is trying to scare him off.

“Gerald...” Rosalind took his arm. “Is something the matter?”

“Wh -- what?” He pulled himself back to find Rosalind frowning at him with worry.

“You are glaring. What’s wrong?”

Nothing was wrong. And that was the entire point! Lord Mildenhall was a good fellow, which was exactly what Gerald had invited him here. And clearly, Lady Hawkins thought the same. To see them together should have brought relief, for if they worked out the way he needed them to, he would be able to cut Lady Hawkins from his life and move on. Is that not what I want!

It was all so confusing. It was all so troubling. It was playing havoc with his senses and Gerald knew that he needed to get control of himself.

“Nothing is wrong...” He straightened up as he came to a decision. “In fact, everything is perfectly fine. Wonderful.”

“If you say so...”

“I must... I will be right back,” he said, stepping around his sister. “And please, stay away from Lord Blackwood.” He looked at her with warning and she rolled her eyes.

“Fine.”

He nodded once and then started across the room toward Lady Hawkins.

Gerald wanted to put Lady Hawkins from his thoughts once and for all. And he would do that. But first, he needed to ensure that she was of the same mind as him. That she understood what tonight was really about and that she would not ruin it, as she so often did. That was the mistake he had made, not warning her the real reason he had thrown this dinner party.

And perhaps there was that side of him that wished to speak to her one last time, almost to prove to himself that he could do it without losing control. Memories of the last time they had been together still haunted him, and he needed to put those to bed once and for all. Only then, would he be free of her.

Lady Hawkins was still very much engaged with Lord Mildenhall, smiling and nodding along to whatever he was saying. But she saw Gerald approach from behind, frowning slightly before looking away.

“I am sorry to disturb you,” he began as he stepped beside them. “But might I borrow Lady Hawkins for a moment?”

“So long as you promise to bring her back,” Lord Mildenhall chuckled.

Gerald smiled his agreement as he indicated for Lady Hawkins to follow him across the room. They walked to a corner together and when they came to a stop, Gerald made sure to stand in a way that blocked her from the room so that nobody would be able to hear what he said.

“I wish to speak with you,” he said.

She frowned further. “I am confused as to what we are doing now.”

“Alone,” he clarified. “In five minutes, tell your mother you wish to visit the washroom and then come to my office. Do you understand?”

“I...” Confusion passed behind her eyes. She glanced back at Lord Mildenhall. “But I was rather enjoying my conversation with –”

“This isn’t a request,” he said with warning as he fixed her in his gaze. “Five minutes, I will see you then.” With that said, and before waiting for her response, Gerald turned and walked from the room.

He felt like a fool for what he had just done. And he knew deep down that no good could come from this. But he did not care. His desires played havoc with his senses. His confusion was beyond his reckoning. One more conversation alone, that is all this is, a final chance to confirm that I am strong enough to resist Lady Hawkins. That I do not want her...

A lie, he was sure, but one he needed to believe.

### ChapterSixteen

"You wished to see me?" Aurelia began as she walked into the office. She left the door behind her open purposefully.

"Close the door," the duke commanded of her.

"Oh..." She hesitated. "Are you sure? I cannot be gone for too long."

"Close the door," he said again.

She did as she was bid to. The sound of the door closing had an effect which she had anticipated but was made no easier to rationalize because of it. The same way she always felt when she was alone in the duke's presence. Part excitement. Part worry. Part hope, because despite knowing that she could not succumb to him as she so wanted to do, she also prayed that she wouldn't be given the option.

"You looked to be enjoying yourself tonight," the duke began. He stood in the center of the room, arms folded across his thick chest. He spoke with a casual tenor, not accusing, not probing either.

"I am, thank you." She stayed by the door, not daring to walk further into the room.

"Lord Mildenhall," he continued. "You two seem to be getting along."

"Is that a problem," she said sharply, followed by a grimace as she knew the duke would not like that. Also, she did not want to suggest that she cared about what he

thought.

“Did I say it was,” he said.

“He is kind,” she said with a soft smile, doing her best to appear at ease. “And interesting. I was enjoying speaking with him very much.”

“And I am glad to hear it.”

Aurelia frowned as she studied the duke, trying to ascertain why he had asked to see her. What could he possibly want? I know what I wish for it to be...

Aurelia was no fool and she knew well enough what tonight was really about. The duke might not have said as much to her, but she reasoned it out quickly. All these single lords gathered together in one place. Her invitation, one which would not have been extended before she and the duke had agreed to their arrangement.

He was trying to set her up. That was all it could be. Not satisfied with the progress she was making, he had decided to take the initiative and fast-track the process. It was a clever move, she hated to admit, and indeed Lord Mildenhall seemed interested in her. A boon, it should have been, as Lord Mildenhall was indeed kind and friendly and interesting enough. What was more, he appeared interested in her. No sense that he was forcing the interaction, and every sense that he was probing her gently as a suitor might do before announcing his intentions as such.

Still, it did annoy her slightly. The implication being that he thought her so hopeless that she could not find a suitor herself. Does he think I am that undesirable? That much of a lost cause that he has to do all the work for me? Although if that was the case, why had he called her to his office...

Her heart beat quickly. Part confusion. Part excitement. Part... lingering desire to

relive their last lesson because at the end of the day, whatever was the duke's intent, Aurelia was only human.

"There are a few things I wish to speak of," the duke started as he approached her. She stood tall, calm, refusing to even consider that something might happen between them. "Concerning your behavior tonight."

"Oh?"

"You have been doing rather well." He stopped before her, two feet away, trapping her between his body and the closed door. "Since you have arrived, I have been watching you..." Her heart raced at the thought. "... and the fact that you have gained Lord Mildenhall speaks to how far you have come in such a short amount of time."

"That is..." She frowned as she tried to read where he was going with this. "That is good, no? Is that not the entire point?"

"It is," he said with a nod. "If you keep this up, I see no reason that Lord Mildenhall will not insist on courting you. And he is a man of great worth, more than capable of paying off your debts."

"Alright..." Still, she had no idea where this was going.

"All that is to say, I am proud of you." A soft smile took his lips.

"Oh..." She blinked. "That is..." A frown now as she searched for what this was truly about. "That is very kind. And if you are able to put in a good word for me with Lord Mildenhall, obviously that will be to both of our benefit."

"Consider it done."

Nothing was said for a moment after that. Aurelia studied the duke intensely, certain that this could not be the only reason he had asked to see her. Surely this conversation could have waited. As to pull me away as he has done might cause unwanted suspicion. Yet he seemed content with his words, almost relieved as she read it. What does he want?

“If that is all...” Still facing the duke, she reached behind her for the door handle. “Lord Mildenhall will be expecting my return.”

“Of course,” he said. “That is...” He hesitated, biting into his lip. Brow furrowed, she saw something pass behind his eyes, a look she knew only too well. A look that excited her in ways she was quickly becoming accustomed to.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Yes?” she asked, letting go of the doorhandle and meeting the duke’s eyes. “Is there something else?”

He groaned as if from pain, shutting his eyes and taking a moment. When he snapped them open, she understood perfectly what was on his mind. And thus she understood the true reason he had asked her here to see him. Not that this made things simpler. It only complicated them.

“There was one more thing that I need to point out.”

“Just the one?” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“A few moments ago, when you were speaking with Lord Mildenhall, I was across the room and even then, my conversation was cut short by your laughter.”

“My laughter?” she scoffed, knowing that he would enjoy the rebuke. “Surely, you are joking?”

He looked at her flatly. “You know that I am not. It was loud and shrill, unbecoming and surely something that might give a man like Lord Mildenhall reason to pause.”

“Oh no...”

He sighed as if with regret. “You need to learn to control it. As you have done so well tonight with your other more...” He took a deep breath as his eyes roamed her body. “... tempestuous habits, you forget yourself sometimes.”



“What should I do?” She was looking at him, her eyes pleading because she knew where this was going and oh how she wanted it.

“Another lesson, I think...” He growled as he spoke to her, taking another step closer so that he was right on her. “One you are sure not to forget.”

She licked her lips and she felt herself moisten between her thighs. “What... what sort of a lesson?”

“As I said...” He reached up with his right hand, resting his fingers under her chin so that she was forced to look at him. In those eyes she saw the hunger, the lust, the want that he held for her. It made her entire body shake. “A lesson you will not soon forget. And where I hesitate to use the word punishment, I will let you decide.”

“That is fair...” She puckered her lips, expecting him to kiss her. Needing him to.

“No,” he said, seeing what she was expecting. “As I said...” His hand dropped her chin and snatched her waist roughly. She gasped and he stepped further, forcing her back so that she was pressed against the door. “Not that sort of lesson.”

Her heart raced. Her mind searched. What does he mean to do? Not that I care. There is nothing he could do right now that I would not want. “You best teach me then,” she purred. “For I am a slow learner, and I dare say that if the point is not made...” She shrugged and then breathed. “I will likely err again, for I am a very bad girl.”

He groaned and squeezed her by the waist. Eyes shut, his breathing was ragged as if he was trying to control himself. She watched him, waiting with impatience, needing him to do as he wished to her. I might scream if he does not.

Then his eyes snapped open, and he met her. “Turn around.”

She bulked. “Excuse me?”

“Turn around,” he growled. “I will not ask again.”

Her beating heart spiked inside her chest. A moment of panic for she had no idea what he intended. But Aurelia found in that moment that she trusted the duke completely. And whatever it was that he was going to do to her, she knew that she would enjoy it.

Without question, she turned around.

The duke stepped into her immediately, pressing his body against her and pinning her to the door. Both his hands moved down and wrapped around her butt, squeezing it. He moaned with pleasure as his lips wrapped around her right ear. “The next time you even think of laughing loudly or doing anything that draws attention in a way it ought not to, I want you to remember this. Is that understood?”

“I am a slow learner...” Her body was shaking with excitement. “You best make it a good lesson.”

He chuckled as he pulled back. Then his hands slid further down her butt and grabbed at her dress. Her breath caught in her throat as she felt him lift her dress higher and higher until her bare butt cheeks were exposed.

On instinct, she stuck them outwards, presenting them. This had the duke moaning again and she could picture on his face the look of abject desire that she knew he was wearing.

His hand began to stroke her bare skin softly. Rubbing it as if in admiration. She frowned, not sure what he was doing or how this was meant to teach her –

He pulled his hand back and spanked her! A sharp crack. A spike of pain flaring across her skin. She cried out and might have screamed but he was quick to wrap his other hand around her mouth to keep her from making too much noise.

“I do not want to do this,” he growled into her ear, his body once again pressed against her. “It is for your own good. Understand?”

She nodded but could not speak for his hand was covering her mouth.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Again, he spanked her. Harder this time. The sensation was unlike anything she expected. Yes, it stung, as that was the point. But it did not hurt. It did not cause pain. Rather, she felt the spike ripple through her body and touch at her loins. She felt herself turn wet instantly, her legs nearly giving out.

A third spank, the hardest one yet.

“Are you going to behave yourself? Nod if you are.”

She went to nod but paused, considered, and then shook her head.

He chuckled deeply; she could hear it coming from his chest. Then he spanked her again and her cry of pleasure was muffled. “Are you going to behave yourself?”

Again, she shook her head, pushing her butt out, tempting him to continue to punish her.

“This is for your own good.” He spanked her. “You will behave.” He spanked her. “You are a lady, and you will act as such.” Another spank, the hardest one yet, and her knees gave out as she collapsed into the doorway.

The duke pressed against her, pinning her in place. His body was heavy. His breathing was ragged. She could feel his heart beating inside his chest. Just as she could feel his manhood pressing through his pants as it rested between the crevice of her butt cheeks.

“You’re going to be a good girl from now on, aren’t you?”

This time, she nodded.

“I thought so,” he chuckled, his hand now massaging where he had spanked. “And every time you are with Lord Mildenhall, I want you to remember this moment. Will you do that?”

Again, she nodded.

He breathed on the back of her neck. His lips found her earlobe and he began to suck. Her body shuddered and she wanted him like she never had before. She was his to do with as he wished. Anything and everything! I am at his mercy...

Only then, as quickly as it had started, it ended.

The duke released her and stepped back. As he had done the last time, he turned on her and walked across the room as if from shame. He did not look at her, his entire body shaking as he tried to calm his breathing.

“Go,” he said.

“I...” She hesitated. “Are you –”

“Go!” he snarled. “Before you are missed.”

She gasped at the sudden rancor. Confusion enveloped her. She had no doubt now that the duke wanted her as she wanted him. She knew beyond questioning that their physical attraction was real, and whatever this was went beyond mere lessons in etiquette, as he liked to claim. But that only sought to make the matter all that much more perilous to her intrepid emotions and sense of righteousness.

The reason she had gone down this path in the first place was for the sake of her

family and their debts. If she had not, her sister would be forced to marry someone beneath her, ruining her life in ways that Aurelia simply could not stand by and let happen. This was for Eveline. That was all it could be.

And yet moments like this one right now flew directly in the face of that claim. If Aurelia truly did care for her sister and her family as she knew she did, why did she continue to allow the duke to draw her in like this? Why could she not resist him? No good could come from what she and the duke were doing, and what was more, it was likely to lead to disaster.

But dammit how she wanted him. Even now as I flee from his office, if he was to call me back... I do not think I have the self-control to say no. There were the two halves of her brain locked in constant battle. The logical side that knew she needed to resist the duke's lure, and the amorous side that could not stop thinking about him.

The journey back to the drawing room was a long and confusing one. Her buttocks ached from where he had spanked her. Her mind was one of confusion, not at all sure how she felt or what she should do.

And this confusion only compounded when she entered the drawing room to see Lord Mildenhall coming for her. He wore a big smile, his blue eyes danced with glee to see her once more. She had no doubt that if she wished it, he would continue to pursue her. But he wasn't the duke, and that was one point she simply could not get around no matter how hard she wished it.

## Chapter Seventeen

"Gerald, are you even listening to me?" Victor asked him.

"Of course I am," Gerald said, even if he most certainly was not listening.

“Tell me then, what did I just say?”

Not only was Gerald not listening to Victor, but he wasn't looking at him either. The two men were sequestered in Gerald's study; Gerald sitting behind his desk, Victor sitting in front of it. Before them both were mounds of paperwork pertaining to their gaming house, as Victor had come here today so the two might get some work done – debts which needed to be sorted through so that they could be collected on. And where Victor had spent the last thirty minutes or so doing as he had come here to do, Gerald's mind was keenly in other places.

He was looking past Victor of the moment, toward the closed office door. Unable to look away from it, it was all Gerald could do to keep his arousal at bay as he remembered two nights ago when he had Lady Hawkins bent over in front of that door as he spanked her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Her big, round butt sticking out. Skin so creamy white. The way she pushed it back, wiggling it as she teased me. And the noises that escaped her each time I struck it...

He was losing his mind. His senses. His self-control! Gerald needed to focus. He needed to forget what had happened between them. He needed to remove Lady Hawkins from his thoughts, from his life before she undid him completely. But then he would look at that door again and the memories would return...

“Gerald?”

“You were speaking of Mr. Montague,” Gerald ventures, forcing his gaze from the door and back on Victor. Victor was frowning at him, annoyed it seemed, at being ignored. “And the debts he owes us.”

“Oh, well done,” he said dryly. “Do you care to comment on what was said? How much he owes? The interest! And how long overdue he is in making payments?”

“Ah...” Gerald swallowed. “Why don’t you remind me?”

Victor groaned. “As I have just done, you mean. Honestly, man! You refuse to come to the office, insisting that I make the trip out here. I do so, thinking that you might at least do me the courtesy of pretending that your head is on your shoulders. The least you can do in return is —”

“I am sorry, Victor,” Gerald spoke over him. “I am just a little distracted.”

“Clearly,” Victor scoffed. “Care to tell me to what this distraction pertains? Or do I



need to guess?”

Again, Gerald looked at the closed door and his blood began to pump red and hot through his veins.

It had not meant to go that far with Lady Hawkins. And it very nearly hadn't. Gerald had invited Lady Hawkins to his office precisely to prove that he would be able to control himself. To pay her a compliment and insist upon her relationship with Lord Mildenhall. If he was able to ensure that their budding relationship worked, then he would be free of her completely, which was what he wanted.

But he had found himself growing vexed to hear her speak of Lord Mildenhall. He had found himself not wanting them to be together. Undone and having lost complete control, Gerald gave in to his most base desires.

Worse than all of that, he could not say for sure if he was presented with the exact same set of circumstances, he wouldn't do so again. What is happening to me?

“What are you looking at?” Victor caught the look in Gerald's eye, turning to look at the empty doorway. “What is going on?”

Gerald baulked, unsure what to say, knowing that if he tried to lie then his friend would see right through him. Lucky that he was saved from such a thing as the door suddenly flew open.

“Brother.” Rosalind stood in the doorway, her expression set and brimming with determination. “I need to speak with you.”

“Ah, Lady Emerton!” Victor sat up. “This is a most pleasant surprise.”

Gerald glared at his friend before fixing that glare on his sister. “Now is not a good

time, Rosalind. I am with company.”

“This will only take a moment.” She walked into the room without waiting for invitation. “I just wished to let you know that Aurelia and Violet have invited me to go shopping with them today, and I must leave at once if I plan on being on time.”

“You... what?” Gerald stammered.

“I will be out for the rest of the day.” It was not a question. “And I thought you ought to know.” She smiled politely and then turned to leave.

“Wait one minute,” Gerald called after her, rising from his chair. “Where do you think you are going?”

“I just told you,” she responded with innocence. “Do not worry, it will not be a long day. And I fully intend to be home by supper.”

“That is not the point,” he said angrily. “Not only do you come in here and make demands of me – to which you should know better. But...” He scowled at her, although she was not who he was angry with. Not really. “It is who you intend to spend the day with that I am forced to question.”

“Aurelia and Violet?”

“Lady Hawkins specifically.” Gerald did not care that she was spending time with Lady Hawkins. At least not as much as he pretended. The truth was, he knew Lady Hawkins to be more than what he had once thought, a true friend and someone who his sister could even learn from. But he was confused. Ashamed, also. He needed Lady Hawkins removed from his life, which meant that he needed her removed from his sister’s life as well. “You know how I feel about her and the two of you spending so much time together.”

She scoffed. "I know what you claim. But your actions suggest otherwise."

Gerald felt his cheeks redden and his eyes widen, and he had to force himself not to look away as if he had been found out. "What... what does that mean?"

"Did you not invite her here two nights ago? And did you not allow me to attend her sister's drum last week? You tell me not to spend time with Aurelia, but you continue to insert her into my life. It cannot be both, brother."

"She has you there," Victor chuckled.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

He snarled at Victor and then did the same to Rosalind. “My actions are not to be questioned. Nor are my orders.”

“Orders?” Rosalind scoffed in a way that was very unlike her. No need to say where she learned that from. “I am not yours to order.”

“That is exactly what you are!”

She widened her eyes in anger. “Tell me what this is really about, for I know it has nothing to do with Aurelia. Not really. You just don’t like the idea of me acting without you – you want to control me until you can pass me off to whoever it is that you decide I am to marry. That is what this is. Do not lie to me.”

“Rosalind...” He groaned. “I told you already, did I not? That I apologize for how I have behaved concerning your prospects of marriage. I thought we were in agreement.”

“As did I,” she said hotly. “But you continue to try and control what I do.”

“I do not,” he huffed. “As I said, this is because I do not want you spending so much time with Lady Hawkins.”

“Because you worry that she will be a bad influence. Again, because all you can think about is who I will marry. And how quickly you can be rid of me.”

This line of argument was as unexpected as it was infuriating. Gerald had enough to deal with of the moment without having to worry himself with his sister’s tantrums

and feigned conspiracies. Yes, Gerald still wished to see his sister wed, and as soon as was possible. But he was serious before when he had told her that he would stop putting so much pressure on her. Truly, he only wanted what was best!

Of course, he could not tell her the real reason that he was objecting. That he wanted nothing to do with Lady Hawkins, or his sister to have anything to do with her for that matter. Or rather, the reason he wanted nothing to do with her...

“This is not an argument,” he said through gritted teeth. “It is an order.”

She curled her lip. “And to think, Aurelia was defending you.”

“She...” Gerald blinked. “She was?”

“I do not know why,” Rosalind snarled. “For some reason, she seems to think that you are more than what you seem – she even went so far as to tell me that I ought to be grateful to have a brother who cares for me as you do.”

“She did?” Gerald asked with bewilderment.

“If she only knew the way you spoke about her behind her back, she might think differently. Perhaps I will tell her myself.” She raised her chin and turned on the spot to leave.

“We are not done here!”

“We are...” She spoke over her shoulder as she walked from the room. “I will be home by supper!” Once through the door, she slammed it closed behind her.

Gerald stayed standing, glued to the spot, stunned by what had just occurred.

His sister had never spoken to him like that. He had not thought her capable of such a thing! She was changing before his eyes, fighting against the rigged structure and expectational modes of decorum he had forced upon her shoulders since she was a little girl. He probably should have expected it, especially considering who she spent her time with...

He wanted to blame Lady Hawkins for this, as that felt easy to do. Alas, he knew the blame fell at his own feet. He was a hypocrite, the worst kind of person, and finally his sister was beginning to see him for who he was.

“How sweet,” Victor chuckled.

“Excuse me?”

“Lady Hawkins defending your honor...” He flashed his eyes knowingly at Gerald and Gerald felt his stomach twist because he knew that look well. “I wonder if she would do such a thing, if she knew what you were doing to her family.” He began to shuffle through the papers. “My oh my, they are in quite a bit of debt, aren’t they.”

Gerald groaned and collapsed back into his seat. “I am dealing with it.”

“Clearly not. I wonder if perhaps I should send some of my friends to pay her family a visit.”

“I am dealing with it,” he snarled. “And that is the end of the matter!”

This looked to be the exact response that Victor wanted. He grinned wickedly and knowingly, that sense that he could read Gerald like an open book. And if that was the case...I need to deal with this problem I have found myself in, and soon.

Gerald was confused. He was unsure. Yet he was also convinced that the sooner Lady

Hawkins found herself a husband, the sooner all of this would be over. And he needed this to be over more than he had ever needed anything.

## ChapterEighteen

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Look who it is,” Rosalind said with a very smug grin as she looked through the window of the seamstress’s shopfront. “What a coincidence.”

“What?” Aurelia turned about to see to whom her friend was referring. For a moment, she allowed herself to feel hope. The smallest chance that it was the only person who she wanted to see right now. Only then, she saw to who Rosalind was indicating and her heart dropped. “Oh...”

“Someone has a stalker,” Rosalind teased.

“How did he know you were here,” Violet agreed eagerly. She swept in beside Rosalind and the two women began to giggle to one another. “Very concerning.”

“Quiet!” Aurelia snapped at them as she felt herself begin to panic.

“In here!” Rosalind waved through the window, bidding him inside.

“Rosalind!”

“What?” Rosalind asked with laughter. “I thought you would be glad. Are you not?”

“I...” Aurelia hesitated, biting into her lip. She knew that she should have felt glad. Even eager, for this looked to be a good sign. Was this not what she wanted? Was this not exactly what she was after? She knew it should be and yet there was only one man whom she would have liked to have bumped into accidentally today, and it most certainly was not he who hurried across the street and toward them.



“Should we leave?” Rosalind asked.

“What? No!” Aurelia cried, to which her sister and friend frowned. “I mean, it is not proper to be alone with a gentleman”

Violet scoffed. “When has what is proper ever been a concern of yours?”

“Please do not go,” she pleaded. “I...” She considered, her nerves building at an exponential rate. “I need the support.”

“Fine,” Rosalind said. “But if I sense that we are unwelcome...”

“We will fade into the background,” Violet agreed. “After all, we do not wish to get in the way – oh, too late!”

The door to the seamstress swung open, signaled by the sound of a ringing bell. Aurelia’s stomach dropped and she forced a smile on her face, not wishing to appear upset or disappointed by this most unexpected visitor. She needed to be on her best behavior. She needed to appear thrilled and eager. And most of all, she needed to not scare him away.

“Greetings, ladies,” Lord Mildenhall announced as he waded into the shop. “What a pleasant surprise.”

That it is. Although surprise would not have been my first choice of word.

It had been a confusing two days for Aurelia. Little sleep had. Barely able to eat. She felt sick half the time. And most of the day was spent wandering aimlessly around the house, unsure of what to do or how she should feel. Worse than that, unsure if there was anything that she could do.

What had happened between her and the duke was an experience that she could not scrub from her mind. Nor do I want to, for that matter. The thrill of the moment. The excitement. The lust and heat and arousal that had swallowed her and the duke both as he bent her over and spanked her again and again and again. Her butt still throbbed at the memory, and her thighs still tingled without reprieve.

She had suspected for some time now that she was developing feelings for the duke that went beyond mere arousal. It had been so easy for so long to tell herself that this couldn't be the case, as such a concept as that was as absurd as it was impossible to imagine. Only now, and after what had happened between them, she could ignore the truth no longer.

But that was a problem. She was not supposed to fall for the duke. She hadn't wanted to! This plan of hers was meant for her sister and family's sake and safety – they were who she was doing this for! But to become distracted now so that she wasn't even certain if she could go through with it. And why? Because she was starting to fall for a man who she doubted could ever feel that way for her? It simply would not do.

She had not heard from the duke for two days, and she was quite certain that she never would. This alone should have been enough to confirm with her that despite how he treated her, he wanted nothing to do with her. At least beyond the obvious.

He is not interested in me and he never will be.

Shopping with her sister and Rosalind today was supposed to be a chance for her to poke and prod about Rosalind's defense as she sought to learn if he had spoken of her or given any hint at all that he was developing feelings. Absurd. Of course he has not! Nor should I. Alas, Rosalind refused to speak of him, seemingly furious at her brother for one reason or another. And Aurelia was too scared to push too hard lest her own feelings be known.

All that was to say that she had one option before her. Not one that she wanted, but the best that she could get. It is for my sister and my family, and that is all which matters.

“Lord Mildenhall...” She beamed as he approached her, doing her best to appear thrilled at the sudden sighting of him. “This is a most wonderful surprise.”

“Isn’t it though.” He reached her and took her hand, giving it a wet kiss. “I was walking by and spied you through the window. I hope it is not unbecoming of me to approach you as I have.”

“Not at all.”

“That is what I was hoping to hear,” he chuckled. “The luck of it. I have been shopping with my mother all morning, searching for the perfect gown if such a thing exists.” He laughed further. “But I am a slave to her whims.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“I hope you are not missed.”

He laughed again. “She will not be happy that I have abandoned her, that is for sure. And I am certain to find myself on the wrong side of her most wicked tongue. But when I tell her the reason...” His smile grew and he took her hand once more, holding it tight. “I have no doubt she will forgive me.”

Lord Mildenhall was indeed a kind man. He was also not unattractive, perhaps a tad plain in the face and unassuming physically, but there was nothing wrong with him. Any lady should have been beyond pleased to find herself the apple of his eye.

Aurelia was trying her best to be that lady. It was just that...he is so darn proper and perfect, a little too polite and saccharine. And she could not help but notice that this was perhaps the tenth time he had mentioned his mother to her, always spoken about as if the world revolved around the woman and he was just lucky to be a part of this world.

It was all excuses, she knew. Again, she should have been thrilled for it. But Aurelia did not feel anything for Lord Mildenhall, save boredom and apathy. And that was the problem.

“I will not keep you,” he said with more laughter, as if something funny was uttered. “I would hate to be a burden.”

“You never could be.”

He beamed. “The truth is, I am glad I ran into you, as I was hoping that I might...”

He clicked his tongue and blushed. "Oh, look at me! My tongue has swollen to twice its size, such the wreck I am."

"That is fine," she assured him. "Say what you are thinking."

"I am embarrassed," he laughed.

"You ought not be."

"What if you say no?"

"I cannot imagine that I will."

"You promise you will not judge –"

"Just say it," she snapped, only to catch her tongue a moment too late. She grimaced, and cursed silently, for that was precisely what she had been trying not to do. However, she could not help but think now of what the duke would say if he saw her act in such a way... or rather, what he might do. A spanking would surely be in order.

"I was hoping I might call on you tomorrow," Lord Mildenhall finally said with some bravery. "If you will have me."

"Oh..." She blinked. "I... I do not see why not."

"Wonderful!" He took her hand with both of his and squeezed them. "Shall we say midmorning? I will be there as surely as the sun is to rise on the morrow."

Aurelia's stomach twisted with regret. To look into his eyes, she could see how excited he was. And that was enough to tell her the reason he wished to call on her. Again, this was a good thing. It was what she wanted! But that regret... that

sadness... it refused to abate.

“I look forward to it,” she forced herself to say.

“As do I, Lady Hawkins.” He kissed her hand again, nice and wet, and she grimaced at the feel of his lips on her skin.

He was kind and he was caring. He was gentle and he was eager. But he was not the duke, and he never would be. That, Aurelia hated to admit, was a problem that she might never overcome. A shame then that it made no difference, for she knew where tomorrow would lead.

For my sister, for my family, for those I love because I will never experience love myself. Not the perfect outcome, but the best that I can hope for.

## ChapterNineteen

The day was cloudy. Rain threatened to break through the bleak grey that sat heavy in the sky. In the distance, there was a low rumbling of thunder which Aurelia could sense to be creeping closer and closer by the minute. Soon it would be upon them, and she could not help but think of how prophetic it all felt.

Nonetheless, when Lord Mildenhall arrived as he had promised that he would, Aurelia’s mother had insisted that they adjourn to the back garden. It was far too windy for such a thing, and Aurelia felt herself shivering from the stiff breeze which attacked them incessantly. But she did not complain or see any reason to. By this point, it felt too late.

“My mother cannot wait to meet you,” Lord Mildenhall said. “She has spoken of nothing else.”

“As we cannot wait to meet her,” Aurelia’s mother spoke quickly, not giving Aurelia a chance to speak. She seemed to have noticed earlier that Aurelia’s mind was elsewhere, and was determined to keep her daughter from saying anything that might undo what they both sensed was coming. “We will have to host the two of you for supper.”

“She would love that.” Lord Mildenhall looked to Aurelia and smiled. “As would I, for that matter.”

Aurelia forced a friendly smile but could not find the enthusiasm to speak. A part of her hoped that in doing so, Lord Mildenhall might change his mind, assuming her lame or disinterested. She also knew this to be folly, for he was as eager as ever, likely to take her silence as a sign of how smitten she was.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

It was just the three of them today. Daniel had been away for a few days, out of town on business, meaning he was not privy to Lord Mildenhall's visit, or his likely intentions. Iris was reading in the library, as their mother had instructed her to do until she was called for later. And Eveline was... well, Aurelia wasn't sure. All she knew was that their mother had instructed her to not make her presence known, aware of the trouble that Eveline was known to bring to any occasion and not wishing to take the risk.

They sat under the same oak tree where Lord Littlefield had proposed two weeks earlier. Tea was served, but no sweets or snacks. Again, Aurelia's mother did not wish to tempt fate. She and her mother both knew what was in store, how important it was that everything today go as well as could be. No risk was worth taking.

"The truth is, she was rather upset that I came here on my own," Lord Mildenhall confessed with a grimace. "She asked to join me. Rather, insisted," he chuckled.

"Oh?" Aurelia's mother said.

"Ordinarily, I would not deny her such a thing." He appeared regretful, the prospect of angering his mother one he did not take lightly. "But as I told her, there are some things that must be done on one's own. She will understand."

"I am sure that she will," her mother said.

"As to why I am here..." He sipped at his tea. "This is lovely tea, by the way," he pivoted. "Might I ask where it was procured?"



“I shall happily have as much sent to your home as you wish for,” Aurelia’s mother answer. “Now, you were saying about why you were here...” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Yes, well...” He cleared his throat and put the saucer of tea down on the table. “This is not a decision I have come to lightly, that is the first thing I wish to say. In fact, I have spoken with my mother of nothing else these past few days, just to ensure that such an act is not considered hasty or in bad taste. But she agrees that I am of the right mind, and that the time is now. Such things should not be waited on, for who knows what tomorrow will bring.”

In the distance, Aurelia heard the rumble of thunder. She braced herself, because she knew what was coming.

Sadness enveloped her, as it had been doing since yesterday. She knew what the viscount was going to ask. Just as she knew she had no choice but to say yes. And yet there was a small part of her that wondered if she should do. If perhaps she might wait, or rather, if she might speak to the one person whose opinion mattered the most.

Am I being foolish? Am I being hopeful? Am I being idealistic, because deep down I know there is no real chance that the duke feels even remotely for me what I now know I feel for him. There is just no way...

“With that in mind...” He cleared his throat again. “It should come as no surprise that I am keenly aware of your family’s financial circumstances...” He sighed and shook his head. “A damn shame, truth be told, that such hard times have fallen on you. Alas, that is the way things are, and where one might dwell, it is important to loom ahead. Don’t you agree?”

Her mother’s mouth twitched with vexation. “And why is it that you have brought up such a thing?”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat for a third time and turned to face Aurelia. “I have come here because... well, as I just said, I know of the hard times that have befallen you, and with that in mind, I believe that I am he who might be able to rescue you from such destitution. If you will allow it.”

Aurelia forced a smile and as she saw her mother glaring, she made herself speak. “You may have to speak more clearly, Lord Mildenhall.”

He chuckled. “I was aiming for subtlety, but perhaps such times call for straight forwardness. “As you may know of me, I have never married. The reason for such things...” He shrugged. “A plethora of reasons, truth be told. But perhaps I was just waiting for the right woman to come along. I am not as young as I once was, I require an heir as much as anything else, and I have been seeking the perfect lady to provide one for me.”

He looked at her as if for an answer, even if he had not asked a question.

“Still...” she laughed nervously. “You speak around the point.”

“I will speak right to it,” he said with a wary smile. “I wish to marry you. In so doing, I will happily save your family from their financial troubles – I am sure a dowry agreement can be reached that you will find most accommodating. And in return, I would like you to provide for me a child. An heir, as it is. Both myself and my mother agree that now is the time, for to wait is to risk the possibility that I might never have one.”

It was all Aurelia could do not to show how sickened the idea made her.

She smiled for the viscount, even doing what she could to look surprised. To her right, she caught her mother watching her in warning, no doubt able to see the hesitation on her daughter’s face.

The only answer I can give is yes. This is exactly what I want, isn't it? A quick marriage. A chance to clear my family's debts. No romance to speak of. A most perfect arrangement.

Aurelia had never wanted to marry before. She had no fancies where love and romance were concerned. Growing up, she had always assumed she would never marry, a spinster as they called it, happy to be single, no sense being tied down by a man who she hated or did not care for. She did not hate Lord Mildenhall, nor did she care for him. And if she was to say yes, she could see her future as clear as if it were an open book.

It would be a simple marriage. It would also be a boring one. This was for her sister, she reminded herself, so she might have a chance at happiness. That in itself was reason to say yes. And yet...

Her mind flashed to the duke. If not his spanking of her, if not how he had kissed her, how he made her feel. That was what she focused on the most. Past the lust and to the romance, the way her heart swelled at the mention of his name, the way her entire body tingled when she pictured him. She had never wanted to fall for him but now that she had, and now that she was finally admitting it, she did not think she could simply give it up.

At the very least, she could not give it up without knowing for sure how he felt. And so it was that Aurelia found herself speaking, again without considering the consequences, as was always her way.

"That is a most kind offer," she said carefully. "And I am most honored that you would consider me."

"Of course." He took her hand with both of his. "How could I not."

“Only...” She smiled as the viscount’s face dropped. “My brother is not here. And as I am sure you know, it would not be right of me to accept such a request without first seeking his approval.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“That is not necessary,” her mother spoke quickly. “Aurelia...” An awkward laugh. “I am sure that Daniel –”

“Would wish to speak with Lord Mildenhall himself,” she spoke over her mother, raising an eyebrow at her. “You know as well as I do that Daniel demands he be kept across such things as this. If we ignore him or say yes without his approval, he will be well within his rights to cancel the marriage altogether.”

It was only half true. Indeed, Daniel was the patriarch of the family, and he was very insistent that he be treated as such. However, their mother still held a firm enough control of her daughter’s interests that she could have insisted nonetheless that this marriage go ahead, and Daniel likely would have agreed. If for no other reason than he needed this marriage as much as anyone else. More so, in fact.

But Aurelia held her mother’s eyes, her eyebrow still raised, making it clear that she would not be budged on this. Daniel needed to be consulted. Or rather, that is the line for now.

“She speaks the truth,” her mother conceded. “We should seek my son’s approval before we agree – which we will do,” she made sure to add, widening her eyes at Aurelia. “Be sure of that, Lord Mildenhall. This is not a rejection, merely a delay. A short one at that.”

Lord Mildenhall looked caught between frustration and confusion. His brow was furrowed while his expression was taught. But he was a man of the ton and the logic was sound enough that he was able to raise his chin high and accept the terms without his pride being too heavily wounded.

“Yes, of course – that makes perfect sense.” He grimaced. “Perhaps I should apologize for being so hasty.”

“Not at all,” her mother said.

“I was,” Lord Mildenhall said with much forced calmness. “So focused on my own needs I do not stop to consider the bigger picture...” He laughed awkwardly. “Please, speak with your brother and once you do, send me word of your final answer. I am certain that nothing will change in my mind.”

“It will be done,” Aurelia’s mother assured him. “And as I said, the answer is sure to be yes. But formalities...” She clicked her tongue.

“Thank you for understanding,” Aurelia said with a soft smile. “You have been most kind.”

For a man who had just been rejected, Lord Mildenhall managed to appear content with how this little meeting had gone. Likely, he did not see a reason to worry, certain that his offer to cover their debts would be more than enough to convince Daniel that he was a man worth giving his sister to.

It was a relief in some ways, that Lord Mildenhall clearly felt nothing for Aurelia outside of her ability to provide for him an heir. Yet it also proved to her how little she wanted this marriage to happen. She had felt passion now. She had felt fire and want and desire beyond reason. She knew what it was to become fixated on another, just as she knew that anything less than that simply would not suffice.

“We will send word as soon as we can,” her mother assured Lord Mildenhall some time later as they waved their goodbyes from the foyer. It was pouring rain outside, they stood in the doorway, and Lord Mildenhall continued to look upon her as if the deal was done and there was no need to worry. “You have our promise.”

“I look forward to it. Just as I do out future together” He gave Aurelia’s hand a kiss, thanked Aurelia’s mother again, and then walked into the rain, heading for his carriage.

Aurelia’s mother waved as she stood in the doorway, ensuring he reached his carriage before closing the door on the storm. That was when she turned on Aurelia.

“Have you lost your mind!”

“I do not know what you mean,” Aurelia said simply, turning to leave.

“Do not walk away from me!” Her mother swept past her, cutting off her exit. “What do you think you are doing! No, I misspoke! Clearly, you were not thinking! If you had, you would not –”

“I was doing as I should,” Aurelia spoke over her, trying her best to appear in the right, even if she knew she was so very much in the wrong. “Daniel will wish to have the final say. You know he will.”

“Daniel!” she cried. “That is your excuse!”

“It is not an excuse, mother. It is simply the way things are. You know it to be true.”

“I know that Daniel wants this marriage even more than I do! I know he would do anything to see it happen – do you really think he would say no! Or that he would care if we accepted without his consent!”

“Maybe.”

Her mother wrung her hands in the air. “I do not know what you are playing at Aurelia but hear me now. When Daniel returns and agrees to the viscount’s proposal

– as he will!” She widened her eyes with fury at Aurelia. “You will say yes. You will walk down the aisle. And you will marry him! Is that understood!”

“Of course it is,” Aurelia said calmly. “You forget, Mother, I am the one who wanted this marriage in the first place. Why would I suddenly say no?”

“I wish I knew,” she seethed angrily. “I wish I...” She took a deep breath and calmed herself. “You will see me to an early grave. That is what this is.” A shake of the head and she stormed past Aurelia, mumbling to herself as she went. “All I have ever done is for you girls, and this is my thanks...”

Aurelia watched her go, the guilt cascading on her.

She was in the wrong, she knew it to be true. Just as she knew that she had done what she needed to buy herself a brief window. It was a flight of fancy, she knew. Likely to destroy and break her into so many pieces she would never recover. A broken heart was what she had in store... but at least then, she would know.

Deep down, Aurelia knew that the duke cared for her. She knew he loved her as she loved him. And she knew that they were meant to be together. Now, before she said yes or no to Lord Mildenhall, she had find out once and for all if what she knew was a shared truth, or little more than a dream.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Tonight, I will go to him and find out once and for all. And after that... nothing will be the same again, for better or for worse.

\* \* \*

It was done.

Gerald took a moment to himself, forcing a deep breath which he hoped would bring him some sense of relief. His heart was pounding. His stomach was twisted into knots. He felt sick but refused to accept the reason. The news he had just learned was to be celebrated, and where it might take him some time to accept this as such, he knew that one day he would.

I did it. It's over. Come tomorrow morning, with the rising sun, I will finally be free to move on and concentrate on what matters.

He was in his drawing room on the bottom level of his manor, pouring himself a drink of whiskey because he needed it more than anything. One was all he would allow himself, for to indulge tonight might see his mind go places he could not allow.

The drink was, in fact, a celebration. Having just spoken with his sister, and having learned the good news, there was every reason to feel relief. Sure, he might not have felt it yet. But as he assured himself as he took a sip of the tart liquor, that feeling would hit him soon enough.

As to what was the good news that his sister had just brought him? Lady Hawkins was to be wed. Or at least she believes that is the case.

As she told it, Lord Mildenhall was set to propose to Lady Hawkins today – hours ago, by now. They had run into him yesterday whilst shopping and he had requested that he pay her a visit today. He had been nervous, Rosalind had told him. Damn petrified to ask for even a chance to pay Lady Hawkins a visit. The reason was thus obvious, as would be Lady Hawkins' answer.

It was exactly what Gerald had needed to hear. For too long he had allowed Lady Hawkins to pray on his thoughts. For too long he had even wondered if maybe there was a good reason that she did – a reason which needed to be explored. No, my feelings for her are purely physical. That is the only reason I cannot scrub her from my mind.

The physical attraction he felt for her was simply not enough. Beyond that, there was no true future there. Not for someone of Gerald's standing, who he was seen as by his contemporaries, and what they expected of him in return.

For a while there, Gerald had cursed what he was and the perception he'd fostered of himself among his contemporaries. How he was seen in the eyes of the ton. What they believed of him. He had convinced himself too that he liked this view they held, because that was what it meant to be a gentleman of the peerage. A shame it is all a lie.

Perhaps one day he would admit it. But that day would remain until well after his own sister found herself a husband. Yes... Gerald forced a smile and nodded his head in ascent. That was what mattered. That was why he did this. Not for himself. Not for others. But for Rosalind, she who would find happiness where he likely never would.

With that in mind, Gerald forced Lady Hawkins from his thoughts – he would never think of her again. To do so only brought confusion and excitement both; a type of hunger which could never be fully satisfied. That did him no good. Rather, he took another sip of his whiskey and set his mind to his sister.

I must find her a husband, and soon. What is more, I must convince her that I am doing so for her best interests. Which I am! Everything I do is for her, I just wished she would see it.

And then, once that unenviable task was completed, Gerald would set his sights on his own future bride. The thought of such a thing made him feel even more at pain than he already did, as he had no desire to consider such a thing. For he knew that the bride he would marry had to be one that was expected of him, a proper lady, a lady of august respect and pedigree. A bore, is what that means.

Food for thought. Worries for the future. Right now, the best thing to do was be glad that he managed to avoid any future mishaps with Lady Hawkins... or rather, that those he and her had already gotten themselves into had gone undiscovered.

The sound of a creaking floorboard coming from outside broke through Gerald's distraction.

It was late in the evening. He was alone in his drawing room. Most of the staff should have been in bed. And the only thing he could hear was the crackling of the fire and the rustling of the trees outside from the late night wind. He frowned as he listened, wondering if he had imagined –

There it was again! Another loud creak.

“Rosalind...”

He sighed as he crossed the room, certain he would find his sister sneaking through the house. Why she was awake, he could not guess, and he just prayed she wasn't up to no good. The way she had been acting of late, I would not be surprised.

Opening the door carefully, he was quiet as he snuck from the room and down the

hall, in the direction of the foyer where he had heard the noise coming from. And as he moved, he heard more creaks, the sound of someone slowly ascending the staircase.

Into the foyer he ducked, his eyes adjusting to the dark, spying immediately the back of she who was not-so-sneakily creeping through his home. When he saw her, even in the dark, Gerald knew who it was. The shape of her body. The smell of her. The way his stomach twisted and his heart beat and the walls seemed to move around him.

He was certain he was seeing things. Only, there was no way.

“Lady Hawkins?” he gasped. She froze, one foot in the air. “What on earth are you doing?”

Slowly, she turned about, grimacing to see him standing at the base of the steps watching her. “Good evening,” she said with an awkward smile. “Fancy seeing you here.”

## ChapterTwenty

“What are you doing here, Lady Hawkins?” His tone was more sharp than Aurelia had been expecting. More severe.

He led her into his drawing room, refusing to let her speak until they were somewhere safe, where they would not be at risk of being overheard. She walked in first, hearing the door close shut behind her as the duke followed. Ordinarily, such a sound would elicit excitement, but she could tell immediately from the duke’s cold reception of her that this visit would not be to her liking.

Was it a mistake to come here?

“I came to see you.” She took a deep breath and turned to face the duke. Her expression was one of hope, but it withered when it came face to face with the dispassion written across the duke’s visage.

“Perhaps I ask the wrong thing.” He stayed by the doorway in a way that seemed purposeful. As if he would rather have been anywhere but in that room with her. But she could not tell if it was annoyance that held him back, or caution. “Clearly, you are here to see me. What I meant was why are you. Remind me, for perhaps I have forgotten, but did I send for you? Was there a lesson I had scheduled? Since slipped my mind?”

“N – no,” she stammered, unsure now. “You did not send for me. He is being colder than I have ever seen him. The gaze he’s fixed on me almost cruel.

“Then I ask again.” A beat as he looked at her, eyes narrowed as if the two were enemies. “Why?”

“I came here to tell you something,” she began, her nerves already affecting her speech. She knew this was going to be difficult. Only she had no idea how much until she was looking the duke in the eyes.

“And it could not wait?”

“No.”

He considered her, his cool gaze roaming over her body in a way that should have made her glow, for when he did that in the past there was always a sense that he was doing more than just studying her. That he was admiring her, drinking her in as if she was life itself. This time, he did so with detachment. “Tell me then,” he said. “But make it quick.”

“I...” A lump grew in her throat. She swallowed it. “Earlier today, Lord Mildenhall came to visit me. And he...” Hesitation, for she knew what she had to say and then ask, but it was harder to do than she had hoped. “And he asked for my hand in marriage.”

“That is...” The duke stammered but then forced correction. “That is good to hear. Wonderful news, in fact.”

“It is?”

He nodded. “What else could it be? Lord Mildenhall is a man of great wealth, as you know. And I can only guess that once married, he will agree to pay off your debts. It seems...” He swallowed, gritting his teeth as if struggling. “It seems that our business together has come to an end.”

She did not speak immediately. Rather, she searched the duke for a hint that this news brought him pain. Was I a fool to come here? To expect anything more from him than dismissal and apathy? The way he looks at me right now, I am beginning to think that I was.

“If that is all...” The duke stepped across and then reached for the door. “I think it is best if you –”

“I did not accept his proposal,” she said.

The duke froze, not daring to turn around. “What was that?”

Aurelia dared to cross the room toward him, stopping short because she did not trust herself to be too close. Yet. “I did not accept,” she repeated.

“And why is that?” Still, he did not turn back to look at her.

“I told him that before I did, he would need to ask my brother, as he is the one who should make such decisions. Only...” Her heart was thumping, and her body was shaking. “Only that was a lie – an excuse made to stall.”

“And why would you wish to stall?” Still, he refused to look at her, half-turned to face the door as if he meant to open it and flee. “The due date for your debt draws closer by the day. Lord Mildenhall is as good an option for a husband as you could have hoped for. If he changes his mind –”

“He won’t.”

“He might.”

“The truth is, I do not care if he does. A part of me hopes for it.”

“That is...” She could see the duke struggling. Even with his back still toward her, his body shook, and his breathing was ragged. “You are playing a dangerous game, Lady Hawkins. I gave you one month because I believed you were serious about finding a husband –”

“I am serious.”

“Clearly, you are not. Do you want my advice?” He straightened and turned to face her. His expression was impassive. And his eyes looked past her. “Accept his

proposal. It is the best you are going to get.”

“I am serious about wanting a husband,” she repeated, trying to meet his eyes but he refused to give them. “Only, I turned Lord Mildenhall away because...” She could hardly breathe; such were her nerves. “Because there is another whom I hope I might be with. It is a long shot, but as you know well enough, rarely do I consider the consequences of what I do.”

Still, the duke refused to look at her. “It sounds unlikely,” he said. “My advice is to take Lord Mildenhall’s request and be glad for it. Playing it safe is not such a bad thing.”

“I never play it safe. You know this.”



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“I also know that your family owes me a lot of money. Did you stop to consider what I might say when I learned that you turned down –”

“What you might say is all I have been able to think about. But not for that reason.” She waited for his response, but he gave none, again refusing to meet her searching gaze. “Your Grace...” She took another step forward. And then another. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

“I think I do.”

“And?”

“I understand well enough, but what you expect of me...” He shook his head. “Lady Hawkins, I apologize if I have given you the wrong impression. Truly, I do. But what you are suggesting...”

“I am not suggesting it,” she said bravely, though with being subtle for now was not the time. “I am saying it outright. Or rather, I will say it outright.” She met his eyes, forcing him to look at her. “I... I said no to Lord Mildenhall because it is you who I \_”

“Stop right there,” he cut over her, his blue eyes piercing her where she stood. Confusion, mixed with anger... and something else that she could not quite read. “What you are about to say, I do not wish to hear it.”

“But –”

“But nothing,” he hissed. “You and I had an arraignment, and that is all it was. You owe me money, I endeavored to help you cover this debt. Everything I did...” He swallowed. “We did... was purely on that basis alone.”

She did not believe him. She could not believe him. “No, that is... you are lying.”

“I assure you, I am not.”

“But our lessons. Our... the last time I was here. You and I...”

“Again, I apologize if I have been sending you mixed signals. Truly, I am sorry. But this proposal is a fine one, and you need to take it. You must say yes. If you do not...” He sighed with regret. “I cannot say what will happen to your family, just that the outcome is not something you will enjoy.”

The words hurt her as much as any words could. She winced and leaned back as if struck, her stomach turning, the walls moving around her. How could she have been so wrong? How could she have been such a fool? She felt betrayed. She felt used. She felt.... She felt angry.

“You used me,” she said with a snarl. “That is what you have been doing. This whole time!”

“Excuse me?”

“It had nothing to do with propriety or... or trying to help me! All you wanted – all you ever wanted was to take advantage of me. Admit it.”

“Lady Hawkins, I assure you that is not –”

“Enough!” she snapped. “I am sick of it. Sick of the lies. Sick of the falsity.” She

widened her eyes at him. “This... the fakeness of it all. You walk around the ton as if you are somehow special and better than everyone else, but it is all a lie. I know the true you. I know what you are.”

“And what am I exactly?” There was a bite to his voice, a warning that made her pulse quicken for she knew how these things often went.

“A beast,” she hissed at him. “A rake. A charlatan conman, is what you are. This entire time...” She shook her head and curled her lip at him. “Did you ever truly care about me? About my family? Or were you only ever trying to... to... to get what you needed from me.”

She was surprised to see the hurt flash behind his eyes. A sense for a fraction of a second that she had hit a nerve. But it was gone quickly, replaced by cold anger that he fixed on her because the duke was not one who was used to be spoken to like this. By anybody.

“What I needed from you?” he laughed coldly. “Do not presume to think that I needed anything from you. Except for your money, Lady Hawkins. Which, when you say yes to Lord Mildenhall, I will have. So, in that case, yes, I have been using you.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“And what did you mean?” He stepped toward her as if in warning. As if hoping she would shy away. “Speak clearly or leave, being glad that you caught me in a good mood.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You presume too much.”

There was fire in his eyes; anger, she knew it to be. But behind that fire she saw something else, a look she knew as well as any other, for it was one he had fixed on her so many times. The fury that was building in the duke was giving way to the storm of desire and want that he so often let take him when they were alone together. Too often they had been in this same position, and too often it had led to the same result.

Aurelia knew she should have turned and left. The duke had denied her. He had refused her. He had broken her heart and she needed to be away from him as quickly as possible. And yet...

Dammit, I still want him. If I am to go to Lord Mildenhall, if that is what my life is destined to become, this might be my last chance to... to... the last night I have to truly be free and enjoy myself like only the duke can make me.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

And so, with that in mind, Aurelia buried logic and pushed him that little bit harder. Just as she knew he liked to be pushed.

“I presume nothing,” she said, stepping into him. “You want me, I know you do.”

He laughed. “You wish.”

“You haven’t been able to stop thinking about me,” she continued, dropping her voice. “Kissing me. Spanking me. Teaching me a lesson.”

She saw the effect of that word on the duke. The way he grimaced and then moaned. “I... that was for... for your benefit.”

“It was for your own,” she continued. They stood so close now, and she breathed in and pushed up her chest, noting his eyes which lowered toward her bosom. Literally, Aurelia could see him fighting himself. It made her blood run red hot. “You enjoyed it. Admit it.”

“I...” He groaned again, licking his lips, his body now shaking. “You need to leave.”

“Make me,” she shot back. “Force me to leave.”

“Lady Hawkins...” It was obvious now that she had him. The resignation in his eyes. The way he lingered on her lips and then her bosom. That his body had stopped shaking, because he had stopped fighting his urges. This would solve nothing. Tomorrow, Aurelia would have no choice but to agree to Lord Mildenhall’s proposal. But as things stood...I simply do not care.“You are impudent and rude beyond

anyone I have ever met.”

“I know I am.”

“Do I need to teach you another lesson?”

“A final lesson, you mean?”

“Yes...” His eyes flashed hunger. “A final lesson. For the sake of your marriage...” He moaned. “And your debt to me. Until it is paid, you still belong to me, remember.”

“Prove it,” she said in a whisper.

His hands moved to the side of her face and he took it, pulling her into him and kissing her with such passion that she thought she might explode. He did not hold back this time. He did not lace it with regret or warning or a sense that there was a purpose behind it. Rather, he kissed her as if his life might end at any second and the last thing he wished to do before that moment came was taste her on his lips.

She kissed him back. Their mouths parted. Their tongues danced and played. Her hands went to his waist, holding him tight as he held her face pressed against his. It felt somehow like both their first and their final kiss. As if he knew that this would be it so he was doing everything he could to remember and make the most of it. And Aurelia did the same.

He bit into her lip, pulling her face back. She gasped and tried to follow, but he held her back. For a brief second, she worried that was it, that he might have found his control and would ask her to leave. But then she looked into his eyes and realized how wrong she was.

“Are you ready for your final lesson?” he growled.

“That depends on what you have in mind...” Her heart was racing with excitement and anticipation.

“You will be married soon,” he said. “And I expect you to be a good wife.” A smirk worked over his lips and his eyes flashed as he looked down her body suggestively. She followed his eyes, spying his manhood pressed against his pants. She saw how excited it made him. How quickly he lost control.

“Oh... you want...”

“It is not about what I want,” he said to her, still holding her by the face. “It is what you are willing to do for your husband. “Are you willing to do whatever you must?”

Nerves wrecked her. Her body was shaking. She thought she understood what he was saying... she was certain she knew what to do. Only, she had never done such a thing before, and the idea was as exciting as it was terrifying. “I am willing to do whatever you tell me.”

“Good girl...” He removed one hand from her face and reached to take her hand. Then, he led it down to the hard outline of his manhood, holding it against his girth so that she began to rub it. “That’s right,” he moaned. “Just like that.”

His eyes were shut and he groaned as she continued to rub him. Aurelia had little experience with the male appendage. No experience, in fact. But that did not matter. When she was with the duke, she acted on instinct, rather than on knowledge. She knew what he wanted just as she knew how to give it to him.

It was a silly idea, she knew. A most foolish one, as she doubted it would work to the effect that she needed. But here with him right now, alone, a final chance to be with

him as she knew they both wanted, and Aurelia only had so much control. If he is to deny me, I will at least make it as difficult for him to do as possible. I owe myself that much, at least.

His eyes were still closed. His jaw was clenched. One hand on the side of her face, the other wrapped around the back of her neck. He squeezed it as if he meant to stop her, but his ragged breathing and the way he throbbed beneath his breeches told her that he would not dare.

She licked her lips as she pulled her hand free and moved it to join the other one, down by the waist of his pants, which she quickly started to open. He stumbled back, against the door, pushing his hips out to give her room to work. She opened his pants and shoved them down, gasping with delight when his manhood sprung free. That is... oh my.

Aurelia had never seen one up close before, so she had no means to judge to by. But it was as long as both her palms together, so thick that she knew she would not be able to wrap her hands around it fully, and it throbbed as it grew harder and harder before her eyes. It was as if it was calling to her.

“Like this?” She reached down and wrapped both hands around it. The duke stiffened and moaned, his body shaking as she began to twist it with her hands.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Yes...” he breathed. “Like that...”

“Tell me you want me,” she said as she stroked him. “Tell me that you always have.”

“I... I... I do not want...” His eyes were still closed, as if to open them might break the illusion.

“Tell me how much.”

“Too much for words,” he said finally. “You know I do.”

“Tell me...” She bit into her lip, her mouth salivating. “Tell me what to do next.”

His eyes snapped open suddenly and she might have cried out from what she saw. They were hungry. Savage! A predator stumbled upon in the wild, and she was the prey. He still had one hand around the back of her neck, the other moved to her chin. He forced her to look into his eyes, growling as he did so.

“You know what I want,” he snarled. “Or do I need to show you?”

“This is my lesson, is it not?”

“It is,” he said. “And you have been such a good student.” She felt pressure on the back of her neck, pushing her down. On instinct, she knew what to do, and so she did it.

Aurelia dropped to her knees, the duke’s member right before her face. Both hands

still holding it firmly, she looked up and met his eyes so that he could see how much she wanted this. And so that she could see how much he wanted it also. And then, with nothing left to do, she did exactly as expected. She opened her mouth and wrapped it around his thick, throbbing member.

“Aurelia...” He moaned and his entire body went rigid as she swallowed him. “Yes... like... just like that...”

When the duke had been pleasuring her with his mouth, Aurelia had assumed that she was the only one enjoying the sensation. It was, after all, aimed at her pleasure, the duke doing it for her, so what could he possibly get out of it? That, she now understood, to be wrong in so many ways. For where the duke was clearly enjoying the way Aurelia took him in her mouth, she realized that she was enjoying it just as much.

There was a type of power to it that she hadn't been able to fathom. A sense of control, as if she owned the duke in that moment. As she ran her tongue up his shaft and licked wetly over the tip, to feel the duke groan and gasp and beg for more, made her feel as if she had him in her thrall completely. It was sloppy. It was wet. It was a mouthful, to be perfectly honest. But it was also very good.

She opened her mouth wide and swallowed as much of him as she could. She wrapped her lips over the tip and sucked for all she was worth. She let him take her head and move it back and forth. She couldn't breathe for much of it. Saliva built in her throat and spilled from her lips. But the duke was enraptured in ways she had never seen before. And this is surely a moment he will never forget.

“Wa – wait!” the duke cried suddenly. He pulled back, releasing his girth from her mouth.

She gasped, taking in a breath of air. “What's wrong?” She looked up at him, worried

for a moment that she had done something he did not like.

He grinned down at her, that same look in his eyes. “You do not think that I am going to have all the fun, do you?”

“I...” She hesitated. “What do you mean?”

The duke slid down the door until he was crouched before her. A hand went to her face and pulled her lips to his mouth. Their kiss was wet and sloppy and hungry. Passionate, but also messy. For a moment, Aurelia worried that he wished to go all the way – something that she wasn’t certain she was ready for. Not if this was going to be their last time spent together.

In the end, she had no reason to worry.

The duke took control after that, pulling her into him by wrapping his hands around her buttocks. He lifted her onto him, forcing her to wrap her legs about his waist. Then he turned quickly, falling back so that he was sitting.

“Your Grace...” she began, panicked over what he was going to do.

“Do you trust me?” he asked her.

“I...” She met his eyes and decided in that moment that she trusted him completely. Whatever he wanted, she would do. “I do.”

“Good girl,” he said. “Someone is learning. Now, turn around.”

She frowned with confusion, not certain what he meant. She tried to read it in his eyes, still not understanding. “I don’t... what do you mean?”

He laughed deeply, his hands moving to the back of her knees. Then, he spun her himself. She cried out, nearly falling on her side, held in place as he lifted her effortlessly so that her head was by his ankles. Her heart was racing with panic, as she still wasn't quite sure what he meant to do with her...

"Relax," he commanded of her. "And trust me."

"I trust – oh!" she cried out as she duke shuffled down, pulled her backside and her thighs toward him, and then placed her squarely on his face.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Her eyes widened and she screamed with pleasure as his mouth wrapped themselves around the lips between her thighs. She stiffed and then began to spasm as his tongue licked between those lips, finding her pleasure center and working it as he had done the last time. Her heart seized in her chest, and it was all she could do to keep herself from screaming.

That was when she noticed where her face was positioned.

The duke's manhood was right before her. Still erect. Still throbbing. Still dripping wet from when she had him in her mouth. Again, instinct took over and this time she did not hesitate.

The duke pleased her with his mouth, and she did the same to him. Sitting on his face, he devoured her. He ate her as if it was his last meal. He licked and he sucked and he kissed her as if he could read her mind and her body. And she did the same back to him.

One hand was wrapped around the base of his member. The other rubbed his balls, which made his legs shake. And her mouth swallowed him whole, taking as much of him as she could, trying not to latch on or choke because the waves of pleasure which rolled through her body from what he was doing between her thighs made it impossible to concentrate.

And so it was, their last night together, and Aurelia and the duke used their mouths to full effect. No more talking. No more arguing. No more fighting. They pleased one another fully before the dimming flames of the hearth, the sounds that escaped their bodies surely enough to wake the entire household.

As to how it ended? That came when Aurelia felt that same building sensation rise inside of her. She clamped her thighs tight around the duke's face and began to suck him harder. A hand of his reached out and found the top of her head, holding her there. His leg began to shake. Her body began to vibrate. He began to growl. She began to moan. Both their bodies started to spasm as if they might explode. And that was when she felt it, the explosion, both in her body and in the duke's.

She pulled back her head and cried out as her body gave way to untold waves of pleasure. The duke roared as his seed burst from his penis and coated her and the floor both. She hung onto his engorged member, writhing and spasming as he did the same. If one was to listen, it might have sounded painful. But to the two parties involved, nothing had ever felt so good.

When it was done, Aurelia's energy spent, she rolled off the duke and collapsed on her back, breathing heavily, body so hot she thought she might catch fire. The duke crawled up beside her, panting as he fell down and wrapped an arm around her. For a second too, nothing mattered. He held her in silence and she lay there, head on his shoulder, pretending that they were both at peace and nothing could hurt them.

Only, that was a lie...

"This will not happen again," the duke said finally.

She winced, even if she had expected the words. "I know it."

"I am sorry, Aurelia. But it is for the best. You know that."

"I do," she said, meaning every word.

"I hope you find happiness with Lord Mildenhall."

“I won’t,” she said, her heart cracking. “I won’t.”

What else could she say? What else could she do? She had come here to learn the truth of the duke’s feelings for her, a success she supposed, simply not the truth that she wanted. Oh sure, he clearly desired her. He clearly wanted her, as she wanted him. But that was all it was... and it would never be enough.

Was he lying to her? Was he lying to himself? She supposed that didn’t matter, because she realized now that no matter what might have happened or how he might have felt, he would never admit it. He was set in his mind and there would be no changing it. Aurelia’s only regret was that she hadn’t known this sooner.

Perhaps that is a good thing that this is where things end for us? At least now I can walk down the aisle no longer wondering if we might have been more.

When Aurelia had first stumbled into the duke’s office all those weeks ago, she had hated the man. Now, she loved him. Funny that a part of her wished she still hated him as she once had done. That, at least, would make this easy. But then again, from all she had heard of love and romance, nothing about it was ever easy.

Her final lesson, learned the hard way, as these things so often were.

## Chapter Twenty-One

It was the following morning when Daniel returned home. This meant, of course, that today would be that when the proposal by Lord Mildenhall would be either accepted or declined. Laughable that Daniel might decline, and why I even bother to consider such a thing is beyond me.

Aurelia had not left her room once since she returned from the duke’s the previous evening. Not to bathe. Not to break her fast. Not to greet her brother as was expected

of her. She remained in her bed, the curtains drawn closed, blankets pulled up, knees hugged to her chest to find self-comfort. She hoped that she might be taken for sick, and in so doing that Daniel might wait to speak with her. No such luck...

“Aurelia...” There was a gentle knock on the door and it cracked open. “Are you decent?”

She thought to deny him, but she stayed that notion because she did not wish for her brother or anybody to think that something was wrong. Like it or not, this wedding needed to happen, and to risk seeing it fall apart would be to risk seeing her family decimated. Eveline... for her, for them, I must be brave.

“I am,” she said softly, turning about in her bed as Daniel walked through the door. “Just a little tired, is all.”

“Perhaps if you let in some light.” Without asking, he walked across the room and threw back the curtains. A pale light shone across the room, stinging Aurelia’s eyes. Or perhaps that was from the tears she’d been withholding all night and morning? “There, much better.”

“Thank you,” she said meekly.

“A poor sleep last night?” Daniel asked as he crossed toward her bed, choosing to stand rather than sit. He was never one for comfort, her brother, which was why she knew there would be no point thinking that he might see the hesitation in her and think to deny this marriage. It would not cross his mind.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“From excitement,” she assured him as she sat herself up. “After Lord Mildenhall’s visit yesterday...” A forced smile. “It is no wonder I could not sleep.”

The truth behind her sleepless night was infinitely more depressing.

It might have been nice if it was caused by her tossing and her turning. Memories of when she had been on her knees with the duke’s engorged member in her mouth. Or perhaps when she had been sitting on his face, his tongue wreaking havoc with her womanhood, as she stroked and sucked him until he was exploding all over her. How she might have liked to have focused on that, rather than the other...

Truly, remembering those few moments of infinite pleasure brought her more pain than arousal. Try as she might, she simply could not fathom how the duke could be that way with her, and yet not want to be with her at the same time. Was he lying? Was he just that stubborn? Or was it as he said, that he had no true feelings for her. Certainly not as she had for him.

In the end, it made no difference. She had told him how she felt. He had denied her. And now she was set to marry Lord Mildenhall. For the best. That is what I must focus on. This was never about me, but my family.

“Ah yes,” Daniel began. “Lord Mildenhall. I was hoping to speak with you about his offer.”

“You have spoken with mother?”

“I have,” he said. “But she is not who this arrangement concerns. That is you,

Aurelia.”

“Oh, well...” She forced her smile to grow as she resisted the urge to sniff back tears.

“I am very happy, of course.”

“Is that so?”

She nodded quickly. “Assuming that you agree to Lord Mildenhall’s offer. I look forward to being his bride and then his wife.”

“So, you would you like that I accept?”

She hesitated, if only for a moment. “I would very much.”

That was where Aurelia expected the conversation to end. Daniel had always been the type to put expectation above happiness, prizing title and respect before personal wants and needs. He was a product of the ton, in that way, and this marriage arraignment was as standard as they came.

Strangely, Daniel frowned as he looked down at his sister. From her disheveled state to her glistening red eyes to the obvious lie he could see in her because just as she knew him well, he knew her. And then he did something even more unexpected. He sat down on the bed and rested a hand on her leg in a show of comfort.

“Mother told me what Lord Mildenhall said. That he will pay off our debts. That he expects from you an heir. You understand this?”

“I do,” she said. “It is all rather standard, is it not? And truly, Lord Mildenhall seems a kind man, one who I am sure I will grow to be very fond of. There is no reason to think differently.”

He studied her closely, the sense in his stare that he didn't believe her. "I never told you how much I appreciated what you are doing, did I?"

Aurelia blinked. "You... you do?"

"This situation, what our father has left us with..." His lip curled and he shook his head. "It is not right. Worse than that, it is not fair. And I look at Violet and Caroline, what they were forced to go through –"

"But they are happy," she spoke over him.

"They are," he agreed. "Which was luck, as much as anything. It could have very easily gone the other way for them. In most instances, it would have." His expression soured. "I have never told anyone this, but I regretted what was forced upon them both. Guilt as much as shame that they were made to suffer for our father's sins. They did not suffer, thank God, and that they are both happy is a relief that I cannot describe. As I said, it could have just as easily been the complete opposite."

"Daniel..." Aurelia had no idea what to say, as she had never seen her brother act so vulnerably before. She did not know he knew how.

"Yet it might be too much to hope that such luck will find our family for a third time. And where Lord Mildenhall is not a bad fellow, I am not such a fool to think that a marriage to him will result in anything other than a fulfilled obligation." He looked at her again, both serious and regretful. "So, I ask you again, are you certain that you want this?"

Of course I don't want this. How could I possibly? But why is he asking me this now? Is it supposed to make things easier? Because it's having the exact opposite effect.

Aurelia was resigned to marrying Lord Mildenhall, because that was all she could do. Her family needed this and despite Daniel's sudden showing of compassion, she knew that if she turned him down it would only bring tragedy. She had no choice...

Deep in the recesses of her mind, she wondered what might happen if she told Daniel the truth. That she had fallen in love with someone else. That the duke was who she wished for above all else. Would Daniel go to him? Would he ask the duke to court her? Even marry her? Was there a world where that might –

No. Do not go down that path. Aurelia had already told the duke how she felt and he had turned her away. Despite the passion they shared. Despite the physical attraction that flooded them when they were together. The duke did not want her. And she needed to accept this and do the only thing she could. What she had to do.

“Daniel...” She took her brother's hand and held it, looking into his eyes so that he would see that she was telling him the truth. Or the truth he needs to hear. “Thank you for this. Truly, that you would even think to ask me...”

“You are my sister, Aurelia. I know we do not always get along but I do love you. And this family means everything to me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“As it does me,” she said to him. “Which is why I am happy to marry Lord Mildenhall. I want to marry Lord Mildenhall.” She widened her eyes at him, forcing him to accept her words.

Daniel seemed relieved, if still a little unsure. “If you say so...”

“I do,” she said. “Truly, I do.”

“Good...” He took a deep breath and pulled his hand free. Then he rose from the bed and straightened his jacket. “If that is the case, I will send word to Lord Mildenhall at once, and preparations for this marriage will begin as soon as he accepts, which I expect to be before the day is out.”

“Perfect.”

He nodded once and walked to the door, only to stop and turn back to look at her a final time. “If anything changes, Aurelia, you know you can speak to me. I will always be here for you.”

“I know it, Daniel,” she said with a soft smile. “And thank you.”

He returned the smile and then left the room.

Aurelia collapsed back in the bed and pulled the blankets up over her head. It was done now and it really was that simple. Yet in the cover of darkness, her mind could not help but flash back to last night, she and the duke, their bodies tangled and touching and writhing together in ways that still made her legs shake. It did her no

good to think about it. In fact, it made things worse. And yet...

...perhaps one more time will not hurt. Once I am wed to Lord Mildenhall, I will never think of the duke again, just as I suspect he will never think about me.

## ChapterTwenty-Two

“Oh yes, that color,” her mother crooned. “That is the one! I knew it as soon as you put it on, dear.”

Aurelia smiled. “As I said, green has always suited me.”

“It is more than just the color...” Her mother was at her, hands on Aurelia’s waste, wrapped tightly as she held the dress in and forced Aurelia to straighten. “The dress too. Where has it been hiding?”

“I have owned it for years, mother.”

“It will look different once I have finished with the adjustments,” the modiste assured her mother. “It is a little loose about the waist and bust. But do not fear, once I am done there will not be a pair of eyes able to look upon you without gushing. Jaws will hit the floor!”

“They better,” her mother said.

“Trust me,” the modiste said with a coy wink.

Her mother beamed. The modiste beamed back. And Aurelia, feeling a need to snap out of her morose state and ensure her mother that she too was as thrilled for this dress, and what it represented, as she had told everyone that she was, beamed along with them. It was forced, of course, but she felt she did a rather good job at

pretending. Two weeks of this and I am used to it by now.

It had been a tumultuous two weeks unlike any that Aurelia had experienced. A daze, she had passed through them in, each day blurring together with a sense of rapidness and speed that saw the day of the wedding approach far more quickly than she had thought possible. Far more quickly than she wanted.

Lord Mildenhall had eagerly announced their wedding as soon as Daniel had paid him a visit. It was to be a lavish and extravagant affair, done to ensure all those who attended that this wedding was more than a mere circumstance of convenience. The wedding license was applied for. Invitations were sent. Decorations and décor were decided upon, paid for, and delivered. It was happening, and two weeks later Aurelia had finally come to accept that fact. Not that there was any chance that it wouldn't be.

Today was about choosing Aurelia's dress. A day which her mother was particularly excited about. Having scoured through Aurelia's wardrobe, she had selected a sample of her favorites and had them brought to a modiste in London in the hopes that one might provide inspiration for an entirely new gown to be worn on her most special day. As it turned out, and most surprisingly, one of the dresses that Aurelia had already owned proved more than perfect.

"I still cannot believe you have had this dress the entire time," her mother mused as the modiste began to shove pins into the garment, cinching it tightly around Aurelia's waist. "Where did it come from?"

Aurelia was standing in the middle of the store, wearing the dress, doing her best not to get stuck by a sharp pin. "I am not sure," she lied.

"Very strange..."

The dress was one that was bought for Aurelia when she had turned debutant.

Typically, it had been too tight for her to wear, and she'd never had a chance to get it tailored to fit her. The truth of the matter was, she had not wished to, for she had suspected at the time her mother had done so on purpose to make a point.

"Wherever it came from, it is no wonder it has not been worn," the modiste pointed out as she worked. "It hangs off you like a tent."

"Wait a minute..." Her mother was rubbing her chin as she looked closer at the dress. "Aurelia, that is not..." Her eyes widened. "Tell me, that is not the piece I bought for your debutant ball! No!"

Aurelia flushed. "It might be. I cannot remember."

"It is!" Her mother swept toward her, taking the hem of the skirt to look closer. "I cannot believe it. Aurelia..." She shook her head in with surprise. "I have not noticed until now, but you have slimmed down considerably. This is..." She beamed. "A sign, it must be, of good things to come."



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This might have been the first time ever that Aurelia's mother had been complimentary toward her body. And where it should have brought her joy, the effect was the exact opposite. Does she not stop to consider why I have lost so much weight in such a short amount of time? Not because of how happy I am, I can say that without question. For two weeks now, Aurelia had felt so sick with thoughts of this coming marriage that she had lost her appetite completely. And where she might have looked better because of it, she certainly did not feel better.

"Thank you," she said, looking away as she was beginning to feel annoyed. All this fake happiness and cheer, when her mother must have surely known how she was feeling, was starting to frustrate her beyond belief.

She turned her back on her mother, wishing to end this conversation. When she did, however, she was forced to look out the window of the small modiste, which had her spying something, or someone, which threatened to undo her completely. Her eyes widened and their eyes met, and she cursed the bad timing of this moment. Just when I think that things can't get any worse...

"Oh, look who it is," her mother said excitedly.

Aurelia grimaced when she heard the door to the modiste's open, and she felt her cheeks and chest flush bright pink.

"Aurelia!" Rosalind cried. "That dress!"

Deep breaths taken, forcing calm and composure because she needed it more than anything, Aurelia turned about to greet her friend. "Rosalind, what are you doing in

the city?”

“Shopping, eating, getting out of the house.” Her friend came for her, eyes wide and glimmering as she took in Aurelia’s dress. “But never mind that, it is you who we should be speaking of. This dress... gosh, it is stunning on you.”

“Thank you.”

Behind Aurelia, lurking in the doorway but careful not to walk too deeply into the store, was the duke. He stood with his arms folded, his body half turned, his attention filtering from Aurelia to his sister to the door through which he had come like he was desperate to flee. He looked just as Aurelia remembered him. Dark and stormy. Masculine and powerful. A sight which made her legs tremble and her loins moisten despite how much she wished they would not.

“Gerald,” Rosalind said, turning to her brother. “Does Aurelia not look beautiful. Tell her.”

The duke grimaced but then fixed a plain, almost disinterested expression on his face. “She does. I mean...” He looked at her finally, their meeting across the room and holding for just a moment. In that moment, the store faded around them, nothing seemed to matter in this world but his opinion, and Aurelia forgot how to breath, how to stand, how to not look as if she might float away. “... you do, look beautiful, I mean.”

“Fine,” she said, looking away.

As enraptured by the duke as she was in the moment, his telling her how beautiful he thought she was set a fire inside of her. If he thinks I am that beautiful, then why did he turn me down? Why did he choose to treat me as if I am nothing? She purposefully turned her back on him next, happy to fold her arms and pretend he was not there.

“Rosalind, we really must not linger,” the duke then said to his sister. “I told you, I do not wish to spend all day in the city.”

“Yes, yes,” Rosalind dismissed him. “I just wished to pop in – I couldn’t very well walk past without doing so.”

“Will we be seeing you two at the wedding,” Aurelia’s mother asked.

“Of course,” Rosalind said. “We would not miss it for the world.”

Aurelia continued not to look at the duke, even if she thought that she could feel his eyes on the back of her head. As much as she still wanted him, she was so angry with him that she refused to give him even the sense that he was still in her thoughts.

They left shortly after that. A few more well wishes. Rosalind opining on how she could not wait for the day. And then... they were gone, the duke leaving quickly, not another word said.

It broke her in ways she thought were beyond her at this point. Not that Aurelia had been hanging onto any false sense of hope, but still there was that lingering feeling that maybe when she saw the duke again, when he was reminded of her in the flesh, something would change in him. I do not believe he has not thought of me once these past two weeks. I refuse to accept that I have not had an effect on him.

Now, perhaps, it was time to accept it.

Such that it was that the rest of the day passed in a sullen fashion, Aurelia doing what she could not to look broken, her mother carrying on about how much weight she had lost, the modiste praising her on the dress and its beauty, and everyone seeming to agree that this wedding and this marriage was the most wonderful of things.

\* \* \*

When they arrived home later that same day, Aurelia went straight to her room. She did so because her mother was starting to annoy her. The falsity of her praise. The purposeful ignorance of what this marriage promised to be. Aurelia was doing all she could to hold her tongue and feign a sense of being content, but she could only push herself so far.

“Aurelia!” Her mother appeared in the doorway almost the second that Aurelia sat down on her bed. “Do not hide up here – I told you, I wish to discuss food options with you. I have narrowed it down, but as you are the blushing bride, I think it behooves you to have the final say.”

“I really do not mind, mother.”

Her mother giggled. “I can see that. With all the weight you have lost, perhaps you will dine on water and air.”

“Funny...”

“Truly, Aurelia...” She swept into the room. “I still cannot believe it – just as I cannot believe I did not notice it!” She reached Aurelia and took her arms, looking down at her daughter with an admiring stare. “I am just so proud of you. And honestly, if I had known this is what it would take for you to lose the weight, perhaps I would have insisted that you were married years ago.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Oh, how Aurelia was trying her best. To hold her tongue. To keep her temper. To not rise to the bait because she did not want to cause a fuss or give a reason to alarm. But I am only so strong...

“Is this what it takes for you to be proud of me,” Aurelia snapped, yanking her hands back. “For me to lose weight, finally? Perhaps I will go one better? Starve myself to death, hmmm? That will really give you a reason to celebrate.” She crossed her arms and glared at her mother.

“Aurelia...” Her mother leaned back in shock. “Did I say something wrong?”

“What do you think?”

Aurelia’s mother was a stubborn woman. Indeed, she and Aurelia had fought over her weight many times and not once had she backed down. Why would she? In her mind, she is always in the right. And everything she says is aimed at improving me, as she thinks I need to be improved. It was such that Aurelia braced herself for her mother’s typical, defensive response.

Most strangely, her mother did no such thing.

“Can I let you in on a little secret?” her mother began, her tone softening.

“You... what?” Aurelia blinked, not sure how to respond.

Her mother sighed and sat down beside her, resting a hand on Aurelia’s thigh in comfort. “I know I am hard on you,” she began. “Perhaps a little more than that,” she

added with a guilty chuckle. "But I hope you know I do it out of love."

Aurelia scoffed. "Is that right? Then why has it never felt like that?"

"I suppose I should know better." She gave Aurelia's thigh a gentle squeeze. "And believe me when I tell you that I know exactly what you are going through. I know because..." She grimaced as if embarrassed but then nodded her head in confirmation, accepting what she was about to say. "My mother was the same way to me."

"What?" Aurelia frowned at her mother; she looked up and down her mother's petite body, wondering what she meant. "What does that mean?"

"I have never told you girls this," she began awkwardly, looking away. "I was embarrassed, was why. But when I was your age, I was..." Another awkward laugh. "I was a little heavier than I am now."

"How heavy..."

"Let me put it this way..." She raised an eyebrow at Aurelia. "If we were sisters, you would have been the skinny one."

Aurelia's mouth dropped open. "You are joking."

"I am not," she said rightly. "I was big, and my mother was not shy about letting me know it. In fact..." She shook her head. "When I finally became engaged to your father, she was the one who forced a diet on me, insisting that I could not be the wife I needed to be if I did not lose the weight. I hated her for that," she then added bitterly. "As if being forced to marry a man I did not wish to was not punishment enough."

“And father?” Aurelia pressed. “What did he... when he began to court you, did he say anything?”

She laughed. “I do not think he noticed. But we did not marry for love. We married because it was expected. Some days, I wish I hadn’t lost the weight. If I was going to marry, it might have been nice to have been myself.”

Aurelia could not believe what she was hearing. For all the times she and her mother had fought over her weight, she never could have imagined that her mother had been the same as her. She supposed it made sense, and she knew enough about her mother and father’s marriage to know it was not a happy one.

“I did not lose the weight for Lord Mildenhall,” Aurelia said softly. “That is not why...” She sighed. “It just happened, is all.”

“I know dear,” her mother said. “Just as I know this is not the marriage you expected or wanted. I think that is why I have been so over the top these past few weeks...” She gave her head a shake. “As if I could trick you into pretending that you are happy.”

“I am happy,” Aurelia said.

“You do not need to lie to me.”

Aurelia smiled. “I am not in love with Lord Mildenhall. But this marriage is still my decision, mother. You know that. And you know why I am doing it.”

“Just as I hope you know how proud of you I am.” She took Aurelia by the hand and gave it a kiss. “I do not say it nearly enough, but I am so, so proud of you. You did not have to do this, and Eveline especially...” She smiled. “She is just as grateful. We all are, dear. That you would put this family first as you have done, it is more than I

could have ever expected or wanted from you.”

Aurelia felt tears brimming in her eyes and for once she did not try to stop them. She let them flow fully, which saw her mother begin to tear up with her. And for a few moments there, nothing was said, because nothing else needed to be. It was a conversation long overdue, but much needed with all things considered.

Still, Aurelia was not looking forward to this marriage but now more than ever she was accepting of it. One day, she would likely be able to look past her feelings for the duke, a bright spot in her life, but not a reality or a world she might have ever hoped to live in. And until that day came, thoughts of her family and why she was doing this was what she would focus on to see her through.

I might never be truly happy but at least I will be content. That is what I must live for. That is what I must focus on. My mother, my brother, my sisters... my family. They are whose lives matter the most, and in that I will find a slither of happiness on which to hold.

ChapterTwenty-Three



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Look who it is...” In the doorway to his office, Victor appeared with a mischievous grin on his face. “I did not think I would be seeing you here tonight.”

“This is my office, isn’t it.” Gerald snapped at the man. He had a glass of whiskey, half-poured, in front of him, and beside that was the bottle. He finished the glass in a single mouthful and then poured himself another. “And my establishment. I do not need permission.”

“And I did not say that you did.” Victor walked across the office and without asking took the bottle off Gerald’s desk and had himself a mouthful. He smacked his lips as he put the bottle down. “And this is our establishment. Do not forget that.”

Gerald bared his teeth at his friend. “Is there a reason you are here?”

“I was going to ask the same of you.” Victor sat down across from him. “Me? I am here every night – which you would know, if you came here half as much as you are meant to.”

“Not here,” Gerald said. “My office. What do you want?”

“Well, someone is in a mood,” Victor chuckled.

“You have that effect on me.”

He glared at Victor in warning, preying the man would leave him alone because with the mood that he was in, the last thing he wished to deal with was Victor’s sardonic sense of humor.

Was there any reason to say that his mood was caused by seeing Lady Hawkins earlier? I am past the point of pretending, as much as I might like to. Dammit! This was supposed to be done with. Cutting her off was meant to free me from this... this hold she has on me. But these last two weeks have only made things worse.

It had started the day after she had come to see him. A night still burned hot in his mind. A night he could not move on from. A night that had not meant to happen the way it did, but Gerald was weak and pathetic and unable to control himself. As was always the case where Lady Hawkins was concerned.

He could still taste her on his lips. He could still feel her mouth wrapped around his manhood. Too many times since that night, he had thought about her. And too many times he had questioned why in the name of all things was he such a fool as to let her go.

His feelings for her were only ever meant to be sexual. That certainty had been what kept him sane and focused. Yes, he wanted her more than he had ever wanted another in his life, but she and he were of two different worlds it felt like, they could never work – he did not want them to work! And when she finally found a man to marry her, that would be it for once she was no longer available, he would simply move on...

At least that had been the plan. Now, I do not know what to think.

Seeing her today had undone him once again. Never mind how good she had looked. Yes, she had lost some weight, but that was not it. It was in her eyes that Gerald had become lost. They had met, held, and he had felt his stomach turn with guilt and his manhood stiffen with attraction. Were they alone, he would have gone to her, taken her, made her his as he had thought of doing too many times these past weeks to count. But... no, even that would not have been an option.

She had spurned him. Turned from him. When their eyes had met he had seen fury in them, confirmation that even if he wanted her, she would not take him. A relief, it should have been, but here he sat, drinking, sulking, wondering to himself what it was all for. Why was he so damn insistent that she was no good for him.

“No... this is beyond your usual sour temperament,” Victor mused as he studied Gerald and the cloud which hung over him. “Now, I am trying my best to think when this attitude of yours began...” His eyes flashed wickedness.

“I have had a long day, Victor. Do not make it longer.”

“A long week by my count,” Victor said. “No, a long two weeks. Yes...” He chuckled and rubbed his chin. “Two weeks it has been. The question is, what happened two weeks ago to cause this once bastion of propriety and fakery to take a turn toward the morose.”

Gerald grimaced. He had thought he’d been more subtle than he had been. Indeed, for two weeks he had wandered about as if he was a ghost. Lamenting. Trying to instill in himself the belief he had made the right decision. Failing miserably all the same.

“Ah, that is right...” Victor chuckled knowingly. “Remind me, it was two weeks ago when Lady Hawkins became engaged, yes?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing at all,” Victor mused. “Although by my mind, this announcement should have had the opposite effect. Lord Mildenhall, as pompous as that lout is, also happens to be rather wealthy, meaning that the debt her family owes us will be paid off in good time. Good news, as it is.”

“And it is,” Gerald said, forcing a smile. “Lady Hawkins... her family does not

deserve to suffer for her father's sins."

Victor chuckled sardonically. "No matter, for you are doing enough suffering for the lot of them."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, please, Gerald..." Victor took the bottle and had another swig. "Do you think me a fool? A blind fool, at that. I know you do not hold me in high respects where my intelligence is concerned, but you should know that there is little I do not see."

"There is nothing to see."

"So, the way you were looking at Lady Hawkins that night at your home was nothing?" He made sure to be watching Gerald, whose eyes opened in surprise, which had Victor chuckling further. "As I said."

"I... I do not know what you are —"

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“And your insistence that I not collect on her family’s debt, even when it was well overdue. I had wondered to myself why you were protecting her.”

“I was not protecting her,” he growled in warning, anger growing now because he could see Victor was mocking him. Taking pleasure in his misery. “I just did not wish to see her family –”

“Suffer for the father’s sins, yes I know, you said that already,” Victor waved him down. “A nice enough sentiment. But a half-truth at best.”

Gerald straightened in his chair and fixed Victor with a scowl that he hoped would be enough to see the large man back down. He did not appreciate being mocked. Just as he did not appreciate having truths which burned hotter than any fire being laid bare before him.

“Whatever it is that you are saying, say it,” he snapped. “Or leave. Personally, I would prefer the latter.”

Victor rolled his eyes. “Enough with the bravado. It is obvious to anyone who pays attention – as I do, by the way. It is obvious that you have feelings for this Lady Hawkins.”

A pang stabbed through his gut. “I do... do not. That is a lie.”

“As you say,” Victor scoffed. “But do you want my advice?” He raised an eyebrow at Gerald. “Get over it. I have no doubt that she was a wild one...” He laughed to himself, and Gerald stiffened with fury. “She looks the type, to be sure. But she is one

of many. Bed another. Have some fun. Sleep your way through half of London if that is what it takes. Believe me, there are plenty more Lady Hawkins to pick from, should you be so willing. All you have to do is pull yourself out of this funk because the way you have been acting lately, a blind beggar on their last shilling would rather starve than waste their time in your bed.” He cackled. “Christ man, have some dignity.”

Gerald felt a lump appear in his throat, just as he felt his stomach drop through the floor. Victor’s advice was predicated on the fact that all Gerald felt for Lady Hawkins was physical attraction, meaning that the advice to bed someone else sounded perfectly reasonable to his ears. Sadly, Gerald was starting to accept the very real fact that this was simply not the case.

There were not plenty more Lady Hawkins to pick from, as Victor had so simply put it. There was but the one, a unique type of woman whom Gerald had never before met the likes of and would never meet again. When he had first met her, he had thought her unruly and uncouth and beneath him in every way which mattered. Now, he knew, these were the qualities that he admired most.

Worse that she had come to him. Worse that she had given him a chance. And worse that he was so damn stubborn and pigheaded that he had refused to accept how he felt. That was what stung the most.

No... what stings the most is that I am too late. That is the cross I will bear for the rest of my life, a sure to be long and painful one at that.

“Thank you for the advice,” he muttered to Victor. “I will... I will consider it.”

“Please do...” Victor sighed and rose from the chair, snatching the bottle away. “And where I often besmirch you for not coming in here nearly enough, I think you not being here until you sought yourself out might be a good thing. I mean, good God

man..." He stepped back, keeping the bottle. "You are a duke! Start acting like one." And then he left, shaking his head the whole while.

A duke... all his life, Gerald had done nothing but play the part of being a duke. Proper. Regal. A perfect example of his station and a model for his peers to look upon and emulate themselves after. He had done so because he thought it right, caring not about how happy it made him because he had believed such things did not matter.

Now, he gave little care for any of it. What did it matter what people thought of you if you were not happy? What did it matter how respected you were if you were miserable? It does not matter, a lesson I am learning in real time, the hard way. In brutal fashion because it is exactly what I deserve.

It had been a long two weeks for Gerald, and the pain was only going to get worse.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

"Gerald, can I speak with you for a moment?" Rosalind called for him the moment he walked through the front door. She was standing in the foyer, arms folded before her, a concerned expression on her face that told him she had been waiting for him.

"Later," Gerald said, moving to walk around her. "Now is not a good time."

He felt immediate guilt for dismissing her like that, and so sharply. But his mood was as sour as it had been all day, perhaps at its worst as he had spent the ride home thinking about what Victor had said as he came to realize within himself all the mistakes that he had made. Now was not the time to speak with Rosalind...

"Later will not do," Rosalind said, moving to block him. "I wish to speak now."

Gerald bulked when he saw the determined look his sister fixed on him. There was

fire behind her eyes, a sense that she was not going to bow willingly. It might have brought a smile to his face, because the changes he had seen in her lately, while unexpected and not how he pictured his often meek little sister, told him that she was growing into herself. She was not a little girl anymore, a woman grown.

“I...” He hesitated, stumbling slightly as the drink was still in him. “Rosalind, whatever this is, it can wait.” Again, he went to walk around her.

“I said now.” She grabbed his arm.

Gerald turned stiff, his head snapping down and looking at her hand wrapped around his forearm. It was the first time he could ever remember her doing such a thing, as she knew better than to dare raise a hand to him. Indeed, the moment she touched him, she seemed to understand the mistake she had made.

“I just want to talk.” She dropped her hand quickly. “Please.”

Although Gerald was angry, he was not angry with her. The fury that burned through him was for himself, and for that reason he could not bring it upon himself to level his sweet sister with his fire. “Rosalind...”

“I am worried about you, Gerald,” she said quickly, fixing him with that same concerned expression she had held when he’d walked through the door. “Dammit, I am terrified.”

He frowned. “Terrified. “What are you... there is no need to worry after me. Rosalind...” He laughed awkwardly. “What are you saying?”



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Do not pretend that you do not know to what I speak,” she said to him, softening her tone and her expression both. “These past few weeks, you have not been yourself. I would say that you have been a shadow of who you are, but shadows are not nearly so sullen. Even they grow in the sun.”

“Rosalind...” He winced, for he knew what she was talking about.

Just as Victor had noticed Gerald’s less than palatable mood of late, he should not have been surprised that his sister had noticed also. Before Lady Hawkin’s engagement had been announced, his entire world had revolved around his sister. She was all he cared about, and he would do, and did do, anything for her.

Indeed, he had promised himself that now Lady Hawkins was out of the picture, he would turn his eye toward her future and find for her a suitor. Where he had also promised not to be so hard on her, and not force her as he had been doing, he still wished to see her wed, just as he knew she wished it too. Assuming it was to a man who she liked and wanted to be with. Something I did not think important but know now that I could not possibly expect less for her.

Yet he had practically ignored her these past two weeks. He had avoided her. He had spurned her. And the few times they had spent together, he had been withdrawn and miserable such that he hoped she might get the message and not try and force herself on him.

Clearly, she had noticed this turn. But such was her love for him that she wasn’t just going to ignore it. I hate her for that... just as I love her for it all the same.

“Something is wrong,” Rosalind said to him, urging him to open to her. “And do not say otherwise. You are not yourself, Gerald. Anybody can see that! Tell me please, what is the matter. I want to help.”

“It is nothing,” he said weakly, barely able to look at her.

“A lie,” she said. “You are my brother, Gerald. I love you more than...” She laughed. “More than sometimes you deserve. And if you think I am going to sit back and simply watch you deteriorate as you have been doing, then you clearly do not know me as well as I know you. So...” She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “Tell me, what is the matter.”

He sighed. “Why do you even care. There is nothing you can do.”

“Ah, so something is wrong,” she smirked. “Told you.”

There was no way that Gerald could tell Rosalind what was bothering him. That he had fallen for Lady Hawkins. That they had been sneaking around behind her back. That after all the times he had warned Rosalind off her best friend, citing her as a bad influence and beneath her, to admit that he now wanted her like he had never wanted anyone. I cannot face the shame. And my sister would be right to hate me for it.

“It is... it is nothing you can do anything about,” he said with a grimace. “Work related. That is all. It will fix itself soon enough.”

“Work related...” She frowned. “What is it? It is money?”

“What? No. Nothing like that.”

“A matter in Parliament?”

He shook his head. “Forget it, Rosalind. As I said, it is nothing –”

“Is it to do with Lord Blackwood?”

Gerald stiffened, for he hated his sister speaking of Victor. “No,” he growled. “Nothing to do with him. Of that, I promise you.”

She took note of his reaction, which perhaps was why she ventured her next question. “I heard a rumor of him, you know. Something I was certain to be a lie but...” She considered and then nodded as a means to show her bravery. “But I am wondering now if there is some truth behind it.”

“What...” His pulse quickened in warning. “What did you hear? Whatever it is, I am sure to is a lie.”

“I would hope so,” she said. “For I know you would have nothing to do with him, if it was true. But...” She bit into her lip. “But I have heard from others – a few people, as it is. That he is involved in... in...” Still, she could not bring herself to say it.

Gerald knew where this was going. From how nervous she was behaving, to the fact he could guess well enough at what unsavory activities she had heard people saying of Victor. Which was why he should have taken the opportunity to dismiss her before she voiced it. To shut it down and cover himself, because once it was spoken of, there was only one place for it to go. He knew he needed to stop her...

... and yet, as Gerald was feeling, he simply could not bring himself to say anything. He was just so tired of it all. Tired of the lies. Tired of pretending he was somebody who he wasn't. Tired of his sister looking up to him when she should have been looking down. It is exactly what I deserve.

There was but one person in this world who knew the true Gerald, and she had not

judge him. Dammit, she had liked him all the better for it. Would his sister be the same? He doubted it... but he felt too that she had a right to know. No more lies.

“Say it,” he said, resolved now to the truth.

She straightened up and looked at Gerald with a sense of accusation, that she knew the truth, just as she suspected his involvement. “That he is involved in one of those gaming houses located throughout London. The same which Aurelia’s family was indebted to.”

“Is that what you have heard?”

“Not just involved, that herunsone of them, Gerald.” She bit into her lip, struggling to finish her thought. There was pain behind her eyes, withheld because even now she could not believe what she was about to suggest. “And he is your friend, Gerald. You know him better than anybody.”

“What are you saying, Rosalind? Do not speak around the point.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“Did you know,” she asked flatly, her tone turned sharp. “Did you know that he was involved?”

“And if I did?”

She leaned back, her lip curling with disgust. “You... you did? How could you, Gerald? How could you be friends with someone like that?” Her eyes held him, searching for an answer which he was not willing to give. And Gerald did not respond, looking upon his sister with an open expression, his heart laid bare, the truth there for her to see, if she wished it. “Oh no...” It struck her in that moment. “Gerald, do not... surely that is not...”

“I am so sorry, Rosalind. You have no idea how —”

“It was you!” she cried suddenly as the pieces fell into place. “Aurelia! Her family... the reason that... that... that is why you and she have grown so close! You are the one to whom she owes money!”

Her voice cut him sharper and deeper than any blade. He winced and leaned away, shame crashing down on him, guilt because his sister looked upon him in a way that she never had before. In that moment, he was no longer her older brother. He was a stranger, and she loathed him because of it.

“It is not that simple, Rosalind,” he said pitifully. “If you will just let me explain.”

“Explain!” She took a step back. “How could you possibly... after everything you have said about Aurelia. How you judged her. How you judge everybody!”

“It is not that simple.”

“You blackmailed her,” she hissed. “You forced her to... to... her debts. You made her marry just so you would get paid!”

“I was wrong,” he tried. “I know that now.”

“Oh, now you do!” Another step back. “Now you admit fault, once you have been discovered. And what, I am just supposed to forgive you?”

“What? No. This is not about forgiving me.”

“Good!” Another step back. “Because this is... Gerald.” She shook her head, still that look as if she did not know him. As if he was a rodent that had wandered into her home. “This is beyond anything I could have ever...” She scoffed, disgust dripping from her tongue. “I do not even know who you are.” And with that, she turned and stormed away.

Gerald watched her go, his heart sinking, his sense of worth crashing and shattering on the floor. His entire life, all he had done, he had done for his sister. He had wanted to be someone who she could look up to, who she could admire. Dammit, he had wanted her to have a perfect life because he’d never had one himself. And now, in an instant, he had ruined everything.

He thought to leave it at that. To let her cool down so that he might explain. But what could he explain? There was no justifying what he had done. He didn’t want to do such a thing. He had erred terribly, and he deserved her venom in full.

At best, he decided that he could tell her the truth. Once again, he was sick of the lies. He was sick of pretending that he was someone who he was not. He did not think that she would forgive him, but he hoped that she might at least understand why he had

done it. Rosalind deserved that, at the very least.

It's time she learns everything. And once she does, then she can decide how she feels about me. At least that will be one less lie I need to live with...

Gerald found Rosalind in her room, curled up on her bed, back facing the door. The door was open, but the room was dark, that sense that she half wanted him to walk on by and half wanted him to come in and speak with her.

"Rosalind..." he spoke from the doorway.

"Go away," she said, sniffing back her tears. "I don't want to speak with you."

"I can't blame you for that," he said. "If I were you, I likely wouldn't want to speak with me ever again."

To that, there was no answer, just the muffled sounds of her sobs. It broke Gerald's heart to hear, but it told him that he couldn't just leave her. What he had to say might not make her feel better, but at least it would provide closure. With all he had been through lately, that was perhaps the best he could hope for.

"You're likely too young to remember this," he began softly. "But our father –"

"Don't blame our father," she said over him, still refusing to turn around. "He didn't make you do anything."

"I'm not blaming him..." Gerald started gently into the room, careful not to approach too quickly. "I just want you to understand why I did what I did."

"So I can forgive you?"

“No,” he said truthfully. “I don’t want you to forgive me. I don’t deserve that.”

She hesitated, sniffing again. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not, Rosalind...” He reached the bed but didn’t sit. “I’ve lied to you, about so many things. All I want to do now is tell you the truth. What you choose to do with that is up to you.”



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

He waited for her to respond, expecting a rebuke. Rather, she sniffed but said nothing, which he took as her accepting his offer.

“You were too young to remember our father,” he started again, careful not to sound as if he was trying to shift the blame. “In some ways, I am grateful for that. Where I won’t deny how much we owe him, myself especially, he was not the center of morality and propriety I like to pretend. He was a gambling addict, Rosalind. And it wasn’t until after he died that I learned the true depths of just how far he had sunk in his final years.”

Rosalind shifted slightly and he waited for her to speak, but she said nothing. Still, he noticed her relaxing slightly as she accepted his words.

“We were in debt,” he continued, sitting now on the end of Rosalind’s bed but careful not to touch her. “A debt which I couldn’t possibly cover myself – not with what our father left us. To help free ourselves from this debt...” He grimaced. “I was forced to work with some men whom it is no exaggeration to say are the scourge of London’s soul. Debt collectors, mostly. The type of men who care only for money, with no regard for how their actions ruin the lives of those who owe it.” He sighed and shook his head to himself as memories of the things he was forced to do came back to him. Actions which shamed him, even to this day. “I suppose working with them is why I try so hard now to be what I am – as if I need to prove that the version of me during those years wasn’t my true self.”

“And is it?” Rosalind asked, a slight bite to her tone.

“Of course not.”

“Yet you still work for them...”

“They work for me,” he said. “I managed to work my way out of debt, and then I bought the same gaming house to which I had been indebted. You might be wondering why I did it...” He trailed off as he remembered that moment for what it was, a thinly veiled excuse to do something good, knowing that in reality it was done to shield himself and his family. “I told myself it was to protect people. Absurd, I know,” he scoffed. “That if I was in control I might be able to stop the terrible things from happening.”

“And did you...” She sniffed.

“No,” he said truthfully. “There was no stopping it. Where money is involved, the worst always comes out. In myself included. It wasn’t until much later that I was ready to admit that my true reason for buying that gaming house was to protect myself, not others. And I hated myself for it...” Slowly, he reached out, resting a hand on Rosalind’s leg. She did not pull away, which he took as a good sign. “I still do hate myself for it.”

“Then why?” Rosalind sat up suddenly and turned around. Her eyes were stained red. Her cheeks too, coated in tears and still dripping. She wasn’t angry, he could see that now. Rather, she was disappointed, which stung even worse. “Why do you still do it? Why not... not sell it? Give it away?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is!” she cried. “For my entire life, Gerald, you have pretended to be this... this bastion of goodness. The perfect son, an emblem of what it means to be a member of the peerage. Everywhere we go, people look up to you. They respect you. But it is all a lie!”

“I know.”

“And what of me?” she hissed. “I am the same. Even those times where I hated how you forced me to act, I did so, knowing that you would do the same were you in my shoes. All I ever wanted...” She sniffed, and her chin began to wobble. “Was for you to think that I was worthy of you and your love.”

“You are, Rosalind,” he said, shuffling closer. “Of course you are. Don’t ever think otherwise.”

“Does it matter?” she shot back. “If you are not what you say. Is everything a lie?”

He bowed his head with shame. “I have lived two lives, Rosalind. And it is only now that I am coming to terms with that. How I have treated you, how you see me...” He fixed her with a determined look. “That was never a lie. It is the other side of me which is.”

“But is it? Or is this the lie and that is the real you?”

He winced, because even he could not say. He wanted to believe that he was good and righteous and someone worth looking up to. But how can I want such a thing when my actions are not worthy of this? “I don’t know...” His voice dropped and he kept his head bowed. “Is that what you want to hear? That I don’t even know who I am anymore or what I want.”

“Are you happy?” Rosalind asked, a question which caught him by surprise.

“Wh... what?” He looked up to find her watching him; her brow was furrowed, her eyes were wide, and the look she held was filled with pain.

“Are you happy?” she asked again. “The gaming house? Or this version of you?”

Which one makes you the happiest?”

“I...” Gerald hesitated as he considered the question, only to crash when the answer came to him. “Neither,” he admitted, for what was the first time. “Neither make me happy. And that is the truth.”

“Gerald...” She sniffed and shuffled closer. He moved to her, taking her hands which she pulled into her chest. “I do not hate you for your lies, I need you to know that.”

“You have every right to.”

“No.” She shook her head. “What I hate is to think that after everything you have done, even the lies, you still cannot find happiness. That is sadder than anything. Why bother pretending to be someone else if you do not wish to?”

“Because it is the right thing to do.”

“Is it?” she pressed on him. “Says who? Why is this version more right than the other? Why does either matter if you hate yourself for it.”

“I...” He searched her eyes as if for the answer, unable to find one because there was no answer that would satisfy. “I do it because.... Because I have no choice.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“But you do, Gerald. That is what I am saying. Do not act this way or that way because you think you must. For me. For society. For... I do not even know why! You are my brother, and I can see how unhappy you are. And not just these past two weeks – even if they have been the worst of it. For years now, I have seen how sad you are, how miserable.” She squeezed his hands and smiled. “I know why now, I just wish that you would admit it to yourself.”

“And then what?” he asked sullenly, defeat creeping into him. “If I am not this man, your brother. What am I? What is there for me beyond this world?”

Her smile grew and she continued to squeeze his hands. “Isn’t that the beauty of it? That you get to decide for yourself. That you get to choose what it is that makes you happy, and when you do, fight for it because at the end of the day, that is all which matters.”

“What... what makes me happy....” He said the words as if he didn’t understand them, as if he was hearing them for the first time. A concept that has been alien to me for as long as I can remember.

“Whatever it is,” she pressed on him. “No matter what.” And then she hugged him. Arms wrapping about his neck and pulling him into a hug which seemed to push away the weight that was sitting on Gerald’s shoulders, sheltering him from that expectation, giving him strength which he had not even known that he needed.

More than that, it was permission given that he felt in his sister’s hug. She had forgiven him for what he had done, when she did not need to. She wanted only the best for him. After all he had done, all the lies he told, she still loved him. It was

more than he deserved.

The question thus became, what was it that made Gerald happy? If he could have anything in this world, what would it be? One thought came to mind instantly. It surprised him, even if it should not have. It made him smile, his pulse rising, his sense of frustration and sadness and pity washing away as he considered what it meant.

Is it too late? Or is my sister right? If that is what will make me happy, perhaps fighting for it, despite the cost, is all which matters? For if I do not... it will be another life led that is not of my choosing, yet another lie I will be forced to swallow. And I am just about sick of all these lies.

He knew what he had to do. It was so clear now that he could not believe he had taken this long. Gerald just had to hope that he wasn't too late.

## ChapterTwenty-Five

“Is everything ready?” Violet hurried into the room, looking frazzled and beside herself with worry. “Please, tell me you that you nearly are.”

“A few more minutes,” Caroline said as she helped to adjust Aurelia's dress, fiddling with the sash about the waist and ensuring it was tight and well cinched. “These things cannot be rushed.”

“Tell that to the people outside,” Violet said as she took a few long breaths. “I had no idea so many people would be coming!”

“Lord Mildenhall insisted,” Caroline said simply. “And seeing as he is paying for it...”

“Quite a bit, by the looks of things.” Violet added.

“I have not seen it yet,” Rosalind joined in. She was attending Aurelia’s face, touching up around her eyes to ensure that they popped with the green of the dress. “Is it that beautiful?”

“Heavenly,” Violet crooned. “Lord Mildenhall spared no expense.”

“He certainly is generous,” Caroline agreed. “I had no idea he would go through such lengths.”

“Can you blame him,” Violet added. “He wants this wedding like nothing else. His mother especially...” She curled her nose. “You would not believe that she had the nerve to ask me about my plans for children, how many I wish to have, and if I had already started trying. Not because she cared, but because she wishes to see if there is anything wrong with me.”

“Me too,” Caroline scoffed. “Clearly, she does not want to take any chances where grandchildren are concerned. But that is the point, isn’t it? Lord Mildenhall was not exactly subtle about it.”

“Is now the time for this conversation?” Rosalind interjected and looked at the two sisters. “We have a ceremony to prepare for.”

“Yes, sorry,” Violet grimaced. “I will just pop out and tell everyone –”

“There she is!” Aurelia’s mother was in the room next. “How much longer? Everyone is ready!”

“A few minutes, mother,” Caroline assured her, taking a step back to admire the dress on Aurelia. “Rosalind...”

“Almost done,” Rosalind agreed, also taking a step back to check her work.

“Good, good...” Aurelia’s mother looked upon Aurelia with a bedazzled expression that saw her eyes begin to well with tears. “Beautiful, absolutely beautiful, Aurelia. I cannot believe it – not that you look beautiful,” she then laughed. “That the day has finally come!”

“Beautiful,” Caroline agreed.

“Stunning,” Violet added.

“I can’t believe it,” Rosalind said with a sniff as she wiped at her eyes. “You look like a princess, Aurelia. Lord Mildenhall is a lucky man.”

To that, all four ladies nodded their heads in agreement.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Aurelia stood in silence as the chaos swirled about her. Happy to let her sisters, mother, and best friend cluck and carry on with feigned happiness and joy for she did not want to risk saying anything that might ruin the mood. She had committed herself fully to this marriage by now, and to suggest anything else might ruin the day. Not the marriage, however, as she doubted that anything she did or said would change that outcome.

It was set to begin at any second. Now that her dress was fitted and her face was painted, all she needed to do was say that she was ready and the ceremony would begin.

The ladies had sequestered themselves to an antechamber at the back of the church for these final moments. Beyond the doorway and down the hall, Aurelia could hear the buzzing of the scores of guests who had come to witness her special day. Most were friends and family of Lord Mildenhall, but many were here for her also. And from the sounds of things, all agreed that it was a wedding to be remembered. And a marriage to be forgotten...

“Mother,” Violet began. “Go and tell them that we will be out shortly.”

Their mother nodded her agreement. But not before taking Aurelia by the hands and fixing her with a smile. “I am so proud of you dear, I hope you know that. So proud.”

“I know, mother,” Aurelia said, ignoring the stabbing pain in her chest.

“Mother!” Eveline appeared suddenly at the door. “I was looking for you.” The sight of her sister had the pain increasing, a reminder of why she was doing this. “Daniel

wants to know how long.”

“Daniel...” Their mother rolled her eyes. “I am coming, Eveline. And tell you sister how stunning she looks.”

“She knows she does,” Eveline sighed, only to look upon Aurelia and beam. “You do though, Aurelia. Wow.”

“Thanks, Eveline,” Aurelia said with a soft smile.

Her sister was only eighteen and had her entire life ahead of her. A life that would now be her own, once this marriage was secured. Any doubts that Aurelia was having were dashed in that instant. It might not have made her feel better, but it made her more determined.

Eveline and her mother were quick to leave, which meant that Aurelia was out of time. They would spend the next few minutes quieting the crowd and ushering everyone to their seats, at which point she would be expected to appear at the end of the nave and begin her walk down the aisle.

“This is it...” Aurelia sighed.

“I best be going too,” Rosalind added. She smiled for Aurelia and took her hands also. “I will see you after.”

“I sure hope so.” She held onto Rosalind’s hands tightly, looking into her friend’s eyes, hoping to see an answer to the question she was too afraid to ask...

“Until then.” Rosalind gave her hands a squeeze and then vanished.

Rosalind had come alone today. Her brother, the duke, for reasons she had not

explained, had decided not to attend. Worse than that, Rosalind had not even seemed to think it strange. She mentioned it as a passing comment, slightly annoyed because she had expected him here, but not considering there to be a reason beyond the fact that he didn't enjoy social events.

When she heard this, Aurelia had needed to work as hard as she ever had not to break on the spot. It was stupid, she knew, but a part of her had wondered if the duke being here and seeing her might be the final push he needed to...No, do not go down that path again. He is not here because he does not care. He never did, and wishing differently isn't going to change anything.

This wedding was happening, and Aurelia had resigned herself to it fully.

"I best tell them you are coming," Caroline then said. She too took Aurelia's hands and smiled. "I know this is scary, Aurelia. Believe me..." She chuckled. "Violet and I both know it more than most. But trust me, sometimes the most unlikely marriages turn into the stuff of dreams. And if you want it, it will happen. I promise."

"Thank you," Aurelia said with a smile that did not reach her eyes. "Lord Mildenhall is lovely, and I am sure that I will be happy with him."

Caroline frowned at the response, likely taking note of Aurelia's dejected tone. But she said nothing to it, probably because it was not that surprising. None of them were such fools to think this marriage to be a love match, most considering it a standard affair, in many ways better than how a lot of arranged marriages began.

Caroline left then, leaving Aurelia alone with her eldest sister, Violet.

It felt apt in many ways that she should be the last to see her off. Years ago, Violet had been faced with an even worse prospect than Aurelia's own, her marriage doomed to be a most dreadful thing. And where it was by no means perfect, Violet

had managed to come to terms with her married life, accepting it in ways that Aurelia hoped would one day inspire her. That was where it all began, this quest to pay their father's debts, so that it was ending now with Violet here to lead her into the church was right and signaled to Aurelia how real all of this was. How unescapable too.

"Shall we go?" Aurelia asked her sister, not bothering with a smile now because it seemed a pointless thing.

Violet studied her for a moment, frowning as she looked Aurelia over, focusing on her sunken shoulders, her resigned expression, and the sadness in her eyes. "Aurelia... you do not need to keep on pretending. Not for my sake."

"Pretending?" Aurelia acted confused. "What do you mean?"

Violet sighed and took her hand. "I am no fool, Aurelia. None of us are. We all know what this marriage is, and what it promises to become. There is no need for you to act differently as if hoping to fool yourself. That will solve nothing."

"Oh..." Aurelia shrunk back. "I am... it is not that I am pretending, Violet. Truly, although Lord Mildenhall might not be a man whom I love and adore, he will not be an awful husband. And many have faced worst circumstances than I. Really, I should be grateful that –"

"He is not wicked and cruel?"

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“That he accepts what this marriage is,” she corrected. “He will cover our family’s debts, and I will provide him an heir.” She shrugged and then sighed. “Is that not the entire point of most marriages in the first place?”

“For many, yes,” Violet agreed. “But you are not many. Until last month, I never thought I would see you wed. Even mother knew as much, figuring it was better to let you do as you please than risk forcing you on someone you did not want.” She laughed. “I would not envy the man who found himself in that position.”

“Things change.”

“But you have not,” Violet continued softly, her expression one of sadness and pity. “I know why you are doing this. And I cannot tell you how proud I am of you – we all are. But Aurelia...” Violet’s eyes searched her. “If you are having second thoughts, believe me when I tell you, ignoring them will not change anything. Best to have them now and act as you feel is right. Who cares what the consequences –”

“I care,” Aurelia cut her off. “That is the entire point, Violet. And why you even...” She felt herself growing angry now. Why is she telling me this? What good does she think it will do! “Why do you care, Violet? It is not as if you have ever cared for my wellbeing before.”

Violet leaned back at that, her face aghast. “I hope you know that is not true.”

“I know what our relationship is,” Aurelia said. “You and Daniel were always close. And Caroline was old enough and proper enough that you found common ground with her. But do not pretend that you and I ever had that sort of relationship. Which is

perfectly fine,” she made sure to add. “I do not begrudge you. I just do not understand why you are choosing this moment to sow doubts into my head.”

Violet was still holding her by the hand. Still studying her with a sadness that made her want to burst into tears. “You are right,” she admitted. “You and I...” She shook her head. “But you are still my sister, and despite what you may think, I know you better than you would be willing to admit.”

“I doubt it.”

“Is that what you think?” Violet cocked an eyebrow at her. “So, this sudden zeal and determination to be married has nothing to do with another?” Aurelia’s face dropped, unable to hide her surprise. “Another who you would rather be walking down the aisle to greet, but for some reason have resigned yourself to not take that chance?” Her eyebrow rose knowingly. “I might be wrong, but somehow I doubt it.”

“How... how did you...”

“It is His Grace, isn’t it?” Violet said gently, taking Aurelia’s other hand. “I am not as blind as some, and I saw the way you two looked at each other at my drum. And then there was His Grace’s dinner party...” She shook her head but smiled. “Did you think that the two of you could disappear as you had and go completely unnoticed.”

Aurelia’s face paled. “That was... we were not... nothing —”

“I do not care what happened,” Violet said. “All I care for is you. And if you do feel this way for him, why on earth are you so set on going through with this marriage? Marriage is for life, Aurelia. Believe me, I know it better than most.”

Aurelia’s chin began to quiver. She felt her eyes well with tears. Desperate not to break down and start to cry, she snatched her hands away and turned her back on

Violet. “I told you why. There is no other way.”

“You do not need to do this.” Violet put her hands on Aurelia’s shoulder and stepped into her. “Not for us. Daniel will find another way to pay the debts his owes.”

“Eveline –”

“Not her,” Violet said. “There are other means to make money. If you do not wish to do this, if there is even a chance at something better...” She sniffed also, her arms now wrapping around Aurelia. “You owe it to yourself, Aurelia. Do not live as I do. Do not live wondering what might have been if only you had taken a chance. If there is even the smallest possibility of something else... take it. Even if it all comes crashing down, at least you will have tried.”

She just doesn’t understand. Her heart is in the right place, and I love her for that. But this isn’t me denying myself a chance at happiness. This is me knowing happiness is not mine to take.

“The duke does not care for me,” Aurelia said, sniffing back the tears and steadying herself. “That is why I am... this is not me being scared, Violet. It is just the way it is. I went to him. I told him how I felt. He rejected me” She nodded and unpeeled herself from her sister, turning to face her. “It really is that simple.”

“Aurelia...”

“Do not feel sorry for me,” Aurelia said with a warm smile. “I will not have it. Not on my wedding day. Lord Mildenhall might not be the one I love, but he is not as bad as he might be. I am glad to be doing this.” She looked right at her sister. “And most importantly, I want to.” A lie, but one that I need to believe.

Violet nodded her understanding, taking Aurelia’s hands again and squeezing them.

“So long as you do.”

“Now, come...” She forced her smile to grow, through with feeling sorry for herself. “They are waiting and if I make them wait any longer, I dare say that Lord Mildenhall might be the one who double guesses if this is what he wants.”

Violet laughed at that but kept hold of Aurelia’s hands as she led her from the antechamber and into the body of the church.

It was brimming with a sense of anticipation when she arrived. Scores of guests already seated, the chatter they had been engaged in silencing the second she was noticed. Heads turned to look at her. Eyes began to brim with tears. Smiles all, for this was a happy occasion and needed to be treated as such. The church was decorated brightly, colorfully, like Spring blooming after a most terrible winter. Indeed, Lord Mildenhall had spared no expense, for this was a marriage he not only wanted but needed.

And there he stood at the end of the aisle. When he saw Aurelia appear he smiled rightly and nodded once, pleased it seemed to see her. There was no love in his eyes. No adoration of her beauty. Merely an acceptance that things were going ahead as planned.

In a last showing of hope, Aurelia scanned the crowds, wondering if she might see the duke among the face...of course he is not here. Why would he be?

Violet took her seat and Daniel came to her. She made sure to beam and his smile was soft yet unsure. As Violet had said, there was no fooling them, and where Daniel knew why she was doing this and accepted it as the right move, even he could not pretend at being overjoyed for her.

“Are you ready?” he asked as he linked his arm through her own.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“As ready as I will ever be,” she said, taking her final breath. “Let us begin.” And with that, Aurelia started down the aisle, toward her soon-to-be husband, toward her new life. Accepting, but not happy. Not surprising, as happiness had never been a part of this arrangement...

### ChapterTwenty-Six

The wedding had already begun. I am too late...

This did not stop Gerald from jumping down from his horse and striding toward the church, his mind set, his actions thought of, the consequences accepted because he knew that he could not live with himself if he did nothing. And nothing was what he came very close to doing.

He had spent the night wondering what he should do. And when he was finally ready to admit such a thing, he spent the morning wondering if he could really go through with it. The timing was perhaps his biggest concern, as he had waited until literally the last minute. And what if Lady Hawkins had changed her mind? What if he told her his feelings and she rejected him? What then?

In the end, he decided that it did not matter. I will never forgive myself if I do not at least try. And even if she does turn me away. Even if this is all for nought. At least I will have stopped lying to myself.

Gerald had hoped to reach Aurelia before the ceremony had begun. That would have been ideal. But seeing the doors closed and hearing no music or chatter coming from within suggested he was either too late... or he had mere seconds to act. So it was,

without a second thought, that Gerald reached the closed doors to the church, took them by the handle, and then threw them open.

The effect of such an entrance was as expected as it was calamitous.

Shocked gasps ripped from the seated guests. A few cries of surprise also. Heads turned. Mouths dropped open. One or two people made to stand as if they meant to attack him and force him back. But mostly, it was bewilderment that struck the church, forcing upon it a silence that stretched from where Gerald stood toward the altar.

The altar was where Gerald's eyes went immediately. There stood Aurelia, dressed in a stunning green gown, looking as gorgeous and perfect as he remembered. How had I fooled myself for so long? How had I not been able to see what was in front of my eyes this whole time? She gaped at him, impossible to tell from her expression if she was happy that he had come, or furious that he had dared to interrupt.

With her was Lord Mildenhall, holding her by the hands as the priest read their vows. He looked at Gerald as if he did not quite understand who he was. As if he thought he was imagining things. His head turned from Gerald to Aurelia, his eyes widening slowly as the realization dawned.

"Lady Hawkins..." Gerald started down the aisle. "I –"

"What is the meaning of this!" Lord Mildenhall came into himself. He dropped Aurelia's hands and turned, taking a few short steps toward Gerald. "Your Grace! What do you think you are doing?"

"What I must." He did not look at Lord Mildenhall as he spoke, choosing to focus on Aurelia only. "What I should have done weeks ago but was too stupid to do. But I am done being stupid. And I am done with all the lies. Lady Hawkins –"

“I ask that you leave at once,” Lord Mildenhall cried. “This is my wedding day, Your Grace!”

“I am sorry, Lady Hawkins,” Gerald continued, speaking over Lord Mildenhall. He walked halfway down the aisle and stopped, knowing better than to try and push past the upset lord. “For lying to you. All this time, that is what I have been doing. When you came to me and told me how you felt –”

“How she felt!” Lord Mildenhall exclaimed. “What does that –”

“—I should have listened. Dammit, I should have seen what was right there the whole time. But I was scared. I...” He shook his head. “I have spent so long worried about what people think of me that I did not stop to consider that the only person whose opinion I needed to worry about was the one person who I care for more in this whole world than anybody.” He held her eyes and smiled. Lady Hawkins, brow furrowed, did not return it. That gave him pause, a moment where he wondered if he was too late...

“Stop this at once!” Lord Mildenhall looked to Aurelia’s brother. “Do something!”

“You, is who,” Gerald continued bravely. “You are who I care for – no, not care for.” His smile grew, radiating with such brightness that it drowned out the sun that shone through the windows. “Love, Lady Hawkins. I love you. And before you marry Lord Mildenhall, I need you to know it. I need you to understand how I feel. You deserve the truth, is why, even if it is too late. Even if you hate me. Even if you want to never see me again. I could not live with myself otherwise.”

More gasps. More cries of outrage. Lord Mildenhall looked caught in a state of utmost apoplexy; his head swiveled from Lady Hawkins’s brother to his mother to Gerald and back again. But Gerald ignored it all.

He stayed looking at Lady Hawkins, desperate for an answer. Desperate for any indication that he was not too late. The marriage was not officialized yet. Still, Lady Hawkins could walk away, if she chose. All she needed to do was see that for once Gerald was speaking his truth and admit to herself that she felt the same way. But her brow was furrowed tightly. Her face was scrunched into a confused ball. It was impossible to see how she felt or what she might say, and Gerald again wondered if this had been a mistake.

“Oh!” From the front of the church, Lady Hawkin’s mother suddenly jumped to her feet, only to collapse.

“Mother!” Lady Hawkins cried and went to her. “Somebody!”

Anarchy broke out after that. The crowd rose to their feet and surged on the passed-out woman. People screamed and shouted. Lady Hawkins could not be seen, for she had fallen on her knees to support her mother. Gerald meant to go to her but there were too many people in the way.

“Lady Hawkins!” he cried out. “Please!”

And then, through the crowd, her brother, Lord Grayhill appeared. He caught sight of Gerald and approached him. Like his sister, it was impossible to tell what was on his mind. But Gerald knew him to be a stern sort, proper in every respect, and thus likely furious for what Gerald had done.

“Your Grace...” He came in beside Gerald. “I think you and I best speak privately.”

“Your mother...”

“Is fine,” Lord Grayhill said. “She knew a distraction was needed and sought to create one herself.” He shook his head at the notion. “But we must speak. Now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Gerald looked for Lady Hawkins, needing to see her again. Needing to see if there was any suggestion at all that this entire charade wasn't folly and a waste of time. Am I too late? Does she still feel the same for me? I must know!

Nonetheless, Gerald allowed himself to be led. Through the crowd, outside, and toward the back of the church. Even if Lady Hawkins did still feel the same for him, that did not mean she would be allowed to simply end this engagement. Lord Grayhill was the patriarch of the family and his word was law. Little wonder that he saw the need to speak with Gerald before anything else was said... or he made things any worse. Little chance of that.

\* \* \*

Gerald paced back and forth, his anxiety building by the second. Lord Grayhill had led him outside and then asked him to wait, striding back toward the church without another word said. The first thought to cross Gerald's mind was that he was going to fetch his sister, which excited him as much as it did terrify him. He had so much to say, and where moments ago his mind had been clear and focused, now his emotions were crashing upon him so that if he did see Lady Hawkins, he wasn't certain he would be able to speak.

And what if she refuses to come? Although I suppose that will give me my answer.

Another few moments of pacing and Lord Grayhill returned, only not with Lady Hawkins. When Gerald saw who he had brought instead, he stopped pacing, his stomach dropped through the earth, and he was forced to reckon in real time with the true consequences of what he had done.

“What is the meaning of this!” Lord Mildenhall cried as he strode toward Gerald. “Your Grace! I would say that you better have a damn good reason for all of this! But I cannot fathom what you might say to justify such a... a... an action that defies reason!”

Gerald’s first instinct was to apologize and ask for forgiveness. He had wronged this man and the easiest way to diffuse him would be to admit fault and lay his heart bare, praying that Lord Mildenhall’s reason saw through his anger. And he very nearly did to...

Only then, Gerald considered a different approach. Where he was sorry for what he had done, he would not apologize for it. He would not beg. And he certainly would not rely on Lord Mildenhall’s good grace to forgive him. This wasn’t about forgiveness. This was about admitting who he was and what he wanted – whatever the cost! And where he felt bad for Lord Mildenhall, he reasoned that he was doing this for Lady Hawkins, as much as himself.

“I would think that was clear,” Gerald said simply. “I am in love with Lady Hawkins and I came here to tell her as such before it is too late.”

“In love!” Lord Mildenhall cried with exasperation as if he did not understand the word. “Too late!” he then added. “That is not... of course you are too late! This is my wedding day, man! How you think such a thing as this is appropriate –”

“It does not matter if it is or not,” Gerald spoke over him. “And that is the point. I love Lady Hawkins...” He looked at Lord Grayhill and nodded so the man would know his words were true. “And I could not live with myself if I did not let her know it.”

“That is... how you think that makes any difference –”

“It makes all the difference,” Gerald spoke over him. “What is more, I believe that she loves me also. I understand the timing of this is not appropriate.”

“You think!”

“And believe me when I tell you that I will do everything that I can to make this right by you. My intention here is not to cause duress. Rather, it is because I believe that Lady Hawkins deserves happiness and I know that with you, Lord Mildenhall, that is not an option.”

Lord Mildenhall continued to look bewildered. “I... I... we had a deal!” He was on Lord Grayhill now. “I was to pay your family’s debts and Lady Hawkins was to provide for me an heir! What does it matter if she and I are not in love...” His lip curled slightly at the notion. “You need this as much as I do,” he begged of Lord Grayhill. “Think of your family’s future!”

Lord Grayhill stood silent throughout the pleading. His expression was considered as he looked between Gerald and Lord Mildenhall. Biting into his lip, brow furrowed, he took his time with it and Gerald held his breath...

“I think...” Lord Grayhill nodded once. “I think, Lord Mildenhall that I will be cancelling our deal.”

“What!”

“I am sorry,” he said added quickly. “Truly, I am. But it is as His Grace says...” He smiled then, and it reached his eyes. “My sister’s happiness is what matters here and if there is a chance she might find such happiness with His Grace, what sort of brother would I be to deny it of her.”

Lord Mildenhall was caught between fury and shock. His mouth opened and closed.

His eyes grew wide and then sunk. It looked for a moment like he had forgotten how to speak and Gerald braced himself for the tirade that was sure to follow.

“That is... I cannot believe...” And then, his shoulders slumped. “If that is the way of things... I suppose throwing a tantrum will not make much of a difference now, will it?”

Gerald very nearly laughed, but that was just the joy that swelled inside of him threatening to explode from his lips. His heart swelled and he had to resist the urge to grab Lord Grayhill and pull him into a hug.

“Thank you, Lord Mildenhall,” he said instead. “I appreciate your civility.”

“Yes, well...” He shook his head and sighed. “In times such as this, I suppose civility is the best that can be hoped for.” He laughed bitterly at that, dejected but not broken.

Still, that did not mean he wished to remain and soak in the rejection that was this marriage, quick to say his goodbyes and shuffle away. Gerald watched him go, making a mental note to help the man where he could, possibly even finding him a bride in the future for he felt that he owed him.

“Do not think it will be that easy,” Lord Grayhill then spoke, bringing Gerald back into the moment. “You have my blessing, but my sister is a different beast.”

“Thank you,” Gerald said. “And don’t I know it.”

“She is waiting for you,” Lord Grayhill said and indicated toward a small room that stuck from the back of the church. “If you dare.”



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Gerald nodded and readied himself to finally speak directly with Lady Hawkins. Although before he did, he realized there was one more thing he needed to say. “Concerning your debts –”

“Do not worry about that,” Lord Grayhill hurried to cut him off. “I am perfectly capable of finding the resources to cover my family’s affairs.”

“Yes, well, that might not be needed,” Gerald said, allowing himself a smirk. “The gaming house to which you are indebted. The thing is...” He grimaced. “It might surprise you to learn that I am its owner.”

Lord Grayhill’s face dropped. “What?”

“It is a long story, and I will regale you with it another time. But for now, just know, there is no need for you to worry about such things as what is owed. Let us just say that your debts are covered.”

Lord Grayhill shook his head. “I do appreciate it, Your Grace, but I am through with trading my sister’s livelihoods as if they were coin. You are owed and I will find a way to repay. You have my word on that.”

Gerald looked upon Lord Grayhill with a sense of quiet awe and respect. Almost any other man would gladly take the easy win, and he hadn’t considered for a second that Lord Grayhill would be the type to deny him. It was for that reason that another idea came to mind.

“Perhaps we can find a middle ground,” Gerald began. “My good friend, Lord

Blackwood. You know him?”

“Of him.”

Gerald chuckled. “He is my partner, and I know that he is always looking for intelligent, able bodies to assist him. And it just so happens that I am thinking twice now about my future in that particular industry. Perhaps the two of you can come to a deal, of sorts.”

Lord Grayhill frowned as he looked at Gerald, likely trying to work out if this was a most generous offer or some sort of trick. But that frown soon straightened and he gave a short nod of respect. “We can talk about it later. For now...” Again, he indicated toward the room where Lady Hawkins was waiting. “I think you have more pressing issues to deal with.”

“Yes...” Gerald felt his stomach twist as his nerves peaked. “I think you are right.”

He had crashed a wedding. He had ended an engagement. He had stood tall in the face of a bereaved groom. All in the name of love. Yet he realized just now that as challenging as that had all been, the final task which lay before him would be quite possibly the hardest thing he ever had to do.

I love her and I know that she still loves me. If that is not enough, if still she sees reason to reject me, so be it. At least this way I will not die wondering. Happiness or sorrow, it is time to face the truth of who I am like I never have before.

And so it was that Gerald took a final breath and started to where Lady Hawkins waited.

ChapterTwenty-Seven

Aurelia paced the small room in a state of utmost bewilderment that even now, minutes after the fact, she still had no idea what to make of what had just happened.

A part of me is thrilled. A part of me is furious. Another part refuses to believe any of it! What do I do? What can I even do? How is this happening!

Her mind raced and she struggled to breathe as she walked the small room, back and forth, going over in her mind the events of the day. She knew they should have brought her joy, for the duke had come to her and expressed his love. Was this not what she wanted the whole time? Is this not exactly what she had been praying on?

Yet it felt too little and too late. She was angry about that, for why had he not said something sooner, rather than waiting until the literal last second? Was this a game to him? And did he truly mean it? And even if he did, could she simply forgive him and accept his love after all he had put her through?

In the end, she supposed she would find out how she felt when she saw the duke next. As she paced, as she wallowed and rose and collapsed and fought through her confusion, she decided that she could not possibly understand how she felt or what she wanted until she spoke directly with the duke. Only then will I have my answer. Will my heart, hopefully, tell me what I want...

The door to the chamber opened suddenly. She froze still, back to the door, heart racing as she heard the duke enter and close the door behind him.

For a moment, nothing was said, and she could feel him watching her as the tension between them mounted. Hardly able to breathe. Hardly able to think. She reasoned that she would not talk first. He had come here. He had broken her engagement. This was on him.

“Lady Hawkins...” His voice was soft and unsure. “I... I am so sorry.”

That did it.

A fire ignited inside of Aurelia. It was typical in many ways, as the duke had always managed to stoke such feelings inside of her. But she let that fire grow as his apology echoed in her head, seizing on it and then holding it to her tightly because she felt she needed the anger to see her through this moment.

That was when she spun about and saw him standing there. He wore a soft smile, a look in his eyes that suggested he was misreading her reaction entirely. Indeed, that smile grew and he held his arms out for her, no doubt expecting her to throw her body into him to they might embrace and put all this behind them. He wishes!

Aurelia stormed across the room and without hesitation slapped the duke across the face. “How dare you!”

The action rocked him, and he blinked back his surprise as his mouth fell open. “What –”

She slapped him again. “Now you come to me! Now, on my wedding day, you think it is appropriate to... to... to ruin everything! Why not last week? Why not a month ago! Is this a joke to you! Does my life mean to you that little!” She went to slap him again.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

The duke caught her hand this time, holding it firm as he met her fiery gaze. He was not angered by her actions. If anything, she saw a hint of amusement behind his eyes. “Not the reaction I was expecting.”

“Unhand me!” she tried to pull her arm free.

“Not until you hear what I have to say.”

“I do not care!” That was a lie, but dammit if she was not angry.

“Be furious with me,” he continued, holding her hand back from hitting him. “Hate me, if you wish. I will not try and change your mind. But just know that I did not come here to ruin your life or upset you.”

“Which you have done anyway!”

“I came here because I have been a fool,” he spoke over her. “I was wrong, Lady Hawkins. About everything. When you came to me the last time —”

“I do not want to hear it!”

“—I was scared,” he said. “Terrified because I knew how I felt. I just did not know what it meant, when you told me that you loved me.”

“A mistake!” She tried to pull her arm free, knowing it was pointless, starting to calm now while trying to hold onto her rage.

“No,” he said. “The mistake was my own.” He grabbed her other arm, forcing her to still and look at him. “I love you, Lady Hawkins. That is why I have come here – why I stopped this wedding. I know I do not deserve your love. And I understand if you do not wish to give it. But I could not live with myself if I did not tell you the truth. You deserve to know.”

“I deserve!” she cried, struggling under his firm grip. “What I deserve it not to have my emotions played with! To not have my wedding ruined! What I deserve is... is... is...”

She felt her anger fading as she held the duke’s pleading gaze. She felt her resolve weakening. Despite the timing. Despite all he had put her through and more. Despite everything! Her feelings for him had not changed, nor would they ever. She loved him as she had yesterday, as she had last week, as she had for longer than she even knew. She loved him...and he loves me. Is that not what matters most?

She bared her teeth at him, a final effort to show her anger. He smirked as he matched her glower. She stepped into him, raising her chin, widening her eyes, daring him to push her further. He looked down at her, holding her close, his grip on her wrists loosening, the fight gone from her just as it was rising in him. And he would fight too. He had fought. That was why he had come. Not because he had to, but because he wanted to. Because he loved her.

In the back of her mind, a small part thought to deny him. To make him beg. To do to him what he did to her. But that was a flickering thought, and Aurelia gave it little credence.

They held one another’s stares. The room around them shrunk and vanished. Silence descended on them, not awkward or tense, but knowing because in that moment they understood completely what this meant. Finally, they were being honest with each other. No more games. No more lies. Truths only.

And with that, the duke rested a hand under her chin, brought her face close, and kissed her on the lips. And Aurelia, not knowing how much she needed it until it was upon her, kissed him right back.

His hands found the side of her face and held her. Her hands were on his waist, grabbing him so she might never let him go. They kissed with passion. They kissed with fiery intensity. They kissed with love. Words were beyond them now, as actions were what were needed. And their actions said it all.

That kiss... not their first. It was, however, the beginning. As they stood in that small room at the back of the church, as they kissed as if their lives depended on it, both seemed to understand the true importance of what this kiss meant. Love given. Love accepted. And most of all, a chance provided at a happily ever after.

If that isn't worth kissing for, I don't know what is.

## Epilogue

Aurelia was beaming. A smile so wide and so bright that her cheeks were beginning to hurt. But she could not force it down, nor did she want to. When one was as happy as she was, why try and fight it? Let the world see my joy, even if the consequences are likely to be a very sore face tomorrow and a few smart comments made by my husband because of it.

She still could not believe that she got to call him that. My husband... it was like a dream from which she could not wake. One she did not wish to wake from, because when the dream was this good, reality simply had no chance to compare. Married now for less than an hour and already her future was looking to be as bright as could ever have been hoped for.

“How long do you think it is until I can ask everyone to leave?” Gerald whispered

from beside her.

She looked at him with surprise. “What?”

“It is our home,” he said. “And it is not as if they are expected to sleep here. What do we think? Another hour? Maybe two at most?”

“Why would you want them to leave? Are you not having fun?”

“Oh, do not get me wrong...” Gerald took her hand and gave it a wet kiss. In his eyes, she saw the love he bore for her, a look that had not faded in the two weeks since he had told her how he felt, and a look she suspected might never leave. “I am enjoying myself greatly. A most splendid day.”

“Yet you wish for it to end.”

“I did not say that.”



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Aurelia found the comment surprising and not at all what was expected of Gerald on this day. Indeed, for the last two weeks, he had been nothing but the perfect groom, as involved and alert as one could hope for, helping to plan this wedding with a sense of enthusiasm that suggested it might be the best day of his life. Which it has been, I am sure. The first of many, if I have anything to say about it.

All had gone according to plan. The ceremony was gorgeous and romantic and damn perfect to Aurelia's eyes. She was dressed in light green, a tight-fitting gown that exemplified her curves while still managing to make her look slim – the weight she lost previously had stayed off her hips, but she was not lithe or willowy, which she knew Gerald relished about her. Gerald too, looked elegant in his dark suit, a true gentleman as delicious as he was dapper. All of her family were there to watch her walk the aisle, and every single one of them were beyond thrilled for her special day.

Once the ceremony had ended, they had returned to her new home for the traditional breakfast. It was hosted in the ball room, there were two score of guests seated across the room's breadth, most of whom were currently eating and drinking and laughing and enjoying themselves because this was a day to be celebrated.

So, again, Aurelia frowned at Gerald's sudden turn toward waning enthusiasm, a brief moment of panic. Surely, he is not already growing tired of me?

"I..." She studied her husband closely, unable to see a hint that his feelings for her had changed. "I expect they will remain for some time. It is still early."

He clicked his tongue. "Yes, that is expected, but if I was to..." He shrugged. "Feign an upset tummy. Perhaps announce that we are both tired and would appreciate that

everyone leaves. Surely, they could not begrudge us then?"

"Gerald..." She hesitated, not wanting to cause a scene. "What is the matter with you? Do not tell me you are already growing bored. I mean..." She laughed awkwardly. "We have been married an hour, and from what I have heard of marriages, they often stretch across several years."

"Am I..." He frowned as if she was the one speaking nonsense, only for the realization to dawn on him. "Ah, I see." He laughed and gave her hand a squeeze. "You misunderstand me."

"I better be."

"I do not want the day to end..." He kissed the back of her hand. "In fact, the opposite. In my mind, it has not even begun yet. Alas, so long as our guests are here, we will not be able to partake in what, to be perfectly honest, is one particular part of married life that I have been looking forward to now for two weeks."

She stared at him blankly. "I am afraid you have lost me."

"Aurelia..." Beneath the table where they sat, his hand found her thigh and he gave it a suggestive squeeze. Her eyes widened and continued to do so as that hand moved further up her thigh. "For two weeks now I have not been able to sleep. And if you think I am going to sit here for hours, knowing what awaits me when our guests leave, then..." His hand slipped between her thighs and her legs began to quiver. "You do not know me nearly as well as I thought you did."

"Oh..." She felt her chest grow flushed. She felt her body grow warm. She felt her mind adle and all thoughts of this day melt away because now that Gerald had said it, she could think of nothing else. "I see."

Just as Gerald had been thinking of nothing else these past two weeks, she had been much the same. Seeing as they were engaged, they agreed that it would not be right to cross that boundary until they became married. For that was proper and right and would make the event all the more special. It had sounded good at the time, but dammit if it hasn't been a long two weeks.

"You see what I mean now, I hope?" he said.

"I..." She slipped her hand beneath the table, wrapping it around his hand and shifting it further between her thighs. "I see."

"So..." He growled in her ear. "What say you? Should we make an excuse and –"

"There they are!" From nowhere, Aurelia's mother appeared. "The happy couple."

"Oh..." Aurelia's eyes turned wide and she snatched her hand away. She also expected Gerald to do the same, but he did no such thing. She widened her eyes at him but he simply grinned at her, his hand still very much wedged between her thighs. "M – mother. What... what are... is that cake?"

"This?" Her mother held a plate with a slice of cake on it. "Yes, well, I thought I would bring you a slice." She placed the plate down before Aurelia. "Have you eaten anything today, dear?"

"I..." She suppressed a moan as Gerald's finger stroked outside her lips. "I have... have not."

"I did not think so," her mother sighed. "Honestly, you are skin and bone, dear. You really must eat. And I know how much you love cake."

The gesture was a kind one, and spoke to how much her mother had changed these

last few weeks. She was going out of her way to repair the rift that had grown between the two, determined it seemed to remind Aurelia that she loved her and any nagging she had done in the past was borne from this love.

The cake was a peace offering, in that way, a most welcome one at that. If not badly timed...

“Th – thank you,” Aurelia managed, pleasure now rippling up her body. “That is most... most kind.”

“Aurelia... is something the matter?” Her mother frowned at her, just now noticing the way she was behaving.

“I am afraid that she has a small tummy ache,” Gerald answered at one, one hand still beneath the table as he looked upon Aurelia with concern. “It has just come upon her.”

“Oh no.”

“I am sure she will be fine...” His fingers slipped inside of her and Aurelia gasped. “But best that we keep an eye on it.”

“If there is anything I can do...”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

“I will let you know,” Aurelia cried loudly, gasping and grabbing onto the table. Then she grimaced and touched her stomach as if sick. “But do not be surprised if I retire to bed early.”

“And on your wedding day,” her mother said. “But if you are feeling unwell, there is no sense fighting it.”

Gerald stroked Aurelia’s face lovingly with his spare hand, offering her a coy wink as his fingers continued to work their magic. She tried to glare at him, warning him off what he was doing. But dammit I don’t want him to stop...

They played the next hour tactfully. Gerald removed his fingers, not wanting to cause a scene, but was sure to then begin around the ballroom and inform everyone of Aurelia’s sudden illness, warning them that soon they might be required to call it a day. And once he did, each guest came to her and offered her their congratulations, while checking that she was well and wishing her the best.

Aurelia stayed where she was, doing her best to look taken with illness, her mind well and truly still on Gerald’s most wicked fingers and what else he would be doing with them, once they were alone.

It was a little over an hour after Aurelia’s mother had brought her cake that the last of the guests left. As soon as they did, Gerald took Aurelia by the hand and led her to the bedroom. He was even more eager than she was and no sooner was she through the door did he close it shut and then lock it.

“Expecting company?” she joked.

“Best to be safe...” He went to her, taking her head in his hands. “I do not expect to leave this room for some days, and I would hate to be disturbed.”

“Some days?” she gasped playfully.

“If I have my way, then yes.” He moved to kiss her, but she pulled back.

“Gerald...” She met his eyes, making sure he was looking into hers. “I just want you to know...” She smiled and laughed at how silly she felt saying it. “I love you. I hope you know that.”

“I am tempted to make a joke.”

“Please do not.”

He kissed her on the forehead. “I love you to, Aurelia. My only regret is that I did not realize it sooner. Although I prefer to see the positive.”

“And what positive is that?”

He grinned and his eyes flashed. “That now I have a chance to make up for lost time.” And that was when he kissed her.

She kissed him back. Fully. On the lips. His hands holding her face like he might never let her go. Her hands reaching for the back of his head, pulling him in as close as she could, refusing to consider the possibility he might wish to pull away. Their lips opened and their tongues played, explored, lapped and licked and sucked without remorse.

It occurred to Aurelia then that she should be nervous. This was, after all, her first time, and she didn’t know what to expect. But those nerves did not arrive, and she

knew that was because of whom it was that she was with. My husband, is who. Never has anything felt more right than this, so what need is there to be nervous?

Still kissing her, Gerald lead Aurelia toward the bed. It hit the back of her knees, and she fell onto her back so that Gerald could mount her. His strong body pressed on her, his mouth moving from her lips to her neck. He began to suck and nibble and every time she felt him a prickle of pleasure erupted from her.

His hands became busy. Grabbing her thighs and then her waist. Moving to her bosom. He found the top of her dress and let forth a roar as he tore it open; her breasts spilled out and he gorged on them.

“Oh...” she moaned as his lips wrapped her nipples and sucked. “Gerald... that is... oh...” Her nipples turned stiff in his mouth and still he continued to suck.

On instinct, Aurelia’s hands moved to Gerald’s pants. His crotch was pressed into her, but he arched it up, giving her room to hastily undo the front. Already, she could feel hard stiff he was, the way that he pulsed and throbbed and she remembered the last time her hands had been here and that made her salivate.

“Tell me what you want,” Gerald growled as he kissed up her neck and began to suck her earlobe.

“You need instruction?”

“No,” he said, moving then to her neck again. His wet lips sucked and his tongue licked her and she moaned from the waves of pleasure which rippled across her body.

“I just want you to have it all.”

“It all?”

He snapped his head up and looked at her. There was a fire in his eyes. The hunger that she recognized. Oh, how he wanted her. If she could not feel it in the way his manhood begged to be released, it was in those eyes. “Whatever your heart desires,” he purred. “That is what I want to give you.”

She flashed her eyes at him. “What do I want...” Slowly, her hand reached into his pants and wrapped his engorged member. He stiffened and she squeezed, delighting in the way his body reacted. “All I want Gerald, right now and forever...” She squeezed again and he groaned. “Is you.”

And that was what he gave her. Oh, how he did.

Gerald was quick to remove his pants and then his shirt. His muscular body glistened with sweat, the hairs on his chest matted and thick. She ran her hands through them, delighting in the feel of the hair through her fingers. But more than that, her eyes strayed south to his manhood which stuck out, throbbing and hard and dripping because he was that aroused by her. That I can have such an effect on him...



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:14 am*

Next, Gerald grabbed at the skirt of her dress, lifting it up and exposing her thighs. She was still on her back, but she spread her legs for him, tempting him with her womanhood. She could feel how moist it was. How warm and how wet. No doubt Gerald could feel it too.

He grinned and lowered his head, starting to kiss up her thighs...

“Wait.” She stopped him and his head popped up, confusion in his eyes. “No, I don’t want that.”

“You... you don’t.”

“Well, I do,” she giggled. “But when I said I wanted you, I meant it.” A raised eyebrow and he understood completely. “Now, give him to me.”

Gerald’s smile was wicked, but he knew what to do. On his knees, he grabbed under her thighs and lifted her toward him. She spread her legs and arched her back. Heart racing. Nerves rising. Anticipation building like nothing she had ever experienced before. She closed her eyes and felt Gerald. His fingers tracing her thighs. His manhood stroking the outside of her lips. He teased her. Gentle as he pressed against her womanhood, dipping it in then rubbing it. Not wanting to rush the moment.

“Stop teasing me...” she moaned.

“Stop telling me what to do,” he shot back.

“Is this another lesson?” she joked, then moaned as she felt him press against her.

“No, no,” he said. “The time for lessons is over.” And that was when he entered her.

Her eyes shot open and grew wide. Her breath left her. Her body turned stiff and rigid, writhing and shaking as she felt Gerald’s member slow but surely entering her. Deeper and deeper. She opened to him. He stretched her. She moaned... bit her lip... held her breath... and still he continued to slide in deeper.

“Gerald...”

“Almost...” He breathed, still on his knees as he pushed himself in as far as he could go. When she felt his stomach against her, that was when she knew he was ready.

She could not describe how it felt exactly. Just that it was like a part of her that was always missing was finally found. She felt whole with him in her, complete in a way she hadn’t known she needed. Her breathing was heavy. Her body was shaking. But oh, how she loved it.

Gerald fell forward then, kissing her on the lips fully as he began to thrust.

She grabbed his head and held him to her, kissing him back; wet and sloppy. Gerald’s thrusts were steady at first. Slow and well-paced. Careful not to hurt or shock her. But as she grew more wet and more open, he began to increase his speed and tempo and the force behind each movement.

“Oh...” she moaned, throwing back her head, shutting her eyes, letting the pleasure roll over her. “There... yes... do not... Gerald!”

Long, deep thrusts. Hard and fast. He moved to her breathing. He kept pace with her demands. His hands were under her thighs. Then they were under her buttocks. Then they were around her breasts. He ravished her with his hands as he filled her with his manhood. And as he did, she felt it coming.

It was a pressure in her stomach that threatened to burst. It started to grow and spread. It reached her thighs and touched her heart. It swept over her body so that she thought she might explode. Her breathing increased. Her body began to shake. She could hardly stand it!

“Gerald... I am... I am... Oh... do not... keep... God!”

As she felt herself about to explode, so did Gerald begin to increase his pace. His thrusts became shorter and sharper. He stopped fondling her, burying his head in her chest as his body pressed on her.

“Aurelia... I am... are you.... ready...”

“Yes!” she cried out as the pressure took her, opened her, devoured her so that she left that room, that house, the earth it seemed. Suspended in mid-air, not of her body, it spasmed as she tried to push Gerald away, while never wanting him to leave her.

“Urgh... Aurelia... I am... urgh!” Gerald threw back his head and roared as he exploded inside her. And she felt it. His member throbbing. His seed filling her so that it spilled out of her and dripped down her thighs. She closed her legs around him, holding him there, keeping him close, and he fell on her, kissing her lips and neck and anywhere his lips could find.

And then, for a few minutes after it was done, nothing was said. Gerald remained inside of her, arms wrapped her, head rested on her chest, a silence that was comfortable and right.

“Gerald...” Aurelia said after some time as her body began to cool.

“Yes?” he lifted his head to look at her.

“I love you.” Such a simple phrase, but one that she felt needed to be voiced. Now,

tomorrow, forever.

He smiled and she felt it in her heart. “And I love you.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she shot back, to which he laughed and then leaned in to kiss her.

It was done. Aurelia was married to the duke. They had lain together as man and wife. Confirmation in so many ways that they were perfect for one another. It had not always been that way, for once they were as different creatures as could be thought to exist in this world. But that was all a lie.

This right here was real. What would come in the future, it did not matter. Good or bad, so long as they were together, Aurelia knew she would be happy. Another truth. Just as she knew Gerald would be also. She had never wanted a happily ever after. Truthfully, she had never thought that she deserved one. Now that she had her own, Aurelia couldn’t imagine her life ending any other way.

The End?