



# A Virgin for the Rakish Marquess

**Author:** *Olivia T. Bennet*

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

**Description:** "You should have never caught the attention of a man like me."

The jilted wallflower—that's what everyone calls Diana. So she never expects her time to be auctioned in a charity event. Nor that the highest bidder would be the worst rake of the ton.

Everything about Marquess James spells danger. For he never sleeps with the same woman twice. Until a bold little mix dares challenge him...and now, he must teach her a lesson.

Five promenades. That's how long this farce must last. Yet Diana soon finds out the only thing more dangerous than tempting a rake: falling for one.

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *A Virgin for the Rakish Marquess* is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 95

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

## CHAPTER 1

### Between Hearth and Society

“Well, you still have time to change your mind, Diana.” Selina smirked.

Diana looked upon her sister’s face. She didn’t need to have been raised with her to know that her eldest sister was teasing her.

It’s her usual manner, after all.

It didn’t matter that Selina was now the Duchess of Seymour. Diana knew better.

“Exactly! Our sister is right, Diana,” Herbert, their older brother, chimed in. “The Season does not start till a few more weeks. See this charity event as a rehearsal.”

“I am in no need of a rehearsal for something. I have no intention of participating actively.”

“Right, we forgot.” Selina turned to her brother with a mischievous smile. “You are determined never to marry.”

Diana fixed her sister with a pointed look.

Selina was not one to allow anyone to deny her the right to speak her mind. Diana always admired that about her sister.

And envied.

“Oh, Sister... firm on your decision to remain unwed like your namesake Diana,” Selina continued in a fake dramatic tone. “Unbothered by the whims of mortal men.”

“Selina, might I suggest saving those musings on Greek mythology for your literary gatherings?” Diana would hiss if it weren’t utterly unladylike to do so.

“I must agree with Diana, Selina.” Herbert chuckled.

For sure he will be coming back with a clever retort.

Diana refused to believe for a moment that her brother would side with her in that matter and deprive himself of the grand opportunity to tease her.

“After all, our little Diana would most likely be Hestia. You know, the one I always forgot when that awful tutor asked us to recite all the gods of the pantheon.”

“Oh, but of course!” Selina exclaimed. “Hestia, the goddess everyone forgets. The one that is always in the background. You might call... Hmm.” Selina pretended to be deep in thought, tapping her finger on her chin. “I wonder how one might call such a person who actively avoids the limelight.”

“My sweet sister,” Herbert hastened to add mockingly, “would perhaps the term wallflower be appropriate?”

“Most eloquently so, dear brother,” Selina agreed, her eyes twinkling with mirth. “And if we were to be more poetic, we might even call her the jilted wallflower.”

“Exceptional.” Herbert’s laughter bubbled forth. “You for sure have a flair for poetry.”

“I do not find you the least amusing, just so you know.” Diana arched an eyebrow. “May I remind you that I have indeed tried my hand in the marriage mart once? I hope you two remember how that went.”

Diana had to muster all her self-restraint so as not to throw a tantrum in front of the ton, who never missed the opportunity to attend any event thrown by the Duchess and the Duke of Seymour. So, she decided that the best course of action was to divert her attention—and gladly, the setting gave her many opportunities. The Seymour estate was nothing if not impressive, after all.

The famed crystal chandelier cast a sweet light on the vast ballroom, with its gilded plasters and impressive murals. Her eyes ran over the items on display to be auctioned later in the evening as many of the guests mingled and walked around the gallery with their lace dresses and ornate fans, tailored suits and silk scarfs.

Porcelain sets and rare jewelry, a week in the family’s villa in Derbyshire, a painting from an up-and-coming artist, a gown of rare beauty, and books from Selina’s collection. It was an impressive collection, and it was no wonder that a great crowd of the ton’s finest was there.

“Are you appraising the art, Diana?” Selina asked, her tone laced with amusement. “Though I suspect you hold it in far higher esteem than your prospects.”

“It is so good to see you have so much fun, dear sister,” Diana said through gritted teeth, “but don’t you have more important things to do, seeing as you are the hostess of this charity event? Other than torturing me, I mean. Unless there was something regarding that in the program that I missed.”

“Do not worry, everything is running smoothly.”

“Unlike your expectations of marriage.” Herbert seemed determined to not waste any

opportunity to jab at her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

This time, her daggers were aimed at her brother, though she was absolutely sure that would have the same consequence it did when he pulled at her pigtails when they were children and she went running to her governess. Which was absolutely none.

Those two...

“My expectations of marriage remain exactly the way I wish them to be. None.”

“You can’t possibly mean—” Herbert insisted.

“Herbert, I have graciously accepted that nickname everyone whispers behind my back, and I own it with pride. I am a jilted wallflower—and trust me, that is a good thing. I enjoy my peace, and I am not trading this for any pointless conversation and meaningless pursuits that would most probably end in heartache and disaster.”

Both Selina and Herbert gaped at her. How could she explain to them the absolute freedom such a decision gave a person? She would remain forever a spinster so she didn’t have to think of her skills and how to flaunt them. She didn’t have to agonize over filling her dance card with names of men who were essentially strangers. She didn’t have to pretend, and she could enjoy being herself.

“Plus,” Diana continued, taking advantage of the rare occasion that Selina was rendered speechless, “I wouldn’t want Stephen to get wind of our conversation. You know how he is.”

The siblings shared a look of understanding. They didn’t need to be reminded of their strict eldest brother’s temper. The Duke of Westall tended to take things a tad too

seriously, and the fact that the youngest in the family, the one who he felt like a father to, decided to never marry is a thorn in his side. And Stephen had a unique way to deal with such grievances, which was straightforward and unyielding.

“Yes, I am aware of how our dear brother is. Did I mention that he sent me five letters last month, with recommendations on how to manage my affairs more properly? Not estate, which would have been understandable. My affairs. The man would control the side on which I sleep if he could.”

“Five?” Selina protested. “I have only received three. I feel neglected now.”

“Well, you could both benefit from my approach, since I am indeed the main focus of his so-called protectiveness. I’ve learned that the best way to deal with him is to nod politely, agree on nothing, and let him tire himself out,” Diana said airily, though the mention of their eldest brother did make her shoulders tense slightly.

“I know I am joining mid-conversation, but I am acutely aware of its subject,” a female voice called.

It was Elizabeth, and the siblings flushed with shame. The reason being that she was none other than the Duchess of Westall, their sister-in-law, then one married to the ‘overbearing brute,’ as they lovingly called their brother.

“But I am furious, Diana,” Elizabeth continued.

Diana tightened her grip on the fan she was holding. She loved Elizabeth and was thrilled to see her brother being brought down from his mighty proverbial horse by such a spitfire as her.

“I believe”—Elizabeth leaned in with a mischievous smile—“I am the one who taught you this trick. Smile and nod and then wait for him to come around.”

“I am sure you have other ways to convince him,” Herbert muttered.

“Herbert!” all three women exclaimed, drawing the attention of all the people around them.

Luckily, none of the ladies and gentlemen frolicking around, a drink in hand, looking immaculate, paid attention to the siblings’ conversation.

“I meant,” Herbert added quickly, “that you know him better than we do.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow in a way that reminded everyone more of their brother, but no one dared make that observation in front of her. The Duchess of Westall was magnanimous but also quite feisty, and her husband was utterly devoted to her. There was no need to test what great disaster would fall upon their heads if she were to run and complain to Stephen. Luckily, her face melted in her usual gentle expression, and everyone breathed easier.

“I hope that you know how much Stephen loves you, Diana.” She took Diana’s hands in her own.

“I know he loves me and that he means well. I just wish he would cease breathing down my neck.”

Herbert leaned in. “In your case, Diana, I cannot blame the man.”

Diana would be angry if she knew how she could summon such a sentiment. But she was annoyed, for sure. As long as the Season didn’t start yet, she had the chance to breathe freely. But now, a few weeks before the official opening, she was back to being suffocated by other people’s worries.

Again, she had to defend her decision.

“And here I was, thinking I have made it abundantly clear that I have no desire to entertain suitors. Perhaps I should practice my embroidery stitches and make myself an embroidered handkerchief with the words ‘jilted wallflower’ and ‘spinster’ which I could use to wipe your tears any time this issue comes up.”

Her siblings stared at her.

Granted, Diana was mostly shy and reserved, but that didn’t mean that she was dim-witted, and having the same conversation again and again was testing her patience.

“Oh, how I like you, Diana.” Elizabeth chuckled. “Hm, I see Stephen spotted us. I will show how truly benevolent I can be and go to divert his course—which is most certainly this area—so you won’t find yourself needing your embroidery. I shall see you.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Elizabeth did exactly as promised and took her husband's arm, laughing playfully. Stephen's eyes were still trained on Diana, and for a moment, she was sure that the Duchess's efforts were falling on deaf ears. But when Elizabeth leaned in and whispered something in his ear, his green eyes lit up, and any thought of Diana faded into the background.

Huh, perhaps Herbert was right. She indeed has her ways.

Suddenly, she felt a pang in her heart as she watched her brother and his wife in their happy little bubble. There was something in their eyes that made quiet mornings and easy afternoons lose all their appeal—no amount of thread from her beloved embroidery kit would mend the little tear in her heart.

“I only wish for you to be happy, Diana,” Selina said and took her hand, pulling her out of her musings.

There was an added advantage to growing up in a loving family. Knowing that there were people around her who genuinely loved her no matter how domineering their love might turn. It was unfair of her to protest her siblings' attentiveness.

“I know, Selina.” Diana placed her hand over her sister's. “I know what you have done on my behalf. But trust me, I am happy. Truly happy. I enjoy my solitude. You of all people must understand that.”

Selina smiled as she searched for her husband in the crowd.

An almost spinster herself, Selina knew where Diana was coming from.

“I know. It is addictively relaxing and liberating. But my sweet, dear, beautiful sister, falling in love surpasses any other feeling.”

Diana looked away, annoyed. Love. Surely her sister held that value in high regard, and seeing how annoyingly blissful she was in her marriage, Diana could not blame her. Her romance with Richard came as a surprise to everyone but ended in absolute happiness that had radiated on Selina’s face every day for the last four years.

But Diana herself had given up on that pursuit.

Love...

That word haunted her after what had happened. She made sure to steer clear of it. And that elusive emotion seemed to avoid her with the same ardor. There might be a tear in her heart, but she was a remarkably skilled embroiderer and could not only mend it but also do it with a flair.

“Selina, I am happy for you. You know I am. But this is not for me. I am not as acutely dedicated to finding love as you were. I’d rather enjoy my privacy. My threads, books, charitable endeavors, intellectual discourse—these are the things that bring me contentment. Not the shallow pleasures of a fleeting courtship.”

“You are nothing if not steadfast,” Herbert commented.

“I have decided that I will not wed. I hope that the millionth time I repeat that would be enough to get it through that thick skull of yours.”

Herbert arched an eyebrow and looked at Selina in an openly conspiratorial way.

Those two are up to something.

Diana needed no other evidence on the matter than the mysterious, satisfied smirks on her siblings' faces. A feeling that was confirmed when they turned to her and said in unison, "We shall see about that."

What on earth could they possibly mean by that?

She was ready to demand answers when Selina smiled that mock innocent smile and decided that they had dwelled on one subject for too long.

"This is a great turnout? Is it not?"

"That is an understatement, Selina. You've really outdone yourself. It is not a surprise that all of the ton is here." Herbert played along.

"I am happy, too. Who would expect that even the elusive and—let's be honest—snobbish Earl of Southcott would attend." Selina pointed at an old man inspecting a set of crystals.

Diana let herself breathe as Herbert and Selina went through the most striking names of attendants, whispering gossip and snickering lightly.

"Did I mention that the Marquess of Crawford is expected to attend tonight?" Selina suddenly added.

Diana welcomed the distraction too and was ready to dive into gossip. She was not fond of that particular sport—one tended to despise such a venture when one was the subject of it—but it was better than nothing.

"Crawford?" she echoed. "Where do I know that name?"

"He's one of Richard's closest friends. You may have heard a mention of him."

“He wasn’t at your wedding?”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“No.” Selina hesitated. “He has been away for a while.”

Diana had an epiphany.

“NotthatCrawford.”

“The one and only,” Selina confirmed, her voice dropping just slightly, the hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

“The rumors say that he is...” Diana trailed off, leaning in slightly as if the very mention of the Marquess’s name would make the room lighter with intrigue. She barely noticed her own curiosity. “Well, we all know what he is.”

“And the whole ton will be reminded, too, now that he is back.”

“Why was he away?” Diana asked.

“I have some suggestions,” Herbert interjected wickedly. “From enraged to tenacious lovers, he must have had a lot of reasons to run.”

“Let’s say that he’s a man of excess. Drinks too much, gambles too hard, and, well... loves too often.”

“That bad?” Diana whispered.

“He is that and so much more.” Selina smiled. “Richard tells me that he has always been... reckless.”

“So, translating Richard, he means he is a rake?” Diana swallowed, still feigning indifference.

“I doubt that there has ever been a woman strong enough to resist him,” Selina elaborated, much to Diana’s dismay. “He does make a tantalizing case for himself. He is rather good-looking, he has a title, and he is obscenely rich. Did I mention that he is good-looking?”

She studied Diana’s face intently, eager for a reaction.

Diana was ready to react in a way that would make her eldest sister regret ever challenging her in her own charity event, but it was Herbert who spoke first.

“I am guessing you expect him to throw an obscene amount of money on the auction.”

Diana was happy to see that her brother could be useful, after all.

“I hope he decides to do the same thing on the business venture I have in mind.”

“A business venture with a man who has such a reputation?” Diana arched an eyebrow. “That seems... imprudent. Even for you.”

“Well, my dear sister, one should never let opportunities pass them by.”

It was too good to last, Diana mused when Herbert didn’t waste the opportunity to poke at her self-imposed spinsterhood.

She was ready to give him a piece of her mind when Selina leaned closer to him, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. Then, they both looked up with identical expressions of mischief.

By Jove, those two are cooking an explosive absurdity.

Diana had the dreadful suspicion that the target for their ill-conceived plans was none other than herself.

“Must you behave like children?” she scoffed. “It’s tiresome.”

“Who? Us?” they both asked in mock innocence.

Diana sensed that she had reached the limit of her patience with her siblings, for now. She was painfully aware that her treasured peace was always just out of reach when one had siblings like hers. Though, something akin to self-preservation told her that she shouldn’t be leaving those two alone.

## CHAPTER 2

### An Irresistible Stitch

Diana moved through the crowd with the measured poise and the agility of a person who has developed the ability to navigate such events with grace and yet still go unnoticed. She needed a change in company, and Elizabeth seemed the ideal option.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

But it seemed that her luck had abandoned her, since she could not locate her sister-in-law anywhere in the sea of beautiful dresses and dark coats. She was ready to give up and retreat to her favorite bay window in the drawing room. There, she could be away from the crowds, near the refreshments, and have an unobstructed view of the ballroom.

But then she saw Richard presenting with pride one of the books that Selina had donated to the auction in an empty area of the ballroom.

Ah, exactly the man I needed to see.

Her proper brother-in-law was the right person to ask about Elizabeth, since she could trust that the strict man would refrain from meaningless hints and senseless jokes.

“Diana.” Richard dutifully bowed to her. “Enjoying the evening?”

“I must congratulate both of you,” Diana complimented.

She meant it. Annoying or not, Selina had truly outdone herself, and her charity events had become a fixture in the ton’s calendar, marking the imminent start of the Season. And leave it to Selina to make it not just a social event but also a reminder that many were less fortunate than them.

Richard seemed to be proud of his wife as his eyes drifted toward her.

That look...

Diana felt that pang again, right between her heart and her abdomen, between her ribs.

Could be the corset.

She preferred to think that her corset finally decided to stab her rather than the alternative.

“Richard, have you seen Elizabeth?”

“If I am not mistaken, she went to the powder room. Is everything all right, dear? Anything I can help you with?”

Diana was ready to take her leave. Just a split moment, a fleeting tick in time. That was all it took.

Someone coughed behind her, and Richard looked over her shoulder. Way above her shoulder. Her instinct told her that in this refined ballroom, filled with proper muslin dresses and kid gloves, meticulously served sandwiches and cold refreshments, a predator was prowling. And yet she turned around.

It took all of her years of training and every inkling of acting skills she amassed to keep her jaw in a dignified position. Because right there stood the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on—which said a lot, since her brothers and brother-in-law were considered fetching.

Perhaps it was the ‘brother’ factor that dulled their appeal, compared to this man. But if she had to answer that, she would probably surmise that the way he towered over everyone in the room, the way his broad shoulders blocked her view, and the way his slightly tousled brown hair shone in the light made him more fetching.

Fetching? Isn't even that too strong a word? What exactly is he supposed to fetch, after all?

Diana hastened to keep herself in check.

Her mind didn't pay any heed to her troubles and focused on the highlight of the charity event, which was none other than those piercing baby-blue eyes that put to shame any other shade of azure.

"Crawford! You came!" Richard greeted in a cordial tone.

Crawford?

If someone were to come out of the blue and douse her in cold water, the effect would be nothing compared to what the mention of that name did to her.

So, this is the infamous rake.

"Well, Seymour." The Marquess passed her by without even looking at her. "I wouldn't miss it."

Diana was used to being ignored. In fact, she had honed the art of blending in the background for years. But something in her revolted at his open disregard. Even though the rational part of her brain rejoiced that the apex predator was fooled by her camouflage, Diana wished to be seen all of a sudden.

No. Leave. Now, she silently ordered herself.

"After all," the Marquess continued, "you clearly hinted that it would mean the end of our friendship if I did not make an appearance, so why are you pretending to be surprised?"

Let's take our leave!

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Diana had enough self-dignity to not allow herself to be ignored so overtly. Her feet were mustering the courage to move, and her mind had already planned the best route to the powder room. But if the Marquess was ill-mannered, Richard lived and breathed propriety.

“Oh, Crawford, this is Lady Diana,” Richard offered with a wide smile.

Smile, bow, ‘My Lord’ him, and flee.

The moves came easily, as Diana was shrewd enough to avoid the man’s eyes.

“Pleasure to meet you, Lord Crawford.” She bowed.

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Diana,” the Marquess said, his voice smooth and deep.

Diana wished that nature, in her infinite wisdom, had given the man a shrill, silly voice to balance everything out. Instead, he was gifted with a dark timbre such that not even a blind person was safe from him.

Sure that the indifferent Marquess had turned his attention somewhere else, she dared one look up, only to be met with his eyes, which lingered on her for a fraction too long.

“Lady Diana is Selina’s youngest sister,” Richard continued.

“I do not recall meeting you at the wedding, My Lady,” the Marquess said with a mischievous smirk.

Is that code for “I catalog all the women I meet?”

Diana was ready to strike back by stating the fact that she, too, barely remembered him. But Richard spoke first.

“No surprise there. Diana has the reputation of being the jilted wallflower.”

Seriously?

Richard remained oblivious to the gaffe he made even after they both looked at him pointedly. Diana had a more sinister intent, thinking how long it would take Selina to forgive her for making her a widow. As for the Marquess, he seemed quite amused by the mention of that dreaded nickname.

“The jilted wallflower?” he repeated, his lips curling into a faintly amused smile. “Such an undeserved reputation.”

Diana’s back stiffened, heat rushing to her cheeks. The man had said but a few words, but she could hear the provocation in the way he bent those words in his mouth.

He was making fun of her and wasn’t even trying to hide it.

The man could be robbing you before your very eyes, and still, he would have women falling at his feet.

Diana knew exactly where his arrogant confidence came from.

“Each has to deal with the gossip that follows them, My Lord,” Diana deadpanned.

There! You know I am a jilted wallflower, I know you are a rake.

She smiled in triumph.

But then she realized that she had kicked the hornet's nest. It was obvious from his chuckle and the way he dipped his chin to regard her with a hungry look.

"Forgive me, Lady Diana. I meant no offense. It is rare to encounter someone whose reputation is both so intriguing and unwarranted."

Diana did something she had never done to a stranger before, something that no dignified lady of the ton did. She glared at him.

"I am sure that you wished that reputations were always unwarranted," she countered.

For once, Richard read the room correctly. "Uhm, perhaps we?—"

The Marquess ignored him. "I do. Especially when yours is a complete lie."

"A lie, My Lord? What a thorough disregard for the ton."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“To what other assumption must I reach when my own eyes tell me that I am not in the presence of a wallflower, let alone a jilted one?”

“Is brandy still your—” Richard tried once more.

“It seems to me that you have developed a fast way to put labels on women, Lord Crawford. I wonder how one comes to possess such an insight?”

“Like I said, Diana, Elizabeth is—” Richard’s attempts to change the topic were failing miserably.

“I see that my reputation precedes me,” the Marquess murmured.

“I trust that it’s as exaggerated as most gossip?” Diana asked.

“Not exaggerated,” the Marquess corrected. “But incomplete. Gossip, after all, rarely captures the full picture. For instance, it says nothing about your sharp tongue.”

“Should we just...?” Richard was almost pale with mortification.

“I do tend to reserve my sharp tongue for occasions such as these,” Diana said with a smile. “After all, most gossip is embroidered with embellishments.”

“Not embroidered,” the Marquess countered. “Merely stitched together with threads of truth. Though I suspect you prefer working with finer materials.”

“Indeed,” Diana replied, her tone sharpening. “I work with precision, My Lord,

ensuring that every stitch is purposeful and secure. I find it prevents one from becoming tangled in careless threads.”

Did I just say that?

Diana was torn between feeling proud and feeling worried. This heated banter did something to her body that no amount of needlework or reading could ever offer. And the heat became almost unbearable, since that pang that worried her before had coiled in her belly when his smile widened and his eyes roamed over her body.

“Careless threads often weave the most interesting patterns, Lady Diana.”

Richard coughed nervously. “Now, let’s not?—”

“Interesting, yes,” Diana relented smoothly, ignoring his interruption. “But what use do I have of them if they were to unravel at the first pull?”

It could have been her idea, but she was sure that the striking man soaring over her like a bird of prey was looking for the loose threads of her soul to unravel her. She could almost feel his eyes caressing her, the heated conversation adding a deep growl to his breath that was the most dangerous sound she had ever heard.

“You know what?” Richard huffed. “I am going to grab a much-needed brandy.”

He walked away from them, appalled that they remained silent, caught up in a staring match, even though good manners demanded that they both acknowledge that their host left.

Diana gathered all her ‘little sister’ energy—the grit it took to survive under three older siblings. She could immediately tell that the Marquess was an only child.

Finally! A victory. Diana allowed herself a private smile when the Marquess looked away.

She was ready to take her hard-earned winnings and flee while she was still ahead. But his retreat was temporary, merely a strategic scope of their place so he could draw nearer.

His proximity caught her unawares and unprepared. It was the first time someone not related to her invaded her personal space. And though he didn't touch her, his scent enveloped her.

Sandalwood... Why do I care how he smells?

She immediately panicked.

"Now that we've lost our chaperone, shall we dispense with the pleasantries?" he asked.

"I thought we already had," Diana replied, her voice steady despite the inexplicable heat rising within her.

The list of the 'most dangerous sounds' shifted the moment he laughed. That crystal, deep laughter rivaled his growl when coupled with a look that was the exact opposite of mirth.

How could he make laughter so... so... so...

Diana was not ready to utter the word.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“And to think that people dare to call you a jilted wallflower. People can be blind and ignorant sometimes.”

“It seems that particular detail of my identity intrigues you.”

Oh, no.

The moment she uttered the word ‘intrigue,’ his blue eyes darkened.

The Marquess straightened, dwarfing her with his immense height. He looked down at her, blinking slowly, with that playful smirk on his plump lips.

And that, ladies and gentlemen of the ton, is what ‘intrigue’ looks like.

“I pity those who underestimate you and call you a jilted wallflower, My Lady.” He leaned in, his eyes straying to her lips.

Diana suddenly developed empathy toward innocent, little bunnies cornered by hungry wolves. Once more, panic came over her, dread and something deeper that she wanted—needed to push away because this was too confusing, too puzzling, and too intoxicating at the same time. Desperate, she racked her brain for the few straws that could save her from falling into an abyss.

“What can I say?” She feigned poise. “Better to be called a jilted wallflower than a rake, My Lord.”

What?

Diana heard the words come out of her mouth, and she wished she could grab them, put them back where they dared exit, and swallow them along with her treacherous tongue. She would be content to be called the mute jilted wallflower from that day onward.

But it was too late. The words reached his perfectly shaped ears.

You are a lady, Diana. Behave like one.

“I am sorry, My Lord,” she said somberly. “That was way out of line. I made a grave mistake.”

Instead of putting an end to their dangerous banter, accepting her apology, and leaving to choke on brandy with Richard, the infuriating man took another step toward her.

His massive body trapped her as she retreated and her legs hit the table laden with the precious books. She knew she should push him back, for propriety’s sake, but her instincts told her that touching him was a bad idea.

“You must allow me to correct you, My Lady,” he said, his voice lower now, almost intimate.

“Must I?” she asked dryly, though her pulse quickened at his tone.

As he leaned closer, his voice dropped to a whisper, and her stomach tightened. It should have been fear that gripped her, but it was something else altogether.

“Your biggest mistake tonight was not that slip of the tongue, Lady Diana. Which I had coming, if I am being honest.”

“Was it not?”

“No, My Lady.” His eyes dropped to her lips. “Your biggest mistake was drawing the attention of a man like me.”

Attention?

Diana’s senses were rendered useless by his words. And speaking of attention, she was worried that even there, hidden behind ridiculously big urns, among the book stands that no one came to see, they were risking exposure. She looked around, dreading and hoping at the same time to find a reason to remind him of decorum. Unfortunately, there was none.

She had no time to think about it anymore. He leaned impossibly close, his body pressing against hers. His eyes drifted to her parted lips, lingering there long enough to ignite a warmth in her chest that spread downward, leaving her both breathless and bristling with awareness.

It was so intense that Diana felt she was drowning in the blue of his eyes, trapped by him. It only lasted an eternity of a moment before he stepped back, making her feel cold all of a sudden.

“Have a great evening, My Lady.” He bowed, turned around, and left her standing there.

What was...? Did he really...?

Diana was rooted to the spot, caught between anger and frustration, curiosity and interest.

“Did I miss something?” Richard was back with a glass of brandy and lemonade for

her.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

She grabbed the lemonade to wet her parched throat. Her training helped her regain her composure quickly, but her fingers tightened around the crystal glass.

“You missed nothing of consequence,” she lied.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Fair Market Value

Diana was ready to leave the charity event altogether by using the great excuse of every lady of the ton—the headache that was met with fake sympathy and no further questions. But then she spotted Elizabeth, and some of her bitterness ebbed.

Elizabeth had a light about her. She was a force of nature, and Diana was happy that she was part of her life. So, the event became much more bearable as they talked and gossiped.

“I wonder where Stephen went,” Elizabeth said merrily.

“Weren’t you together just now?” Diana pointed out. “Anyway, since you are on the lookout for my family, make sure we steer clear of Herbert and Selina.”

Elizabeth chuckled and patted the arm Diana had linked with hers.

They were standing near the refreshments table, since both prudently decided that this event could not and should not be suffered with an empty stomach.

“That bad, dear?” Elizabeth asked her.

“My siblings are atrocious tonight,” Diana huffed.

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow.

“Except for Stephen,” Diana hastened to add.

“Better.” Elizabeth nodded.

“I haven’t had the chance to talk to him, after all. I am sure that exception would be quickly overturned should that happen. Anyway, for now, Selina and Herbert are the vicious ones.”

“Yes, well, I imagine that is hardly news to you.”

Diana bit into her game pâté and toasted bread as if they had offended her.

Oh, this is so good.

Horrible or not, Selina had a fine taste, and everyone in the ton envied her, since she had managed to snatch the best cook in the whole of London.

And let’s not forget the pastry chef.

Diana made a mental note to step toward the pastry stand later and fill a cute porcelain plate with the famed chocolate custard tart.

“I am telling you,” she said, not ready to allow savory treats to distract her from the menace Selina could be. “I am sure that they are up to something. Plotting behind my back, snickering and whispering.”

Elizabeth studied her with that sharp look that left nothing hidden. Diana swallowed and cowered under that soul-drilling look.

“That is basically their default disposition, Diana. Are you sure you are mad at them and not something else?”

Could it hurt anyone in the family to be more ignorant?

Of course, Herbert and Selina were the bane of her existence, but her foul mood was caused by something else entirely.

No, not something. Someone.

The main reason Diana was stuffing her mouth, the main reason behind her exhaustion, was none other than him. It took all her will to power the sheer effort of pointedly ignoring him.

Not because he hovered near her—he did not. Not because he sought her out—he hadn’t. Not because he acknowledged her existence after their exchange earlier—because, blast it all, he had not done that either.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Diana knew deep in her soul that she should have been glad that his teasing was just that, a teasing and nothing more. She had no interest in being tangled in dangerous games with a rogue. She should have been thrilled that not even once did his gaze turn to her.

Now, she had to convince her mind that this was all a good thing. She had to warn the part of her that was trapped—even if for a brief second—off that treacherous heat between them. She had to caution the bits of her that were snared by the rasp of his voice and the devilish smirk that darkened his blue eyes.

So, what if he was acting as though their exchange was nothing more than an amusing sidenote of his evening? Such was the way of a rake. His attention fleeting. Flaring one moment and disappearing the next.

“There is something else you are not telling me!” Elizabeth was quick to read her face and thoughts.

Diana summoned the spirit of her governess and schooled her expression to that impassive politeness. But Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at her in a way that said, “Nice try.”

There was no chance under the gracious sky that Diana would utter to another breathing soul what had transpired in the book section of the auction. Still, her eyes drifted to the table that was part of her trap for a few seconds. The other being his unbelievably tall body.

Diana! Get a hold of yourself!

Lucky for her, at that moment, she saw movement behind Elizabeth.

“Oh, look!” Diana blurted. “The auction is starting.”

She could care less for the auction, but when one saw straws, one ought to grab at them.

Elizabeth turned with interest and grabbed her by the arm to pull her to the ballroom.

But the chocolate custard tart...

Still, Diana thought that no amount of chocolate would be enough to risk resuming their conversation, so she followed reluctantly.

The master of ceremonies stepped up on a small dais and started the bidding on some tea set, and Diana lost all interest.

One after the other, the items were auctioned off, and the evening became an endless chain of number counting, thrilled voices, clapping—lots of clapping—and enthusiastic ladies and lords stepping on the dais to be thanked and to enjoy their moment. Most of the items were sold as the evening progressed.

Diana was ready to quietly slip away from Elizabeth’s side and enjoy the empty-of-people and filled-with-desserts drawing room when she saw Selina step onto the dais. Propriety demanded that she stay and clap as her sister gestured to the crowd to calm down so she could talk. So, she gritted her teeth, forced a smile, and stayed put.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Selina’s voice echoed through the room. “Thank you so much for your contributions, which will be given to a good cause. Now, before we conclude this evening, there is one last item up for auction.”

A slight hum rippled through the guests. There was no mention of another item in the printed program. Diana felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Then, cold sweat ran down her spine when Selina's eyes found her in the crowd.

No, no, no.

Selina smiled. To everyone else, that was a poised, beaming smile worthy of a lady of her standing. But Diana was not everyone else. She knew that sly smile. Whatever came out of Selina's mouth next was not going to be anything good.

"I present to you," Selina announced with unrestrained glee, "five promenades with none other than our jilted wallflower, Lady Diana!"

Diana froze. Her pulse quickened, and her cheeks flushed. Her eyes were trained on Selina, who had the gall to keep smiling. Her breath caught, and she wished she could faint at whim, like most ladies of the ton. But all she could do was keep still in the sea of silence.

A silence that quickly turned into gasps and then became a tidal wave of murmurs as all eyes swiveled toward her. Diana was pinned beneath their scrutiny, her heart slamming against her ribs.

This can't be!

Not even in the novels that Selina so avidly read was there a world where this had truly happened. Her sister didn't just publicly auction her off like an unwanted parlor ornament. Without her consent! Still, Selina's delighted expression, mirrored by Herbert's smirk, said otherwise.

Diana opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again, but no sound came. What was she supposed to say when her own sister betrayed her like that?

For the third time that evening, she looked for straws to grab at—an act that became tiresome.

She turned to Elizabeth, seeking help.

Elizabeth looked appropriately horrified. “Oh dear,” she murmured.

“Oh dear?” Diana repeated, her voice strangled. “That is all you have to say?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“What else am I supposed to say?” Elizabeth asked, her words partially drowned out by a sad, reluctant round of applause.

“I don’t know,” Diana sputtered. “Perhaps remind me of the fact that sororicide is a crime. Though, I am sure I can make my case before the court.”

“Well...” Elizabeth smiled. “You can plan that after the bidding is over.”

Diana refused to shift her gaze to the dais. One reason was the very realistic fear that she would run up there and strangle her sister. The second was to be spared the embarrassment.

Indubitably, no one would bid. No gentleman of good standing would wish to parade about town with her once, let alone five times. Herbert and Stephen and, of course, Richard would have to bid to save her from the humiliation. She hoped Herbert would win so she could push him into the lake at St. James Park.

All thoughts of dessert were pushed to the back, and all that remained was the wish that the pot of custard was there so she could throw herself into it and die in chocolate heaven.

Alas, she had to stay there and endure the proceedings. She shut herself out of the process, deciding that if she wished it hard enough, the whole thing would just go away. She heard voices, loud gasps, and the light tone of her sister, but she refused to let anything register. She didn’t want to hear the whispers and the pity mixed with cruelty.

How could Selina do this to me?

“Calm down,” Elizabeth muttered with a fake smile.

“This is me being calm, given the circumstances,” Diana hissed.

“Now, now,” Elizabeth warned. “It is almost over.”

“Almost?” Diana despaired.

“Oh.” Elizabeth’s eyes widened.

“What? I thought you were supposed to be quite eloquent. Please clarify that immediately.”

But Elizabeth didn’t get the chance to explain herself further, for Selina announced loudly, “Congratulations, Lord Crawford!”

No.

Diana could hear her heart beat in her ears, and she was fairly certain that it would soon burst out of her chest and flop onto the polished floor.

“Diana.” Elizabeth squeezed her hand.

This can’t be happening.

Diana forced herself to remember her status and not cause a scene. And by scene, she meant running out of the ballroom, out of the Seymour estate, out of London, and out of the country if need be. Instead, she collected the tattered remnants of her sanity and looked up.

Yes, running out of the country sounds like a marvelous idea!

Because the moment she tore her gaze away from her shoes, on which she had been focused during the auction, she was met with his eyes.

The Marquess approached her, the crowd parting for him like the Red Sea. And why wouldn't they? He looked like a feral beast even in his refined attire and the controlled way he carried himself.

As he stalked toward her, her breathing quickened. The air between them thickened, charged with something dangerous. His eyes were locked onto hers, and she felt herself burning under that scorching look. Burning with anger and that other thing that was too scandalous to even think about.

Still, all of this is a game for him.

Diana made sure to feed the fire of anger. He had purposely avoided her, and now that her troublemaker of a sister gave him the opportunity to torture her on a silver platter, he gladly took it.

By the time he stopped before her, Diana was glad that her anger was stoked enough to suppress all other emotions.

She raised her chin first because she had to. The man was extremely tall, after all. And she wanted to show him her defiance. His games were not appreciated.

"My Lady," he said with a taunting smirk.

"Congratulations, Lord Crawford," Diana drawled. Then, she added in a lower voice meant only for his ears, "You will regret this."

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

The look in his eyes lost all mirth and turned predatory. Diana's resolve faltered. Never before had anyone looked at her like that. It was as if... as if he was ready to devour her. And with dread, she realized that she didn't mind being devoured.

His sarcastic chuckle brought her back to her senses. She was ready to say something clever, a witty remark, a polite goodnight, anything that would get him to step away from her, but he was faster.

He took her hand, slow and deliberate, and lifted it to his lips. At first, his breath made the hairs on her arm stand up as if to meet his lips. But then he did not simply brush a kiss over her knuckles. His lips lingered, warm and firm, pressing into her skin harder than propriety dictated, long enough to make her pulse spike.

"I did warn you, My Lady," he purred darkly. "You should have been more careful to not get caught by a man like me."

Diana lost all coherent thought. She racked the drawers of her wit to find something, anything to say, but it was futile. All her being was currently taken up by a warmth pooling in the pit of her stomach.

Five promenades with him?

She blinked, trying to process it, and then realized, with growing dread, that she wasn't sure if she should laugh or run.

## CHAPTER 4

## Pins and Needles

“Ouch!” Diana was ready to curse louder as the needle pricked her.

“You sure are less careful these days,” Elizabeth remarked, staring at her over her book. “Perhaps you should try something less sharp. I am sure you run less risk of getting blood all over yourself with watercolors.”

“I prefer to be armed when Selina decides to visit,” Diana murmured. “Though drowning her in colored water doesn’t sound like a terrible idea right now.”

“In truth, I am sure she won’t dare show her face here so soon.”

“You do realize we are talking about Selina, right?” Diana looked at her sister-in-law.

“I stand corrected.” Elizabeth let out a boisterous laugh.

Diana joined her, grateful for the pillar of humor that her sister-in-law was. She felt the mirth warming her body and soul. That was until the butler walked into the parlor.

“Lady Diana, you have a visitor.”

Diana was tempted to pin her needle in her eye out of frustration. Perhaps a sudden injury like that would stop the vexing aftermath of that fateful auction. It had been days, and during each of them, Diana had been forced to receive visitors. Eligible bachelors. Suitors. Everyone but him.

Word about the auction got out and spread like wildfire. Everyone was talking about how Lord Crawford paid a ridiculous amount to have the honor of five promenades with the jilted wallflower. A man of his reputation, who monopolized the attention of the ton the rare times he graced their events with his presence, had noticed her. Ergo,

she was considered a prize. Overnight, she became a rare commodity. She was the ton's most eligible bachelorette, her value high in the market.

In simple words, boys saw one of their own play with a toy they had forgotten, and now they wanted to play too.

Male folly at its finest.

But the question remained. Why did he want to play with her? And why suddenly he didn't?

"My Lady?" the butler prompted. "Should I show Lord Herrington here?"

Diana nodded reluctantly. She would love to throw decorum out of the window along with her valuables and run away from all of this. To her dismay, Elizabeth took her book and went to sit on the armchair by the window, leaving her alone on the sofa.

Diana cast a sharp glance at her sister-in-law and lady of the house. After all, if Elizabeth had chosen any other moment to visit the powder room that fateful night, all of this would have been avoided.

"My fair Lady!" Lord Herrington busted in with an overflowing flower basket that he dropped in Diana's lap.

She forced the distant cousin of what could be considered a smile.

Lord Herrington bowed, and that made him even shorter. Despite his pale skin, blonde hair, and hazel eyes, he was...

Well, not as tall as him.

Diana motioned for him to sit, and she smiled and nodded and responded as best as she could to his benign small talk. And she was forced to do so again. And again. Day in and day out.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

One after the other, every eligible bachelor visited her parlor, and not even one thought to bring chocolate—which would have made the whole ordeal more bearable.

Her once quiet haven, filled with books and her beloved needles and threads, was invaded by an endless procession of suitors she had no use for. Men who had never noticed her before, and even used to snicker behind her back, now seemed fascinated by her. Men who never even spared her a second glance were now vying for her attention, squeezing into the seats of her light blue sofa.

A distressing realization dawned on her. This was never about her. All this attention and the extermination of gardens upon gardens of flowers was not for her. This was about him.

A man like him taking notice? Paying for her company? Openly kissing her hand? It was his worth that raised her worth. And she was angry at this absurdity that ruined her days. And she was not alone.

“You are not thinking of honoring the auction offer, are you?” Stephen demanded, rather than asked.

Between the rare moments she had to herself, she had to suffer that as well. Stephen was the other reason that the hospital Selina had chosen for her charity event would see an influx of money. He was the one bidding against the Marquess. Not to save her from humiliation. After all, there was no humiliation. Diana was told that the moment Selina started the auction, Lord Crawford bid an outrageous amount. It was Stephen who had hastened to outbid him.

“That man is a rake. The worst kind.”

There is the reason.

Diana inhaled. Her overbearing brother had outbid the Marquess because he was not ready to see his little sister walking around with him. He had decided that a man of his reputation was not to be seen around Diana, let alone be her companion on romantic promenades. Diana had no desire to deal with him as well.

“Perhaps you should be talking to our sister about the matter.” She sipped on her tea. “I, on my part, am not going to give the Marquess any reason to withdraw his generous offer to the hospital.”

“Oh, trust me, I will have a serious conversation with Selina about this matter. But do not even jest on the matter. I forbid you to go!”

Forbid?

Diana looked at her brother, who was seething, and was ready to ask him to reconsider his words lest he wanted to hear what she had to say on the matter.

“I do think that Lord Crawford’s actions, dubious and questionable as they may be, have had a wonderful impact, dear.”

Her voice and tone were enough to distract him and lighten the heavy atmosphere, which was seconds away from blowing into a fight only a brother and a sister could have.

“Pray, do tell us how any of this is wonderful, Elizabeth?” Stephen demanded.

Diana nodded, forgetting that she was ready to have his head moments ago. She too

wondered about Elizabeth's mental health.

"All of the eligible bachelors are now competing for Diana's attention. Respectable men," Elizabeth interjected. "I am sure our wise Diana could choose any of them. Five promenades mean nothing, but they can bring you closer to the man you really want, Diana."

Diana was ready to scream, "But I want none of them!"

But such overly emotional responses did not fly well under Stephen's roof. Ever since that fateful evening—when the man who had all but promised himself to her turned to another woman in front of the whole ton—she had lived in the shadow of that mortifying spectacle. Being away from her wall and into the limelight was exhausting. She had more pressing matters at hand than disillusioning her sister-in-law.

"You are not wrong, Lizzy." Stephen smiled at his wife. "Smithwick, for example, is a good fellow. I know him well. We both went to Eton. And Langam. He is respectable, has no debts, and never drinks."

Diana tuned the rest of the conversation out. There was an insight she would love to share with her brother after spending almost a week with the crème de la crème of the marriage mart. What was presented as a virtue was the same thing that made them boring: none of them was Lord Crawford.

None had that devilish smile that would make a nun blush. None could dwarf her with his height. None had that deep voice that said so much more than words. None had that sharp wit that challenged her. And none had those piercing blue eyes that saw her. Truly saw her.

Stop that!

This was the really draining part of her days. To constantly try to stop herself from thinking about him. Caught in a purgatory between dreading his arrival and anticipating it, she found no peace. Each time the butler announced a caller, her breath would hitch... only for her pulse to slow when it was no him. And then, absurdly, disappointment would follow.

She lived in fear of seeing those blues again and in dread at the notion that she might not see them again. She squirmed at the idea that his massive body would make her poor sofa creak, and she sprang up just thinking of him seated too close to her.

Because she knew exactly what he would do when he was too close. He would just get closer. Oh, she could see him enter her haven with that smug smile on his lips and that swagger that made him less stiff than the other gentlemen of the ton. But so much more dangerous.

No, she didn't need 'dangerous' in her life. Her poor sofa had suffered enough from the endless string of men occupying it. It was better that she was spared his presence.

Lies, a voice in her head intoned.

Her heart raced just picturing him so close, daring enough, testing limits and propriety with his words and hands. But his eyes and his lips would betray his real thoughts. The way he would convey how he could just?—

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Ouch!” She had pricked herself, again.

Elizabeth was about to comment on her clumsiness. Diana was never clumsy, especially with her needles. Her astute sister-in-law was ready to make that observation when Stephen was right there, and that was the last thing Diana needed. She didn’t want him to worry even more than he usually did.

Yet, in a stroke of luck—or calamity—the door flew open, and Selina entered in a light green dress, a bundle of books in her arms and a smile on her face. A very wide, very contented smile.

“What a glorious, sunny day!” she gushed.

Three pairs of eyes landed on her in disbelief at her carefree manner. In a pure Selina way, her audacity momentarily stunned everyone. And to add salt to injury, Herbert followed, walked past her, and flopped down on an armchair, grabbing a biscuit as he did.

If the two siblings felt the room temperature drop despite the sunlight pouring in, they did not show it. But judging by the way Selina occupied herself with untangling her hat from her hair and the way Herbert munched on his biscuits, Diana was inclined to believe that they were blissfully oblivious.

“Selina!” Stephen would, of course, be the first to snap out of it. “What on earth do you think you are doing?”

Selina turned and smiled. “I was under the impression I was visiting family.”

Stephen was ready to stand up and erupt, but Diana beat him to it.

“I was under the same impression, dear sister,” she bit out. “That we were family, I mean.”

“Are we not?”

“We might need to reevaluate the meaning of the word. Because I find that our definitions of whatfamilyis vastly differ. You see, I was raised with the notion that family supports each other.”

“You are angry,” Selina noted.

“Always so perceptive, dear sister. And for the less insightful”—Diana turned to Herbert—“that feeling extends to you, too.”

Selina rushed to her side and sat down, ready to take her hands in her own.

“Do not tempt me, Selina. I am armed with needles, and I am not afraid to use them.”

Selina must have sensed the seriousness of the threat, since she quickly drew her hands away from her sister’s embroidery.

“But why are you mad at me?” she asked. “At us?”

Diana blinked. She turned to Stephen and Elizabeth to make sure that she was hearing her correctly. The couple seemed equally appalled.

“Why am I mad? Because you auctioned me off like cattle!”

“I doubt the best cow would fetch the amount you did,” Herbert muttered and reached

for another biscuit.

His hand paused mid-air, for it seemed that he finally caught on and was fully aware of the icicles dripping from the occupants of the parlor, except for Selina.

“I know how you feel, Diana.”

“I assure you, you have no idea how I feel right now because, then, you wouldn’t have sat so close to me while there is boiling tea in the vicinity.”

Selina nodded a few times somberly. “What I have done was?—”

“Unforgivable? Stupid? Appalling? Humiliating? Deplorable?”

“Necessary,” Selina offered.

“Lizzy, leave the room!” Stephen was on his feet instantly and started rolling up his sleeves. “I have never spanked any of you, but there is always time to remedy things.”

Elizabeth didn’t move, her whole attention focused on the muscular arms her husband revealed. She seemed lost in a haze of thoughts Diana didn’t want her to have in front of the rest of her siblings.

“Elizabeth!” Diana hissed, snapping her sister-in-law out of wherever she was. “I think it’s best you took Stephen somewhere else.”

“Oh, I will take Stephen alright.”

Diana’s cheeks flushed, but one touch from Elizabeth and the couple was out of the room. Now, she could focus on the problem at hand.

“I should have let him make good on his promise, Selina. Maybe I might.”

“May I speak?” Selina smiled.

“I think you said enough. Humiliating me like that was necessary, then?”

“It was! You were wasting away, and I was not prepared to sit back and watch it happen.”

Diana gasped. Her fire turned cold.

Selina spoke a hard truth. She wasn’t here to mock her or just dismiss the whole thing. She was going to tell her something she didn’t want to hear.

“It’s not about marriage, Diana.” Selina risked it all and took her hand. “I couldn’t care less if you got married or not. If that made you truly happy, I would be right there beside you. But to allow you to wither away because of something that happened years ago? No, my sweet sister. I had to do something.”

“And that something was degrading me without my consent?”

Selina looked down with embarrassment. She was indeed feeling guilty. She indeed

took it too far.

“The auction was my idea,” Herbert spoke up, leaning in.

“You had better keep your mouth shut, or I am calling Stephen back in.”

“I am sure that as long those sleeves are rolled up, he is thoroughly occupied.”

“Herbert!” both sisters exclaimed in shock.

“There, I got you to agree on something.” Herbert smirked.

“Diana.” Selina drew her sister’s attention to spare Herbert from finding out how much damage a pair of scissors could do. “I know it was too... drastic.”

Diana frowned, and Selina swallowed.

“I am not shying away from saying it was wrong.”

“And yet you do.” Diana smiled that fake, dangerous smile.

“Fine, it was wrong. But I would do it again.”

“I thought survival instinct was ingrained in all creatures, yet you seem to lack that ability that has kept our species flourishing. I am sure killing you might be called drastic but necessary.”

“It got you out of that endless loop of nothingness, did it not?”

“Being visited by all the bachelors and hearing their empty comments and empty compliments constitutes a good thing for you?”

“Perhaps not, but going out there, being forced to put down the books and threads and simply promenade is something more.”

The reminder that the auction came with an offer made Diana’s jaw clench.

Was he part of the scheme?

It was logical to think so. He was Richard’s best friend, and her brother-in-law was known to bend over backward to keep her sister happy. Asking his best friend to bid in the auction, knowing the reaction that would follow, was something he would gladly do.

Oh, the betrayal runs deep.

“Of course, I never expected Lord Crawford to bid. Especially that obscene amount that made everyone back down. Except for that thickhead brother of ours. It made the plan even better.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

What?

That had Diana's head spinning. So, the Marquess made a bid because he really wanted the prize? Then why had he not claimed it? Was he trying to ridicule her more? Paying for the honor of escorting her and then never doing it? Just because she challenged him?

"Diana, will you ever forgive me?"

If there was ever a perfect opportunity for Selina to ask that, she sure found it. Diana was so flustered by her thoughts that she nodded without thinking.

"Oh, my sweet sister. You'll see. This is for the best."

Oh, I seriously doubt that.

## CHAPTER 5

### Cue Ball

The atmosphere in the gentlemen's club James had frequented all his adult life had that familiarity that wrapped around him cozily. Especially while he and Richard indulged in a game of billiards. It was the only time James saw his uptight and proper friend loosen up.

"No wager this evening, Crawford?" Richard teased.

James scowled. Familiar or not, there was something different in the way he just was. It irked him that he couldn't place it. Something was eating at him, and it drove him crazy that he couldn't locate it and pluck it out because it was taking roots like a weed in his perfectly curated garden. It was disrupting the patterns he carefully planned.

But he was unwilling to let the mask slip. The mask of that effortless charm that took almost all his energy to maintain. Thereputation of the charismatic rake who had no care in the world, who simply had it all.

"If we hit the tables, Seymour, I will gladly make a wager. But with you and that damn stick? I am never winning, and we both know it."

"I know. You prefer the whim of Lady Luck. I prefer the certainty of skill. I can control exactly what the balls will do, and thus I control the outcome."

"Where is the fun in that?" James chuckled. "Having control all the time?"

Richard sniggered as if to himself, and the look in his eyes softened. A rare sight on him. One he reserved for his wife.

James still couldn't believe that Richard of all people was in love.

"Your turn." Richard pointed at him with his stick.

James scanned the table, trying to decide his next move, but he just couldn't concentrate. He was not as good as Richard at this, but tonight he was losing the basic functions of his body. Still, he finally found an easy shot and bent to take it.

"Have you called on Diana?" Richard asked.

The stick slipped from James's hand, and the balls ricocheted aimlessly around the table. When he straightened up, Richard was observing him.

James clenched his jaw. There it was, the wrinkle in his perfectly ironed life.

"No." He coughed. "Not yet."

Richard frowned.

It had been days since the auction. Propriety demanded that James would have visited her by now. But James was never about propriety. One does not build his reputation by being respectful.

"You do intend to honor the offer, Crawford, right?"

James smiled that disarming smile of his, but if there was one person on earth who was immune to his charm, it was Richard. It was the main reason he was his best friend. His only true friend.

"I will, of course. You know me."

"It is exactly because I know you that I am drawing your attention to this matter. This is not some barmaid we are talking about. Not some wanton widow. This is my sister-in-law."

"I am aware, Seymour. I have paid a ridiculous amount to promenade with her. I mean, the barmaids I could have?—"

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

His words were cut short when the stick in Richard's hand came too close to his nose.

James threw his hands up in the air and smiled.

Where James was fire, Richard was ice. And right now, he envied his friend for possessing that particular attribute.

Something was boiling inside him since that damned night. Since the moment he saw her, so petite and sweet and innocent. Her sharp, unforgiving tongue had challenged him. There was none of the fluttering of lashes or fake sighs. She never saw him as anything other than a friend of her brother-in-law—and a rake, at that.

That is a lie, a voice in his head hastened to correct him.

She did see more. When he pushed her against that table, her cheeks reddened, and her breathing quickened. Oh, what he wouldn't give to throw her on the table and silence her smart mouth.

“James! Your turn. You know what? This is hopeless.” Richard tossed his stick on the table. “Brandy?”

Yes, lots of it.

James swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

This can't be happening.

Where did that thought come from? The image stirred him so deeply that he had to sit uncomfortably across from his friend. For all the practice he had in feigning nonchalance, he was almost losing it.

The moment the brandy was served, he emptied his glass.

Richard studied him. He knew that something was off. Hewas off.

“James, you will call on Diana.”

“I said, I will!” James snapped.

Richard was shocked but said nothing.

James clenched his jaw. Yet, seeing his friend avoid his gaze for fear that he might explode again was not a sentiment he liked.

“Come on, Seymour,” he joked with that practiced ease. “A little anticipation stirs the blood.”

Richard chuckled. Then, he kept laughing.

James felt irritated. This was not lighthearted. His friend was laughing at him.

“Crawford, go visit Diana and do your duty. Your silly, little games won’t work on her.”

“She is a woman, is she not? Allow me to disagree, then.”

Richard shook his head. “That would be one great wager, but I would never bet on my sister-in-law falling into your trap.”

“Your rules spoil all the fun.”

“And your fun disrupts my rules.”

James poured more brandy into the small, curved glass, and for some reason, his mind brought forth her full curves, the way she felt against him when he pushed the boundaries just as much. She had gasped. He remembered that sound well.

What would it take to make her breathless?

His eyes widened when debauched images rushed to his mind. Images of Diana breathless and flushed, her lips parted. He shifted uneasily on the armchair as if it was on fire.

“You seem to hold her in high regard, that sister-in-law of yours.” He was desperate for a distraction.

“I do. She is a proper lady. Well-bred and with exquisite manners.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

James thought of their banter and how daring it was, borderline improper, but he wasn't going to disillusion his friend.

"It is a pity she doesn't wish to marry," Richard added.

James's ears perked up. She didn't want to marry? Interesting. That was what almost all the ladies of the ton were after.

Someone like her, with that fire, destined to be a spinster? No way.

"Ah yes. You called her the jilted wallflower."

"She is that. You see, there was a man who courted her for a while. A good-looking fellow with good standing. It was common knowledge that he was to propose soon. But at a ball, the man fell on his knees and professed his love for someone else. Before Diana's eyes."

"What? He did what?"

"Exactly, my friend. You can only imagine how poor Diana must have felt."

"And who is that fellow?" James asked, suddenly irritated by the affairs of a lady who was a stranger.

"Who cares? They left London, of course. Since then, Diana renounced marriage, much to her siblings' dismay. But... after Selina's stunt—which I still do not approve of—she has started receiving visitors once more. I wouldn't be surprised if she were

to be wed soon.”

That was not the plan. James had made that bid to vex her. To see her flustered. And all the money in the world was worth it just to see her as furious and shocked as she was when he went to claim his prize. To render her speechless as he kissed her hand.

It was a game. A game he won.

And it seemed that his little stunt affected her a little bit more. If she was half the woman she had shown him, she was probably pulling her hair out, having all these annoying callers.

If there was any time to make her patience snap, it was now. Surely, she must be thinking she was rid of him. Oh, he could almost see the look on her face. Priceless.

“Do not worry, my friend.” James stood up. “I will call on her tomorrow.”

“Where are you...?” Richard trailed off as James rushed out.

James climbed into his carriage and went straight back to his estate, still unable to put his emotions in order.

He entered the place he was forced to call home, feeling exhausted. He just wanted to go to sleep and pray that all these weird feelings and thoughts allowed him to do so.

“You are late.”

He froze in the dimly lit hallway. If there was ever a voice he hated to hear, it was the one that came from the small, ground-level study. His father’s voice.

He turned slowly and raised his chin in defiance, his eyes hardening. His father was

sitting at his desk, going through years and years' worth of ledgers. Reports and bills and crop sums, incomes, and expenses.

Those were James's ledgers. The work he had put in while his father wallowed in depression. And now his father was back, going through his estate and dictating his curfew.

"You are late. Again," his father repeated.

"Quite observant of you," James uttered. "I could say the same for you."

The weight of his words filled the space between them, that space filled with unvoiced anger and unresolved issues.

Solomon Bolton, the Duke of Pemberton, shrank a bit under his son's harsh words. Because they were true. He was late. Late to check the ledgers and late to check him.

James felt a hollow satisfaction at seeing the older man take the sting of his words. The words had hit their mark—he saw it in the slight tightening of his father's mouth and the stiffening of his shoulders.

Still, when his father got up to stand at the threshold of the study, his back was straight, and his face was cold. James was irked that he looked so much like his father.

"Being late and getting drunk? Is that what will restore your reputation? Your rakish ways may win you some favor with the ladies behind fans, but no respectable family will ever let you near their daughters."

If James thought he understood what nasty feelings were, hearing his father judging him like that redefined the term swiftly. Blood rushed to his temples, and his heart

pounded madly. His lip curled slowly before he took a step forward. Then another. Not rushed, not reckless. Intentional.

Solomon's eyes widened.

"That," James said, his voice a barely controlled growl, "is hardly your concern."

Something in his tone made his father hesitate.

The Duke opened his mouth to say something, but he was met with the ice in James's eyes. He stepped back and walked away.

When his father left, James cursed under his breath and then climbed up the stairs, every muscle still tight with restrained fury. He hoped his grandmother didn't hear their exchange. It would wreck her to see them like this. She was always pushing them to reconcile in that firm, sweet way of hers, the same way she had always been as his guardian.

He tore at his cravat, shrugged off his waistcoat, and yanked his shirt over his head as if shedding his skin could rid him of the anger burning beneath it. He needed to sleep. He had to sleep and forget all of this and the way he allowed his father to get to him again.

He had to sleep. He had to make good on his promise to Richard lest he wanted to find that precious billiard stick inserted into his cavities. He had to call on Diana.

At that thought, an image of her flashed through his mind. Not the sharp-tongued wallflower that challenged him. Another her. Flushed cheeks, heavy-lidded eyes, mouth slightly parted and swollen from something far more indulgent than biting retorts. He smelled her bergamot scent and heard that little gasp she let out.

Tomorrow, little wallflower.

That was his last thought before he drifted off to sleep.

When the curtains were pulled back the next morning, he felt better than ever. Perhaps there was some merit to all that talk about getting a good night's sleep. He was almost whistling as he went down for breakfast the way he did since he was three-and-ten. In his grandmother's drawing room, the sunniest room in the estate.

He hesitated like he did every day. Because this wasn't just his grandmother's haven. It was his mother's favorite room too. It had the perfect light for her watercolors. Sometimes, she would secretly paint him, despite Society dictating that women only draw tame little flowers.

His hand trembled before he steadied it, and then he turned the knob.

"Good morning, Grandmother!"

The old lady dropped the cat on her lap and opened her arms to him. James smiled—really smiled.

"My boy," Euphemia Bolton greeted as he leaned down to wrap his arms around her.

He placed a kiss on her cheek and took his spot on the sofa, grabbing the morning paper. The butler came in with his usual breakfast—sweets and coffee.

"Argh!" Euphemia wrinkled her nose at the smell of coffee. "How can you stand that?"

James poured the black liquid into the china cup he had brought from Italy. That was where he got addicted to coffee, after all.

“If we did this in the dining room, you would have put more space between you and that,” James said as he raised his cup to her.

“Well, I must have you know that I happen to like this distance. I am not going to drink my perfectly blended tea too far from my only grandchild.”

James looked up from the newspaper. Euphemia Bolton was old, but she was not senile. He knew that the mention of the famed ‘only grandchild’ was a prelude to something less pleasant.

“I heard that there was an interesting auction at the Seymour estate a few days ago.”

There it is.

James knew that secluded as she may be in her old age, his grandmother was still the greatest gossip he knew. Little if nothing escaped her.

“It was interesting, indeed. There was a tea set I tried to get for you, but it was snatched by Lady Fairton.”

“I am sure it was. Though, you didn’t leave the auction empty-handed.”

James folded the newspaper he wasn’t reading and smiled at his grandmother. “But I did leave Richard’s house empty-handed.”

“Do not test me, boy! You know what I speak of. Lady Diana.”

The mention of her name somehow turned his smile into something else. Not frozen, but not that perfectly rehearsed mysterious smirk either.

“Ah.” He leaned back.

“Ah?” His grandmother put the other cat down—a sign that things were serious.

“Care to elaborate?”

“I would love to, Grandmother, but I am expected.”

James downed his coffee in one gulp, got up, and kissed her on the cheek.

“Expected? Where are you expected?” she almost yelled at his retreating back.

He looked over his shoulder and smirked. “At Westall Estate, of course.”

## CHAPTER 6

### The Path Ahead

“Lord Crawford calling on you, Lady Diana.”

Diana was glad she was holding a brush instead of a needle this time. Even so, a long line of dark blue completely ruined her beautifully painted garden.

Leave it to Lord Crawford to ruin beautiful things—this painting, her morning, her peace.

She turned to the butler, having decided to turn the Marquess away with an excuse—his well-being, most of all—when a shadow in the hallway made her spine

stiffen.

He stepped inside. Without invitation.

Suddenly, the drawing room shrank as he filled it with his presence. Diana's fingers tightened around the brush—a lifeline as the air rushed out of her lungs.

Under the candlelight, he was dangerously alluring, but the sweet light softened things that were not soft, like the veneer of a civilized gentleman. Broad daylight offered no such mercy. He almost looked savage, all sharp lines and angles.

But Diana was not ready to back away so easily. His smug smile told her he was there to annoy her, probably bored with his other games. She was going to prove to him that not all games are meant to be won.

“Ah, Lord Crawford,” she greeted, breaking the silence. “What a surprise.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. I was rather hoping that I was relieved of my sentence.”

“Sentence, My Lady?”

“How else would you describe five promenades with you, My Lord?”

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest. She had not meant to enjoy the sound of it. But—darn it!—he caught that.

He came closer, just enough, at the edge of propriety. He bowed and took her hand in his gloved one.

Diana's heart skipped a beat as his breath caressed her skin. Yet, his lips didn't touch her. Somehow, that was worse. Her fingers twitched—just slightly, just enough for him to notice.

His eyes flicked up, catching the movement, catching her. His lips curled into a wicked, knowing smile. A challenge.

“Ahem.” Elizabeth cleared her throat, making her presence known.

Thank you!

Diana was grateful for her steadfast chaperone. She could always rely on Elizabeth to keep her safe and sane. As long she was in the room, all was well.

Surely, Elizabeth wouldn't fall for the Marquess's parlor tricks.

Betrayal.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Wasn't she the one who swore up and down that she wouldn't allow 'a treacherous scoundrel' to be alone with her for one moment? What exactly was she doing, laughing at his preposterous stories?

"So, I tried to make the best of the situation..." His voice was filled with mirth. "... and guided her to the nearest table, where she somehow made sure that a vase was broken."

"Oh, you are incorrigible!" Elizabeth laughed.

"Well, it was a gift from a distant aunt, a horrendous piece of art—and I am stretching the use of the word—that deserved to be broken into pieces. Ending her pursuit in a river of apologies and embarrassment was just a bonus."

Elizabeth laughed even harder, and when she threw her head back, the Marquess turned his focus on Diana. She didn't have time to school her expression, so he caught her murderous thoughts, and somehow that made him smile darkly at her.

That smile must have conveyed a bold message because Diana watched with dread as Elizabeth rose, took her book with her, and made herself comfortable on the armchair by the window. She felt like a general watching his troops abandoning him, leaving him with a very determined opponent if she were to assume from Lord Crawford's too-wide smile.

"So, Lady Diana? How about our promenade?"

"How about it?" Diana quipped, hoping the tone of her voice would make the idea of

promenades sound as charming as a lake filled with crocodiles.

“Would you like to go for a walk? The weather is splendid.” He raised an eyebrow.

The look Diana gave him could have turned the splendid day into a raging winter storm, and yet he took it in his stride and smiled wider.

Diana knew he was toying with her, and she knew that he knew that she knew, and somehow that was worse.

“Would you like to go to St. James Park?” He openly showed her what he thought of her threatening glances.

“Do I really have a choice?”

His smile dropped instantly, and his already straight back straightened even more as he leaned away from her slightly.

“Lady Diana, I assure you, you always have a choice.” His tone was not strict but serious, and somehow that made it comforting.

The air shifted a little, and his amusement was distilled with consideration, as if he really valued her choices.

It shook her, but rather than dwell on that new emotion, she said, “Well, I suppose, unwillingly or not, I became part of a deal that I wish to honor.” She got up suddenly. “St. James Park is just fine.”

“Do you wish for me to wait for you to get ready?” he asked as he rose respectfully.

Diana looked back at him with surprise. Did the man think that she was going to rush

upstairs and wear her best dress, find the perfect hat and gloves?

Such a spoiled rake. Women must have been tripping over themselves to land at his feet, so he was used to a road paved with female victims of his charms.

“No, I just need to fetch my accessories and let Mrs. Bremford know that we are going out.”

The message was clear—this was a duty, not pleasure.

“Just as well...” He fixed her with an intense look. “You already look lovely.”

That...

Diana pursed her lips, angry with herself for allowing him to have the final word.

It was going to be a long promenade.

St. James’s Park was alive with the hum of the fashionable crowd. Ladies in pastel gowns and gentlemen in crisp waistcoats strolled along the manicured paths, stopping only to murmur pleasantries or cast lingering glances at potential matches. The air was fresh, touched with the scent of budding flowers. The promise of spring was in the air.

Yet, to Diana, it might as well have been a battlefield. Because in a way, it was. She really wished it would start raining, so she would have to run back to her parlor and cross the first promenade off her to-do list.

“I am wondering—” James started.

“I am sure you do,” Diana huffed.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“I am wondering,” he continued, undeterred, “if you find my company so deplorable as your expression conveys.”

“I pride myself on keeping my expression neutral.”

“Really? I would have thought otherwise looking at you, My Lady.”

“Everything has a limit, My Lord,” she said matter-of-factly. “Though, I am sure you are delightful company. To yourself.”

“I must say, I do find myself charming and amusing.”

“How about you spend more time with yourself, then?” Diana smiled.

“Where is the fun in that?”

“Where is the fun in this?”

“I beg to differ,” James said. “I find myself the most entertained I have been as of late.”

“And by as of late, I am guessing you mean since last night. I’d be amazed to find that your attention span went further than a day, My Lord.”

James chuckled and nodded at a passing couple who stared at them openly.

Diana was fully aware of what they were staring at. First of all, their height difference

was... substantial. Then, their ranks were literal opposites. And if that wasn't enough, their dispositions were overtly different.

"Now, My Lady, do not spoil the mood," James murmured as if reading her mind.

"Yourmood, My Lord. I am afraid there is little to be done about mine."

"I am known to... lighten ladies' moods."

The wicked comment earned James a side glance and a huff.

"You are insufferable."

Diana almost threw her hands up in the air in triumph. He clenched his jaw and looked at her in disbelief. Hewasa rather skilled charmer, but she was proving not to be impressed.

"Insufferable? Is that envy I detect in your voice, My Lady?"

"Envy? It must be so great for one to live in one's world. Perhaps you are right, My Lord. I do envy you for that."

"You envy me because I dare to live the way I want, whereas you, My Lady, don't."

"How presumptuous of you."

"You say presumptuous, I say honest. Tell me, My Lady, were you ever tempted to do what you truly wanted?"

Diana was never one to throw a fit, weep, or lash out, but she was close to doing all that.

The gall.

The ease with which he said things no gentleman should ever say...

“Look, squirrels,” she said flatly. “If we can locate a few females, My Lord, we can appease your need to flirt with every breathing, walking being.”

“Not any breathing, walking being. Just you.”

“For the next hour, I presume.”

He scowled. He was sure that using the word ‘tempted’ would rattle her and she would blush. He schooled his expression, but Diana gave him a fake smile that said she knew that this round was hers. Not that she was keeping score, of course.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Lady Diana, you wound me,” he said in the most blatantly fake way possible.

“I assure you I do not,” she threatened.

“Still, your words strike truer than any blade.”

“Have you been struck by a blade, My Lord?”

“I cannot say I have. I avoid violence at all costs.”

“Pity.” Diana smiled. “I avoided violence at all costs as well, but lately, that decision has been seriously tried.”

“Judging by your sharp tongue, My Lady, I would guess you are battle-ready. This way perhaps, My Lady?” He gallantly led her before she retorted.

For a while, they walked down a beautiful path shaded by trees, a bit far off the usually frequented ones. Diana had a troubling suspicion that he led them there out of concern, having noticed how demanding it was for her to maintain her composure under the ton’s scrutiny. But she shook that thought away. That meant that the Marquess had considered her feelings—which was an absolutely absurd thought.

“So, how do you feel, being auctioned off like an ancient vase?” he asked out of the blue.

Diana looked up at him with a glare that said, Where did that come from?

“I am guessing part of your... mood is attributed to this.” James shrugged.

“At least I am not shattered yet.”

“Oh, so you were listening!” he exclaimed, amused. “And here I was thinking I was wasting one of my favorite stories only to your sister-in-law’s amusement.”

“I am sure you got more stories like that to keep ladies amused, My Lord.”

James smiled, slow and lazy, but his eyes didn’t reflect his mirth. They were too steady, too knowing, like a wolf playing with his prey before killing it.

This infuriating man was not just a rake. He was dangerous. He should be declared illegal.

Diana turned her attention to the flora of the park to keep herself in check, calculating the proper duration of a promenade so she could be released from his company.

“My Lady, I understand that this unfortunate auction has redrawn the ton’s attention to your person. Most women of your standing would be delighted by that turn of events,” he mused.

Diana’s fury flared, and her hands curled into a fist. She took a sharp breath.

“I suppose you find it unfathomable that a woman might prefer not to be claimed like a prize?”

“No, I don’t.”

What?

Diana had devised a perfect layout of how the conversation would go. He would dismiss her wish to stay unmarried and degrade it to a petulant child's tantrum, to which she would answer accordingly. Then, he would say, "That is the fate of a lady like you," and possibly add a flirtatious joke, to which she would retort firmly. But now, all the hard work she did in her mind flew out of the window because of his firm, serious no.

She turned her head to study him, searching his face for some hint of mockery. But there was none. He was taking her answer seriously.

"That surprises you," he noted.

Diana hesitated. "It does."

"You did not think me capable of these opinions."

"I did not." She could not deny it.

"Ah. You thought that I found it natural for a woman to seek a marriage that would allow her husband to continue his debauchery while she smiled prettily for the sake of appearances."

Diana blinked. Those were supposed to be her lines. Even better worded than she would have said herself. And, worst of all, he seemed honest—as honest as a man of his reputation could be.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Exactly,” she could only answer. “And how about you, My Lord? Do you intend to marry?”

She immediately regretted asking the question because it elicited a genuine laugh from him. And to see him laugh, truly laugh, was a dangerous sight. His face softened, his blue eyes became even brighter, and his body rippled in a way that no laughter should provoke.

“Oh, My Lady. That would take some serious imagination on anyone’s part. Me, Lord Crawford, the absolute rake, domesticated. A loving husband and a doting father.” He shook his head.

Diana should have seen the insult, the recklessness in his words, but her womanly instincts picked up something more akin to bitterness. She had the crazy idea that perhaps despite his rakish ways, this man wanted exactly the very thing he renounced—being a husband and a father. She sensed that perhaps he wanted to belong.

He turned to her and leaned closer, and the glint in his eyes made her mind go blank.

Was she right? Did he really want to?—?

“You see, Lady Diana, we are not so different, you and I,” he purred.

And it’s gone.

All those senseless thoughts of him being forlorn were blown into smithereens when

that seductive smile spread across his face.

The man was a rake through and through.

“I think, My Lady, that you and I may be the only sane people in the ton,” he said and patted the hand she had on his arm.

“I do not know what I dread the most. What your definition of sane is or the fact that whatever it is, you put me in the same category as you,” Diana deadpanned.

He laughed again, but this time, Diana was wise enough to avert her gaze and resume the calculation of the appropriate duration of a promenade.

## CHAPTER 7

### White Orchids

As a general rule, James hated promenades, especially in the perfectly maintained and absurdly manicured St. James Park. But to every rule, there were exceptions, and he found that this promenade was an enjoyable one. He wasn't lying earlier. This was the most fun he had had in a while. In forever, if he were being honest with himself.

He couldn't quite specifically name what made this promenade so vastly different. It could be the twisted idea that the woman reluctantly holding onto his arm was exactly that, reluctant. Not an obligation that his grandmother had forced upon him, not a too-eager granddaughter of a friend, not a lady thinking she could change him with her love.

But since he was in the realm of honest truths, it was all because of Diana. Her, specifically. She was a different breed to what he was used to.

An unsettling thought.

He decided that it was best to focus on the winding path that he had purposefully chosen. He told himself that he did it so he could vex her more. These were not well-reputed paths. Oh, they gave many excuses—rare flowers were some sparse art that could constitute enough reason to draw a lady out here. He should know.

“How about this way, My Lady?”

“Is it closer to the carriages?”

“Do not worry, I am not cutting our promenade short.”

“Pity.”

“It would be to be deprived of our banter. I find that I quite enjoy it.”

“You do?”

“Wholeheartedly. Though I feel obliged to warn you.”

The look in his eyes was clear enough. It was too steady and tinged with dark amusement. He didn't have to voice any warning—Diana got the message loud and clear. Her wide, shocked eyes told him as much.

“You assume I am afraid,” she almost stuttered.

“No, My Lady.” His voice dropped in an openly seductive way. “I assume you should be.”

There, this is much better.

James enjoyed the little delay in her step as his words rendered her speechless. He felt less irritated now that he had managed to vex her, unsettle her, and make her uneasy.

But if he was this irritated, why did he guide her here for her sake? To relieve her of the titanic effort of maintaining a strained smile while mingling with the ton, who openly regarded her as if she were a spectacle. Eyes followed her, and gossip was exchanged behind fans as they glided by the Serpentine. Here, they were away from prying eyes.

He proudly noticed that her gait changed. She walked more freely, lighter, and he offered that to her. Only, he was not supposed to make her life easier. Quite the opposite. This experience was supposed to irritate her and irk her. Yet, here he was, going out of his way to make her more at ease.

And what was the reward for his unspoken good deed? To see her relaxed, her body gliding lightly. Her hipsswaying.

That last part was punching holes in his logic.

And this silence... Sure, Richard would know how to comfortably remain silent, show restraint, take the weight in a sure way, and give weight to a well-timed pause.

But James was not Richard. To him, silences were—quite frankly—terrifying. It left others the opportunity to observe him, and James did not appreciate the scrutiny. So, he filled the silences with walls and reinforcements disguised as wit and charm.

Not that she was observing him. She was not. She was supposedly enthralled by the scenery, an excuse James was not eager to believe. He could almost hear her count the minutes before he escorted her back to her haven and away from him.

Not so easily.

“You seem to have your blade sheathed, My Lady.”

She jumped up at the sound of his voice as if she had completely forgotten he was there.

“I am merely wondering if I should be concerned that you know your way so well around these secluded paths, My Lord,” she retorted, still looking ahead, her eyebrow cocked.

“Are you suggesting that I am a reckless rake with no sense of decorum?”

She looked up at him with her most bored expression. “Yes.”

He chuckled. She was nothing if not refreshing.

“You are not like most ladies,” he admitted in a rare bout of honesty.

Her steps faltered, a brief hesitation. For the first time since they started walking, she seemed caught off guard. Her eyes widened just slightly before she narrowed them.

“I am most certainly not.”

There she was! Back in control.

He pushed the boundaries. She took those boundaries and threw them at his face.

Little by little, he gave a little more, promising that this would be the last inch he would give.

Oh, the things he would love to give her.

That thought bypassed all security measures in place to avoid rash decisions. He inhaled sharply at the intrusive thought, and he had to cough a little to hide that momentary loss of control.

Diana didn't seem to notice, and that added salt to injury. There he was, noticing every little thing about her. How a stray strand of hair bounced on her neck, how she closed her eyes when the breeze picked up a little, how delicate her fingers were. And she didn't even notice when his body tensed to the point he was ready to pounce on her.

"Mrs. Bremford." Diana turned to her old chaperone. "I am sure you're tired. Perhaps we should head back."

James barely held back a laugh at her open attempt to cut their promenade short.

"Oh, no, My Lady. I can go on for a while."

I like the old lady. This is truly amusing.

James reveled in Diana's huff. Seeing her go red with barely restrained fury was the highlight of his day. She stomped off as if this would end their walk quicker, and with glee, he followed her.

When he searched for the chaperone, he found her completely enthralled by a bunch of white orchids that bloomed off the path, way back. He looked down at Diana, but it seemed that she hadn't noticed.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

He trembled. He was practically alone with her. He could, of course, slow his pace to allow the chaperone to catch up with them. He could even do the decent thing and let Diana know of the precarious situation they were in.

Decent?

James grinned. He was a lot of things, but decent wasn't his preferred flavor. So, he picked up his pace just a little.

Stealthily, he pulled her closer to him, just a little, just enough that more of her touched him, that the hem of her dress grazed his legs as they walked. He could feel the warmth of her body, the heat radiating off her. Such a pity. He could sense the fire burning underneath her cold exterior. A fire that would remain unkindled as long as she remained unwed.

Suddenly, he resigned himself to the fact that today, now, with her, the walls around his sanity were crumbling. Because a thought struck him so sharply that he felt it in his stomach.

She would never know pleasure.

A woman like Diana—sharp-tongued, clever, burning with barely restrained defiance—was expected to live a life devoid of indulgence simply because Society dictated it.

A man could do as he pleased. He was living proof of that. He could drink and gamble to his heart's content. He could pursue and bed whomever he desired. And all

that with minimal to no consequences.

But her? If she were to remain a spinster, she would never feel that sweet quiver of desire, that unraveling of her body. She would remain untouched.

Unless she's already touched herself.

His mind was outright betraying him today. It brought forth an image of Lady Diana in her bed, in her thin shift, her hands moving between her legs and?—

“Ahem.” He coughed loudly.

Diana looked up with momentary concern.

Oh, she should be concerned.

“Did it turn a bit chilly, My Lord?”

“Quite the opposite, My Lady.”

She frowned in question, but since the answers did not bring forth any excuses to cut this short, she walked on.

James was at war with himself. His thoughts were more winding than the path ahead, with more twists and turns. Someday, some man might come along, whisper sweet words in her ear, pull her closer, and replace her hands with his. He would touch her and promise her things that James knew he could deliver better.

No, he saw her first. He noticed her spark first. If she was to know pleasure, it would be because she chose it. And if she chose it, then, by God, he wanted it to be with him.

“You are lost in thought, My Lord.” Diana’s voice cut through the air, her tone lightly mocking.

James glanced at her, then his lips curled into a slow, knowing smile. The moment was now. If he let the moment pass, it would be lost forever.

“I was simply considering something, My Lady.”

“And what, pray tell, could be so fascinating?”

Chance—or fate—would have it that they were in the darkest, most secluded spot in the whole park. And with no chaperone in sight.

James stopped walking and stepped closer to her. Not as close as he would have liked, but close enough to be felt. For her to notice.

“My mind wandered again to the matter of your unwed state. I applaud your decision and your determination.” He lowered his voice. “But tell me, My Lady, have you considered what you are giving up?”

“You presume I am denying myself anything of importance.”

“I understand. Marriage can mean shackles, and it can be a trap. It also brings...” His voice turned intimate. “... pleasure.”

The moment that word left his lips, James knew that everything changed. This game of theirs changed. It became deeper, something more. There was no turning back now. He didn’t want to go back. He liked it.

“Denying pleasure,” he continued, stepping closer until her back was pressed against the bark of a nearby tree and his frame towered over her. “That is quite the sacrifice.

One that shouldn't be made lightly.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

She lifted her chin and clenched her jaw. She was fighting for control, fighting to expel the thoughts he was pouring into her mind, into her body, into the pit of her stomach.

“Marriage doesn’t guarantee pleasure. The married ladies you have seduced are a testament to that.”

A sharp crack of the whip. James shivered in rapture to see her lose the decorum she clutched onto for dear life. One inch closer was all he offered.

“Ah, I agree, My Lady.” His voice now was a low purr that rumbled in his chest. “But with the right man, pleasure can be the most exhilarating feeling.”

She swallowed. His gaze flickered down, catching the way her pulse jumped at the base of her throat.

“Th-That,” she stammered, “is none of your concern.”

James felt the turning point. The undeniable reality of her truth. It was indeed none of his concern. Then why couldn’t he give up? Why did he fight all his self-imposed rules to give her more than he set out to do? He was standing at the edge. He could step back or fall.

He made his decision.

“But if it were?”

He reached out slowly, deliberately, and traced his knuckles along the underside of her jaw. Not touching, not fully, but enough that she would feel the heat of him.

“I could show you pleasure, My Lady. Real pleasure.” He was whispering now, his breath fanning her face.

Diana’s lips parted. Not a lot, just slightly. Enough for him to lose his sanity, all walls, barriers and lines forgotten and blurred. It was as if he was charming a woman for the first time.

His hand rested on the trunk behind her, and he leaned in, so much so that their breaths mingled. He was breathing her in and could almost taste her. He searched her face for any hint of discomfort. There was none.

She wanted this. And damn his dark, rakish soul, he wanted it too. He wanted it more than anything, and though it made his heart pound, he would take it. Or else he would lose his mind.

And then?—

“Lord Crawford! Lady Diana!”

Reality crashed down on them like a bucket of cold water as they heard the clicking of the chaperone’s shoes on the path.

James cursed softly and jerked back, his jaw clenching.

Damn it.

He took back all the nice thoughts he had of the old woman. She was a menace.

Diana regained her senses quickly and even wrapped her hand around his arm, though he could feel her shaking.

“Ah, Mrs. Bremford, there you are,” she said, her voice trembling.

“I thought I lost you,” Mrs. Bremford sighed, completely oblivious to the monumental moment she had interrupted.

“Well, no one is lost,” Diana assured her as she fixed James with a glare.

It seemed that she finally got what she wished for because the walk was cut short after that and James was in no position to keep her from running away from him.

As they headed back to her carriage, James mulled over what had happened. Fate had given him a choice once more. He could apologize for going too far, for pushing too hard, but he wouldn't. He didn't want to. He wanted her, her shallow breaths, the heat of her body. He wanted her no matter how infuriating she was, no matter how stubbornly she fought him at every turn. If anything, that only made his need worse.

He gave her his hand as she made to climb into her carriage. He pulled her hand to his lips, forcing her to lean toward him.

With his breath on her skin still, his hooded eyes locked onto hers, he murmured, “The offer still stands, My Lady.”

## CHAPTER 8

### Cold Chamomile Tea

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Diana had brushed her hair too many times. She slipped into her shifts, lay on the soft mattress, and blew out the candles. All in all, she had performed her nighttime routine, which had never failed to lull her into sleep. And yet she was still wide awake.

She had asked for a warm chamomile tea and then took her favorite book with her to bed. The warm blend tasted bitter, and her favorite words twirled around, making no sense. And she knew exactly why.

Him.

She couldn't sleep because she was used to sleeping alone and she was no longer alone in the darkness. Hewas there with her—although not in body—in her bedroom, in her bed. It didn't matter.

She could hear his voice, that dangerous purr. She could feel his breath on her face. And worst of all, she could still hearandfeel his words.

“I could show you pleasure, My Lady. Real pleasure.”

She jumped out of bed faster than she would if it was on fire. The bed wasn't.Shewas.

Days had passed. Days since she was backed up against that tree, its bark digging into her back. And somehow, she never left. Every time she was left alone, her mind would wander, and she would find herself back there. With him so close, his hand trapping her in place, his other hand touching her.

Almost touching her.

That was the thing, wasn't it? He still hadn't touched her. Not skin on skin, not without the gloves and the layers. Diana used to find the fact that they couldn't be out without all those restrictions on their appearances stifling. But perhaps there was some merit to them. Because if his gloved touch nearly unraveled her, an actual touch would ruin her.

Get a hold of yourself!

She could not. It was as if there was a quiet lake inside her. A lake filled to the brim with want and desire, and she had done an amazing job of building a dam around it. A brilliant dam made of indifference and distance, of books and threads, of measured control and perfect composure.

And then he came along with his expressive blue eyes and his witty remarks, his massive body and his devilish smirk, and with one flick of his fingers, the dam burst out, pouring unknown feelings into her, making her ache.

This is his fault.

Diana picked an emotion out of the dangerous soup that was boiling in her heart and mind. And she chose anger. Yes, she was angry that she allowed him to manipulate her like that. She was not—would be not—one of the foolish ladies who let themselves be carried away by his polished charm.

Was she not?

“Argh!” Diana allowed herself one moment of wild emotion.

Then, she sighed and sat back on the bed. Whatever had happened, it mattered not.

Whether he was manipulating her or truly interested in her was not important. The thing she needed to focus on was that whatever it was, whatever it did, it unveiled something within her. It unleashed a deep desire and begged a question she couldn't ignore.

Why should she forsake pleasure because she rejected the notion of marriage? It wasn't fair just because she was a woman, she was to remain untouched simply because she didn't want to get married. Men like Lord Crawford could give into their desires and flaunt their rakish ways, but she had to eternally remain the picture of piety.

Never before did she question that cruel, unjust rule of Society. She simply accepted it. But now the seed was planted. The thing she chose to ignore was demanding attention.

Diana let her hand travel up her arm. Light, like a teasing feather touch. Nothing more. But there was a fleeting moment when her eyes fluttered shut and it was him touching her. The effect was so devastating that she moaned softly into the darkness. The sound woke her up, and she grabbed her head with both hands, shaking it as if she could empty it of such thoughts.

Once more, she climbed out of bed and went to the window, trying to distract herself from a path she didn't dare tread. Did she?

Society dictated that her only purpose in life was to marry and bear children, and there she was, defying that notion already. What were a few more rules to be bent? If she were to remain unmarried, that didn't mean she needed to remain untouched, did it? And who better to do that with than him?

Before madness overtook her, she took a deep breath and rationalized as calmly as her shaking body allowed. A list. She could create a sensible list and mull over this

with a level head.

Yes, that is the best idea.

Lord Crawford was perfect for the job. He had the experience, the audacity to propose it himself, and the emotional incapacity to demand anything more. He would perform admirably, deliver what he advertised, and then move on to the next conquest, with no attachments and no rash ideas of marriage. He would be discreet and efficient.

Oh, so efficient.

He was already worming his way into her head and he hadn't even touched her. Yet.

If she were to make that reckless, wild decision, if she were to take a step down that irrevocable path, she somehow knew that he would take her to the edge and bring her back safely. She could allow him to show her pleasure, and then they would go on their way, having shared a fun memory.

A perfectly laid out plan!

Diana was finally able to sleep.

The Hexters' ball was one of the most extravagant events of the Season, and no one was missing that. Diana was no exception. She was to be escorted by Herbert, since Stephen and Elizabeth had stayed behind.

“Does this mean you forgive me?” Herbert asked and patted the hand she had on his arm.

“It means there was no one else available.” Diana glared at him.

“How about your precious Elizabeth?”

“Are you seriously jealous of your sister-in-law?”

“You seem to like her more than me.”

“An affection she has won by—I don't know—by her constant care not to humiliate me in public.”

Herbert smiled and kissed her cheek. He could be quite charming if he so wished.

Diana smiled back. She could not stay mad at him for too long. Plus, she had more pressing matters at hand.

She seemed determined and composed, that same posture she had perfected after years of training and observation. On the outside, she was the same Lady Diana

everyone knew. An impenetrable castle of indifference to all the whispers and murmurs around her.

Especially now that she found herself out of the shadows where she usually hid.

She mingled with her hand wrapped around Herbert's arm. But she was a fraud. Inside, she was anything but indifferent. She wasn't there to enjoy the full orchestra Lady Hexter had brought from France solely for the ball. She wasn't there to admire the acrobats that were dancing and swinging over the guests' heads. Not even the mountain of chocolate truffles in the banquet hall.

No. She was a woman on a mission. She had a plan to set in motion. She had made a decision, and she was ready to act on it. But to do that, she needed to find him. He was an integral part of the said plan. By Jove, he was the one who initiated the whole thing.

But where was he?

Diana almost swore between clenched teeth.

It figured. The man was an insufferable flirt, trying her, testing the limits again and again, and now that she was finally crossing them, he was nowhere to be seen.

A rotten suspicion crept up her spine under her lilac dress. What if this was just a trick? He could have led her exactly where he wanted her to be, with his charm and his promises, his dark looks, and that devious smirk. All the perfect making of a trap that she willingly walked into. Only to mock her in the end.

Was this all a lie?

She had the gnawing feeling that she was the butt of a joke. That this was all nothing

but an exercise in manipulation in which he excelled and she failed.

“Good evening, Lady Diana.”

Her back went rigid. He was there. With that annoyingly perfect timing that was most likely meant to throw her off.

“It sure was.” She turned around slowly.

He was looking at her with fascination.

“Was? I do not dare think I am the reason for that. No, it can’t be.” He seemed unfazed by her clipped answer. “Luckily, I am here to improve your mood.”

The look on his face was all fake politeness, and Diana was ready to unmask him in front of the swooning ladies.

“Lord Crawford!” Herbert was annoyingly giddy. He initiated a discussion with gusto. Diana guessed that it was trivial, judging by the way Lord Crawford’s attention was solely focused on her. He was still playing that game, that same game.

“Lady Diana.” Lord Hexter, their host’s eldest son, materialized before her. “May I ask for your first dance?”

He had been one of her visitors and the only one she did not find completely atrocious. She was ready to turn him down with a smile when she found her hand swallowed in a big, hot palm.

“I am afraid, Lord Hexter”—Lord Crawford was already pulling her to the dance floor—“Lady Diana has promised her first dance to me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Despite the loud music, his words carried far and wide, and everyone was now looking at them as he guided her through the other couples.

“Why did you do that?” she hissed.

“To spare you the effort of turning him down, of course.”

“And how, pray tell, did you surmise that I had no intention of dancing with him?”

He smirked and pulled her closer. He was a good, elegant dancer. That caught her unawares, seeing as his body was... big. But he seemed to be in control of it as well.

“How did I know you wouldn’t be caught dead with a bore like Hexter? It is simple. I was right there.”

“You are insufferable,” she said, but her words lacked that bite.

He said nothing, just led her through the dance elegantly and gracefully. His grip on her was firm but gentle, and while it had been years since she last danced, she let go in his arms.

“So, tell me, My Lady.”

He didn’t have to finish that sentence. She knew exactly what he was going to say. It was in the sensual way his word coiled around her, the way the word ‘my’ rolled off his tongue.

Diana stumbled, but he caught her graciously and kept her steady.

“I see you have been thinking about my proposal.”

She was tempted to deny it and not give him the satisfaction. But she also knew it was fruitless. She could protest all night, whip him with all her wit, and spit some poison for good measure. But he would still know. So, she did the next best thing.

“Yes, I have reached a decision.”

“Oh, I knew you would.” His voice was so smooth.

“You seem overconfident, My Lord.”

“It is simply a matter of how things will unfold.” His eyes never left hers. “I always get what I want.”

Diana’s jaw clenched at his taunting smugness. But judging from the way he pressed closer, so dark and intense, the way his eyes traced her lips, he knew she was never going to deny him. She knew it too.

“It seems that you are very satisfied with yourself,” she said, unconvincingly annoyed.

“Speaking of satisfaction, My Lady...”

His hand slid around her waist, pulling her one fraction closer. Diana gasped.

“Oh, there it is. The answer I was waiting for,” he murmured, his voice rough.

There were no edges anymore. They had blurred long ago, and she wasn’t going to

agonize over what-ifs. All that mattered was that she had a plan she wanted to put in motion. She had a need, a hunger that wouldn't be sated by gloved touches and near kisses.

"Meet me at the library balcony," she said as she bowed when the dance ended.

Diana walked away briskly, praying that she didn't faint as she did. The match was thrown, and she wouldn't be surprised if she looked back and found the ballroom in flames.

Diana prided herself on being a brave woman. She was a fierce equestrian, and she didn't scream at the sight of a bug. She wasn't afraid of heights or tight spaces. But on this small balcony, she was both dizzy and breathless. And she couldn't tell if it was because of the anticipation of him coming or the dread of him not.

She looked at the small, enameled glass door for the millionth time, willing it to open and begging it to stay closed at the same time. The fear that they might get caught didn't even get the chance to enter her wide roster of emotions.

Diana decided to focus on the dark gardens below. She knew this balcony well. As a young girl, she used to get lost in the estate and end up out here. It used to take everyone hours to find her. The Hexters had completely forgotten that they even had a library.

She chuckled at the thought and was grateful that her mind offered some relief at that moment, because she was going crazy. She could finally breathe and?—

The glass door creaked. She heard booted steps. Felt his body behind her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“I am here, My Lady,” he whispered.

“You came.” She turned around slowly, thankful that he had kept some distance between them.

“There was no stopping me.”

It was true. As he stood a few inches away from her, he looked like an unstoppable force of nature. Even in the civilized restrictions they were meant to dwell, he emerged as an apex predator. Though this time, she didn’t feel like a poor prey. He was looking at her as if she were his sustenance.

He wasn’t just hungry for her. He was aching for her.

“So, My Lady, tell me, what do you need?”

Her breath hitched. He had asked her to utter her desires. To speak them out loud. To shamelessly admit what she craved.

“If you do not tell me what you want, what you need, I can’t give it to you,” he said as he drew closer.

You, she wanted to scream. But she wasn’t ready to relent this easily.

She gathered the remnants of her self-control and lifted her chin. “There has to be terms. Rules.”

“Of course,” he taunted.

When he pushed her like that, she sparked. It was as if they were powder and fire.

“I want to know pleasure.” She looked him right in the eye.

His jaw twitched. He took one last step and closed the distance between them.

“But,” she continued, making him stop. “Our...lessonsare to last for the five promenades.”

“Five promenades? You’d put a time limit on passion?”

“I am sure a skilled teacher such as yourself will manage.”

His eyes flicked to her lips before meeting hers again. The challenge was accepted. Her fate was sealed. He was upon her now, latched on, and he wasn’t going to let go.

He leaned, his hands resting on the rail, trapping her. He was not touching her, not yet, and somehow that absence made everything more intense.

He tilted his head as he inhaled her scent.

“I will agree to your terms, My Lady.” His breath was hot against her cheeks. “But...” Now, he was blowing on her neck. “I need to you ask properly.”

Diana almost didn’t hear his demand, caught in the steamy cocoon he had encased her in. Her mind rushed to keep up, and she was proud she managed to talk.

“I... I thought I just did.”

“Ah, My Lady,” he said as he studied her face. “You said you want to know pleasure.”

“I do.”

“Say what you really want,” he ordered.

That tone made her heart skip a beat. It was unrefined, raw, primal. It made her skin crawl with fear and something deeper, something darker, something rooted in the core of her being.

She knew the answer he was seeking.

“I want...” she muttered.

“Come on, say it,” he coaxed, his breath tickling her ear.

“I want...” She licked her lips.

“Say it, Diana.”

Her name on his lips undid her.

“I want you.”

His mouth was on hers the moment that last, fateful word left her lips. She broke, and now he was broken too. She could tell from the way he consumed her. It was hard and relentless, a kiss meant to shatter and ruin.

His whole body was vibrating with need. One hand found her waist, and the other cradled her face both reverently and firmly. He pressed her body to his, forcing her to feel exactly what she was doing to him. She was his now. She gave him permission to own her, and he was claiming her.

She gasped, but he wasn't going to give her time to breathe. He deepened the kiss, tasting her, exploring her. It was a kiss meant to kill her softly, slowly, irrevocably. She was sure she would never recover from the softness of his lips, the tenderness of his tongue, the warmth of his arms, the firmness of his body.

If she was going to die, she was going to do so gloriously. She was going to enjoy this—deeply, truly. She let go. She got lost in the moment and leaned in to give him more access, her hands curling in the fabric of his coat. Heat coiled in the pit of her stomach and rushed through her veins as she kissed him back.

Dear Lord, she kissed him back.

A sound feral and savage rumbled in his chest as he pulled back and broke the kiss. His chest was heaving, his jaw was tense, and his hands were unsteady. His eyes met hers, and she knew that she had made a delicious, forbidden, dangerous mistake.

Oh God. What did I do?

## CHAPTER 9

### Spilled Tea

Throughout the years, James had found himself waking up in various states. Tangled between the sheets with a woman. In his carriage just outside his home. In the middle of a gambling hall still holding cards. And of course, with a punishing headache and upset stomach from drinking too much. But this? This was new.

Never had he woken up restless. Every day was a new day no matter what had happened the night before. He never dwelled on a moment or lingered on a person. Only this time, he was still hung up on exactly that. What had happened the night before.

He could still taste her. He could feel the heat of her. He was still fixated on how small she felt in his arms and yet so perfect. How small but strong, fragile yet firm. A contradiction that intrigued him. How bravely and yet timidly she had agreed to his game. How her lips felt on his. How she kissed him back.

Oh, when she kissed him back...

He felt the moment, the exact second any doubts she had flickered and died. Only to be replaced with something more dangerous.

Sure, James expected uncertainty, but he had confidence in his skills. He could easily replace any reservation with at least curiosity. What he hadn't expected was the yearning.

He groaned in the stillness of his room at the thought. He had barely held himself back when she surrendered to the sheer sensation of the kiss. If he hadn't, he would have shown her the whole worth of the lessons in a matter of minutes. Which would have made the game so much... less.

And James? James was determined to savor this. Every little thing, every little moment of it.

"Oh, little wallflower. You learn fast." He smiled to himself. "You'll make such a good student."

He chuckled. He had four promenades to teach her the true meaning of pleasure. A true challenge. But when had he ever backed away from a challenge, especially one so delectable?

He straightened his waistcoat and continued getting ready for breakfast. He was to meet with her that day, and he was nothing if not a dutiful tutor. Yet, his mind demanded that he remember one more thing from last night. The one thing he avoided to think about.

He could still hear her say, "I want you." It wasn't the first time that a woman breathlessly told him that. It wasn't the 'want' part. Women always wanted him the moment they saw him. They would show him their desire with flushed cheeks and shameless looks.

Yes, he knew want well.

It was the 'you' part. The way she said it, the fact that he knew it was not a hollow word. Like there was no other option. Only him. And why did that make his stomach tighten? Why did that not make his pride flare? And why was fear crawling up his spine?

You, she had said. Therealhim.

"James?"

His grandmother's voice brought him back to her little sanctuary, away from a certain balcony on which he still lingered even during breakfast. He could tell that his grandmother knew that his mind was wandering, and she was wondering where he was off to.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

He gave her that boyish smile that got him lemon drops and sweets when he was a boy.

“So”—Euphemia slipped into the role of an interrogator—“how was the Hexters’ event last night?”

Satisfying, James was tempted to admit. Lady Diana asked me to show her pleasure, and I gladly agreed. All in all, it was a great evening.

But he decided to spare his grandmother a possible heartache. And spare himself a long scolding.

“You know the Hexters. They like to show off,” he said offhand.

“They got money and no idea what to do with it. Maybe they lack... refinement, but ever since their unassuming son took over, their estate has expanded. He has a knack for business, and his wife is happy to spend his money.”

“It amazes me, Grandmother, how you are always so well-informed even though you are confined in the house. You should accompany me next time.”

“Then I would have a firsthand account of your conduct.”

“You know me. I conduct myself with dignity, upholding our family name.”

“Ah, dignity. The first word people use when they talk about you, I am sure.”

“That is fairly unkind, dear grandmother.”

“But accurate.”

James cocked an eyebrow. He didn’t have to look far to see who he got his attitude from. He filled his cup with more coffee, since he had to admit that although he was not drunk, he had a hard time sleeping.

“Now, tell me. Did you meet Lady Diana?”

He almost choked on his coffee. His grandmother was for sure a menace. He looked upon her, the frail old woman petting her cats. One could mistake her for a fool, and that would make him the fool in her stead. James was smarter than that.

“Grandmother, if I didn’t know you any better, I would think you are prying.”

“I am prying.”

“So, all of this is not a thoughtful inquiry about my well-being?” James pretended to be hurt.

Euphemia looked at him over her teacup. “Your being has constantly been well, boy. I am always more worried about the well-being of the people around you.”

James couldn’t help but laugh and put his hand over his heart as if her words truly hurt him.

“I am sure you will survive.” His grandmother waved him off like a spoiled child.

“I do feel the need to warn you, Grandmother.” The look in his eyes was playful but also serious. “Keep prying, and I might indulge your curiosity. It doesn’t mean that

you will like what you will hear.”

Euphemia gaped at him and perhaps blushed. “Anyway, Lady Diana...?”

“I did meet her,” James proceeded carefully. “She was accompanied by her brother. We had to discuss some business venture.”

“Did you dance with her?”

“It was only polite to do so.”

“And you are one for propriety, right? Especially when there is something to gain?”

“Grandmother, you wound me.” James smiled. “You have no regard for my virtues.”

“But I can always rely on your vices.”

James chuckled at that.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Euphemia Bolton had her way of getting you to reevaluate your life choices while showing you immense love. James made sure he always appreciated the love she had showered him with. It was with love that he regarded her as she poured her millionth cup of tea.

“I don’t think I have met the girl,” she continued. “I knew her mother. A beautiful woman, she was.”

His grandmother was a shrewd one. Either he admitted Diana was beautiful or not. Either way, she would have what she needed.

“I can’t say whether her mother was beautiful or not.” He took a sip of his coffee.

Euphemia narrowed her eyes in a way that said, “Don’t toy with me, boy.”

James shook his head. “But,” he relented, “if I were to judge from her daughter’s looks, it’d be fair to say that she must have been lovely.”

“Lovely? What an interesting choice of words.”

James decided that the best course of action was to drink more of his coffee. He wasn’t ready to ask his grandmother what exactly piqued her curiosity. It would only entangle him and incriminate him further.

“And you are going to do business with her brother. How interesting, indeed.”

“Grandmother,” he simply said with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, please, my handsome boy. You know I only wish to see you happy. Married, with a family.”

He was ready to tease her when the door opened and his father walked in. James’s back stiffened, and his smile dropped. It felt like an invasion to have him here.

This had always been their moment, the little quirky breakfast that the two of them had here. Only the two of them, he and his grandmother. In the house they lived in, a house he had to manage so young along with the rest of his duties. Now, his father was here and was getting in the way all the time, claiming everything that was his.

“Good morning, Mother.” Solomon kissed Euphemia’s cheek.

James watched as the old woman’s eyes lit up. This was her only son, after all. He was absent, and now he was back. Who could blame the old woman?

“James.” Solomon nodded, seeming at a loss.

James didn’t move, eyeing him over his coffee cup.

“Ah, you came at the perfect moment,” Euphemia chimed in.

Not at all, James wanted to protest, and it showed on his face. Solomon had the decency to refrain from trying to inject himself into their conversation.

“James was telling me about last night’s ball. Because I have it on good authority that he only danced with one lady all night.”

James clenched his jaw. The mirth was gone. He had really hoped to pretend that his father was not there till he finished his coffee and left.

“Do you know of Lady Diana, Solomon? She is the sister of the Duke of Westall, and her eldest sister is the Duchess of Seymour.”

“I can’t say I do.” Solomon was careful to avoid James’s gaze.

Euphemia was no fool. Her old bones must have felt the chill between the two men, but she was on a mission. If she desired to see James married, then she desired even more to see her son and grandson mending their broken relationship.

“Our James”—Euphemia was glad to include him, of course—“bid at an auction on five promenades with her.”

Solomon shot his son a dark look. James returned it tenfold. The sunlight filtering through the windows was making a futile attempt to warm their cold looks.

“I am not surprised you don’t know of her. She is a rather reserved lady.” Euphemia was happy to keep the conversation going. “Understandable, of course, after what happened to her. If I was so publicly humiliated, I’d want to make myself invisible.”

“Grandmother!”

It was too late, though.

“Humiliated?” Solomon’s tone was cold.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“The poor girl saw the man she was supposed to marry confess his love to another. The whole ton was present. I can only imagine the mortification and the heartbreak she must have been through.”

Solomon’s eyes snapped to James’s. A true collision. The room grew smaller and smaller.

“A woman who has already been abandoned,” Solomon said coldly. “Not exactly a promising prospect, is she?”

“Funny,” James retorted in a way that conveyed that he found nothing in their conversation amusing. “You speak as if I ever asked for your opinion on this matter. Onanymatter.”

“I am merely stating the obvious. Why would you involve yourself with a woman who has a reputation? Even for a man of your... character, that is a bit too much.”

James’s pulse quickened, but his expression remained perfectly composed. He tilted his head slightly, a lazy smile curling at the edges of his mouth.

“And here I thought experience might have taught you not to judge a person by what Society thinks of them.”

The words fell in the space between them like a boulder that completely broke Solomon’s composure. Mainly because they were true, and everyone in the room knew that.

His eyes widened, and he had to gulp his tea the same way he would swallow poison. He swiftly recovered, though.

“I merely meant that there must have been a reason that she was rejected and abandoned.”

Even Euphemia was shocked to hear those words.

James slowly set his cup on the table and dipped his chin in a way that made him look like a predator ready to attack. “Interesting. Some might say you are an authority on abandoning one’s responsibilities.”

Solomon’s fingers tightened ever so slightly around his teacup, the fine porcelain straining under the pressure.

James watched with the same hard look as his father’s jaw twitched and his shoulders stiffened.

“Boys,” Euphemia cut in. “It’s such a lovely day to spoil it with harsh words over lukewarm tea.”

She rang for more tea, but James was already up.

“Are you leaving, my sweet boy?”

James buttoned up his coat, breathing deeply to remind himself that his grandmother was not the one to blame. She was merely trying to mend the unmendable.

“Yes, Grandmother. I am expected.”

“Expected?”

“Ah, yes. You see, I committed to five promenades with Lady Diana.”

He adjusted the cufflinks on his shirt and threw one last look at his father. A look that was a cross between dismissal and something far colder.

“And I never run away from my commitments.”

## CHAPTER 10

### Chinese Magnolia

Diana had expected that he would call on her today. Just not this way. The moment the butler announced him, she shifted nervously. And then he came into the room and simply said, “Good morning, Lady Diana.”

She frowned. His voice was polite. Nothing more. No teasing, no wicked gleam in his eyes. Sure, they were in the drawing room of her brother’s house, and Elizabeth was there. Still...

“Good morning, Lord Crawford. You seem well-rested,” she returned, trying to elicit a reaction.

“Uh... It was a quiet night.”

Diana smiled, though she was ready to get up and check his pulse. Was this the same man who had kissed her senseless? Was this the man who had kept her up at night?

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

Because she hadn't slept. Simple as that. There was no way she would sleep. It was as if he was in her room, sitting on the edge of her bed, patiently waiting for her with that infuriating smirk on his lips to acknowledge what he had done. What they had done.

"I am glad that you had such a quiet night," she said sarcastically.

"The day is splendid."

To kill you, probably.

Now, he was straight-up ignoring everything she said. This day couldn't be worse.

"Is it?"

Diana did nothing to hide her irritation. Even Elizabeth raised her head at her tone.

James was still looking at his still-filled cup of tea. Then, he turned to Diana and looked at her absentmindedly. As if he was going through a list of chores he needed to do, and being here was just a chore he needed to tick so he could move on.

"How about we promenade in Hyde Park, My Lady?"

"Why not?"

And that's how Diana found herself walking alongside a distant James. Of all the things she had expected from their second promenade—wicked teasing, smug

satisfaction, another lesson in temptation—this was not it. Not after that kiss.

God! That kiss. That kiss was forever imprinted on her lips, her body, her very soul. He hadn't kissed her. He had devoured her like that was his only purpose in life.

And the way he stopped, with barely hinged restraint... His groan was a predator's warning. His control was a taut, dangerous thing. Yet, she could only think of one thing. He had more to give. More than that burning, branding, scorching kiss. And she wanted it all.

But now she was doubting that it had happened at all and that it wasn't all a figment of her imagination. The man who held her like that last night couldn't be this cold man walking beside her, couldn't have unenthusiastically placed his palm on the hand she had wrapped around his arm. It was as if he was escorting a dowager rather than a woman he had kissed senseless the night before.

No, this won't do. It simply won't do.

"I am wondering," she began, breaking an unbearably boring silence.

"Hm." He barely listened.

Diana was ready to strike him with her parasol—an act that would surely attract more looks. And perhaps give her chaperone a heart attack.

"Well, who knew my bonehead of a brother was right, after all."

That caught this attention. He finally looked at her as if she was there, not an accessory on his arm.

"Right about what, My Lady?"

“That one should have all his agreements in writing.”

“I am sure that is prudent,” he acknowledged. “Though there are some agreements that are better kept off the books.”

“To give either party the opportunity to back out, My Lord?”

James smirked, slow and with that rehearsed wariness that wouldn’t have the same impact if Diana hadn’t seen his mask crack.

“To give either party the opportunity to... amend the terms, My Lady.”

Diana arched an eyebrow and clenched her jaw. She wasn’t sure what vexed her more, the fake way he was toying with her or the fact that he was trying to weasel his way out of their agreement.

“A safeguard for those who lack the fortitude to see their commitments through, perhaps, My Lord?”

For a moment, it seemed like he would let her remark slide. Let her win. But then, just as she started to wonder if she had truly backed him into a corner, he let out a slow, deliberate breath and turned to her.

“Careful, My Lady. One might think you are challenging me.”

He has a pulse, after all.

Diana decided it's time to see if this was going somewhere. She decided not to take his advice and be the exact opposite of careful.

"I am starting to think that you were right, My Lord," she challenged.

"That is rare of you to admit."

"You did say that gossip was nothing if not exaggerated. It seems that it applies to you, too."

James scowled and shot her a dark look. He wasn't stupid. He knew what she was alluding to. For good measure, though, she found it imperative to drive her point home.

She gave him a saccharine smile, so overly sweet that he was already bracing for the sharp sting of her insult.

"Maybe the tales of your reputation had been embellished. Inflated." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Or your expertise is more... theoretical."

He straightened to his full height, looking taller, more intimidating. His eyes darkened, and he regarded her like a hunter debating whether he should devour his kill whole now or save some of it for later.

Then, he leaned in slowly. Painfully slow. The perfectly trimmed pathways of Hyde

Park, the promenading lords and ladies, and even her chaperone faded into the background. Their existence was blurred into insignificance as long as he looked at her like that.

“Tell me, Diana,” he almost growled. “Did last night feel theoretical to you?”

No!

Diana simply gave up. There was nothing theoretical about him. He was real, pulsing and... practical. Hearing him growl like that, she realized that maybe she bit more than she could chew. She looked at him, all challenge lost.

“Welcome to our second promenade, My Lord.” She blushed.

He didn’t argue. He knew exactly what she was talking about and wouldn’t even waste his breath on denying it.

“And now that I am here? What should we do about it, My Lady?”

“You are asking me? It’s a good thing I’m not paying for your services, My Lord. Your reputation suggested I would be receiving far better guidance. Should I reconsider my investment?”

He laughed at that.

Diana felt a surge of pride rushing through her. It seemed easy to make him lose control like he almost did last night. But to make him laugh? To make him truly laugh? That was rare.

“I was merely trying to get an answer out of you,” he said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Ah, so you fancy yourself a Socrates, then? I thought he was executed for being an unbearable nuisance.”

“Not before he changed the world with his words. Will you have me drink hemlock before I can share my wisdom with you?”

“I wouldn’t dream about it, My Lord. I prefer my philosophers alive. Although if we are comparing you to philosophers, then I’d have to admit that you are closer to Epicurus than Socrates.”

“I see. Is it because he sought pleasure?”

Diana’s jaw dropped. Of all the things she expected when she weaved that analogy, him getting the butt of the joke with such ease was not one of them.

“The lady thought that I was an uneducated rake.” He raised an eyebrow at her.

Diana schooled her expression to mask her surprise and tilted her head with interest.

“I must admit that I find it refreshing that you read.”

“You unsheathed your sword again, My Lady.” James pretended he was wounded.

“I am sure you will survive. Epicureans are quite resilient, after all.”

“I do not identify myself as one, though.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

She raised an eyebrow. “I must admit that I am intrigued. Which philosopher speaks to you more, My Lord?”

“Judging by the times I have read *Meditations*, I must admit that Marcus Aurelius is the one I admire most.”

Diana’s eyes widened, and she faltered for a second. *Meditations*. Her favorite book.

He caught it, her disbelief, ever watching every little change in her face and body. “I see that you approve.”

“I do.”

“You seem surprised, My Lady.”

“Let’s say that I am reevaluating some assumptions I had made hastily.”

His eyes darkened, and his smirk widened. “Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.”

*Machiavelli*. He was quoting *Machiavelli* to her, and he managed to make it sound so debauched and wickedly alluring.

“Whereas I...” He was relentless, not letting her catch her breath. “... as you may have noticed, I am not the least surprised to find you so well-versed in philosophy.”

“I feel as if I am obliged to say thank you.”

Diana realized exactly what he just explained to her. He considered her deep knowledge of philosophy a given.

“You’re welcome, My Lady.”

“I gather, then, that you actually studied while in university.”

“Would it ruin the carefully cultivated air of mystery I’ve worked so hard to maintain if I told you I was the captain of Pop? And later, a rather infamous presence at the Oxford Union?”

Diana blinked. “Infamous? What a recurrent theme for you, My Lord.”

“Let’s say my opponents did not leave debates unscathed. Not all wounds are of the flesh, My Lady.”

The way he said ‘flesh’ awakened hers. Their philosophical banter, the way he overturned the poor opinion she had of him without being insulted, and the way he elevated her by not being surprised that she was well-read did things to her that she struggled to control.

“So, you were a formidable debater then, My Lord.”

“A skill that your wit is putting to the test.”

Calling her beautiful or any other of those nonsensical compliments would mean nothing to her. But this man knew exactly what she needed to hear. His praise of her wits made her heart skip a beat and her stomach flutter.

Diana glanced up at him, the blue of his eyes darker than before. Her gaze flicked—too quickly—to his lips before she realized what she was doing and looked

away. But it was too late. He had seen it. And worse, he knew.

“Oh, Lady Diana, what a waste it would be not to see the Chinese magnolia in bloom,” he said far too loudly.

What?

Diana almost lost her balance at the absurdity of his comment. What did Chinese magnolias have anything to do with?—

“A Chinese magnolia, you say, My Lord?” Mrs. Bremford, her chaperone, piped up. “I have never seen one.”

Oh, he is an absolute scoundrel.

Diana slightly shook her head as she squinted at him. He shrugged with a devious smile as he turned to the old woman.

“That is a loss that must be remedied.” James used all his polished charm on the unsuspecting maid. “It is a rare beauty. And it is said that its scent surpasses that of the most intoxicating roses.”

Mrs. Bremford’s eyes shone with excitement. Diana was ready to applaud him for his performance, but he was not done yet.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Alas, I am afraid I do not remember its exact location.”

He dashed the old woman’s hopes, only to revive them again.

“I do know it is somewhere near that old gazebo.” He pointed at a small marble ledge. “But the trees are so thick that it would take some time for the three of us to cover the ground in time. I promise that next time?—”

“I can go this way,” Mrs. Bremford offered promptly, “and you can go around the gazebo, and we will alert each other when we locate it.”

“What an excellent idea!” James beamed. “How haven’t I thought about it?”

He had barely finished his sentence when the old woman walked away from them at a speed admirable for her age.

“Is there at least a Chinese magnolia?” Diana scolded as he pulled her quite indecently to the gazebo.

“Do you think me so cruel?” he murmured as he guided her away from prying eyes.

“Yes.”

He looked upon her with something that bordered on amusement and dark desire, and she completely forgot what she was scolding him about.

“Now, my eager student, where were we?”

She barely had time to process what he said when his lips descended on hers.

Diana was lost. Utterly, irrevocably lost.

She gasped against his mouth, and he took full advantage, deepening the kiss with a hunger that nearly made her knees buckle. His tongue slid into her mouth, caressing hers in a slow, tantalizing rhythm meant to unravel her. And it did.

Diana lost command of her body as she clutched at his coat in despair, fighting to keep her balance and not float away. She moved her lips boldly against his, coaxing a deep groan from him. One that spread fire through her body.

James wrapped both hands around her waist and pulled her flush against him. Then, he broke the kiss. Diana was ready to protest, her whole being cold at the loss of his lips, but he was quick to bring back the heat.

He kissed down her jaw while one hand explored her side. He breathed over the sensitive skin of her neck, and she gasped.

“Those little sounds you make, Diana,” he groaned.

He pressed her against the cold marble of the gazebo, letting her feel his full length, the hard muscles rippling under the trappings of his clothes.

“James,” she panted.

A groan rumbled in his chest when his name was uttered by the lips that were swollen from his kiss. He placed an open-mouthed kiss over the pulse point in her neck only to feel it flutter.

His mouth lingered there, savoring the wild rhythm beneath her skin. His lips trailed

lower, hot and deliberate, pressing against the hollow of her throat, before moving right where her shoulder met her neck and he bit softly.

“Oh God!” she gasped.

His hands glided from her waist to her ribs, slow and measured. His touch burned through the fabric of her gown, setting fire to nerves she never knew existed. His thumb grazed the underside of her breast, just a whisper of sensation, yet she felt it everywhere and shivered.

“Should I stop, Diana?” He silently begged her to say no.

She shook her head frantically.

Diana didn’t know what she was agreeing to, but she would rather die and be buried under the Chinese magnolia than give up the bliss she was lost in. She arched into his touch, his body trapping and freeing her.

“Such a fast learner, indeed,” he breathed against her sensitive skin.

His fingers slid up, cupping her breasts. Diana lost all command of her body while feeling fully aware of it. James groaned and tried the weight of her breasts in his palm, kneading softly while his tongue tasted her neck.

“James!” She was trembling now.

“That’s it, Diana. Feel this.”

His touch was slow, deliberate, yet hungry. Then, he rolled his thumb over her erect nipple. Her head fell backward, and a whimper escaped her lips. It barely left her mouth before he captured it with his own.

James kissed her in a slow, languid, lazy way in sync with his fingers, which were massaging her breasts. Over the fabric, which did nothing to cool the heat of his touch, he ran a persistent thumb over her aching nipple coaxingly.

“Oh, I...” she whispered against his lips, her breath mingling with his.

He chuckled, his other hand splayed on the small of her back as he pulled her against him. Diana felt his ardor and was ready to lose her mind. Only to have it emptied by a simple flick of his thumb.

“You learn so beautifully, My Lady,” he murmured between kisses, not stopping until she was trembling in his arms.

“Lady Diana! Lord Crawford! I found it!” Mrs. Bremford’s voice called.

Diana panicked, but James held her firmly against him and placed a long, languorous kiss on her lips.

“Pity,” he said with a dark smirk as he straightened her dress. “I was ready to begin my favorite lesson.”

Diana had never felt so eager to further her education.

## CHAPTER 11

### Business Plan

Two days. Two days since they made the cold marble of the gazebo almost catch fire. Two days since he had kissed her until she trembled, two days since he had touched her until her knees gave out.

Of all the things he wanted to do those two days, being Lord Crawford was not one of them. He wanted to be James, to hear her gasp his name like a plea. He wanted to teach her how to sway with his touch, how to enjoy the pleasure he can bring her.

Instead, he had to take care of things that held no appeal and perform duties that were not at all pleasant. Luckily, his next meeting was not that much of a burden.

James had a very low tolerance for fools and was glad to admit that Herbert Wilkins was not one. That was the main reason he decided to take the man up on his offer to start a new business. It was refreshing to see a man who didn't waste his pocket money but wished to make something of his own.

So, when he agreed to meet him at his bachelor lodgings, James expected whiskey and cigars and some manly talk over economy, politics, and women.

The last thing he was expecting was her.

The moment he stepped into the townhouse, his attention was immediately drawn to her. The rest of the house was as he expected it to be—the lodgings of an eternal bachelor, all masculine lines and empty spaces. Yet, her presence filled the room in a soft, light way.

She was sitting in a comfortable armchair near the window, and the afternoon light softened her features, her black hair capturing the light with the shades of the rainbow.

Wait. Why am I noticing her hair?

“Lord Crawford.” Herbert got up to greet him. “How great to have you here.”

James struggled to keep his focus on the man, but it was proving to be a losing game. Luckily, He did notice in time that Herbert had extended his hand toward him. He took it, firm and sure, but his gaze betrayed him, flicking back to Diana.

She was looking at him, genuinely pleased to see him. And that... that threw him off more than it should have.

Sure, women were mostly happy to see him. Well, desired him, to be more accurate. And if he were being brutally honest, they desired the version of him he wanted them to see.

But Diana... Diana was truly happy to see him. A smile played on her lips—a smile that reached her green eyes. She got up with the grace of a queen, and he suddenly got tunnel vision.

“You know my sister, Diana,” Herbert offered.

Intimately.

James’s eyes darkened as they roved over her body. Diana coughed and bowed politely. The look in her eyes had turned into a reprimand laced with a warning.

“Ah, of course. Lady Diana, what a surprise to see you here.”

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Apleasantone, I hope,” she returned with that innocent smile of hers.

James felt alive. Truly alive. Animated and at ease.

“It is always a pleasure to be in your company, Lady Diana,” he said mischievously. But then he added earnestly, “A real pleasure.”

It was probably enough for Diana, who nodded in understanding. The teasing was over. He came in peace.

It was just as well, for James realized that her brother was right there while they exchanged innuendos and was studying them.

Since James had already concluded that Herbert was not a fool, the best course of action was to dampen the fire that raged inside him.

Herbert showed him to the living room, and James fought the temptation to take the seat right next to Diana. He did the next best thing as he made himself comfortable in an armchair that offered him a splendid view of her.

“I hope I am not interrupting some family matter,” he said.

“You are, but you have my eternal gratitude,” Herbert replied with an amused smile. “I understand that you are an only child?”

“That is correct.”

“Truly blessed, then.” Diana beat her brother to it.

The two siblings exchanged a glare that dripped with hate on the surface but spoke of unconditional love. If only James had siblings to share his loneliness with...

“Ah, blessed, indeed, Lord Crawford, to have quiet afternoons to yourself without impromptu visits regarding your well-being,” Herbert sighed.

“I asked you once—once—if you were eating properly, and you acted as if I had dragged you to the gallows,” Diana protested.

“That’s because your concern sounded more like an interrogation.”

“I was thorough.”

“Counting my bites?”

“I should let you starve, then.”

“I am capable of feeding myself.”

James let out a low laugh, watching them with an amused glint in his eyes.

“At least my suffering brings some amusement to Lord Crawford.”

“Because other than that, you are not amusing at all,” Diana hissed.

“I see now why you’ve developed such sharp wit, Wilkins.” James chuckled. “A man does not grow up with Lady Diana as a sister and survive without learning some form of self-defense.”

“I might need a moment to decide whether to be offended or flattered, My Lord,” Diana said.

Both men smiled at her boldness and looked at each other with shared admiration.

“I am glad I came by to offer some assistance, Wilkins.” James smirked.

“Treason!” Diana huffed, feigning annoyance. “I thought I had gained an ally.”

“You did,” James assured her smoothly. “But, My Lady, I am merely playing fair. You outmatch your brother so effortlessly, I felt some mercy was warranted.”

“I know it might cost me financially,” Herbert teased, “but I withdraw my invitation.”

“A grave punishment for simply stating the truth.” James smiled. “I am sure you are only jesting.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“I must admit I am merely joking. If someone were to be banished for such a trivial matter, my dear sister would have been permanently exiled long ago.”

Diana’s expression was soft, though she was trying to summon a not-so-convincing glare. It was her eyes that betrayed her. Those green eyes that sparkled with delight. The same eyes James had seen so full of ire. And melting longing. Now, they were shining with... love.

She loved her brother.

“To have Lady Diana in exile would have been a terrible loss to the world.” James cast a glance at her.

There was something in his voice that made her turn to him. He heard it, too.

“That almost sounded sincere,” she noted.

“I am capable of being sincere, My Lady.”

She tilted her head and regarded him seriously, assessing and measuring him. As if she had uncovered something she wasn’t expecting.

James didn’t like it at all. Or he rather hated that he liked it.

“So, Lord Crawford,” Herbert cut in. “Let’s talk numbers.”

James was equal parts relieved and annoyed that Herbert changed the subject.

Diana smiled and got up. "Since I have concluded that my brother remains the same brute he has always been, I shall leave you to it."

Herbert jumped up and took his sister in his arms, before placing a kiss on her cheek. James ached to touch her too, to give her more than just a peck. He did the next best thing.

He bowed and grabbed her hand.

"Are you attending the Ashford ball, My Lady?"

His question was genuine and also gave him an excuse to hold onto her hand a little bit longer.

"I shall endeavor to be in attendance, My Lord."

"I will see you there, then." He smiled roguishly and finally brushed his lips over the thin fabric of her gloves.

After he left Herbert's much later, James contemplated spending his evening in his club. But he already had a few drinks with the young man, and the conversation was so rich and smooth that he felt sated.

And after seeing Diana, he could barely focus on anything else other than the Ashford ball. Where he would see her again. Sure, they agreed that the lessons were to be conducted during promenades, but he was certain he could get her to bend the rules for him.

Rules, he had found, were often more of a suggestion than a hard limit. He could persuade her. Hewouldpersuade her.

So, James ended up back in his study, buried in financial reports. Investments and accounts, ledgers upon ledgers filled with numbers. It sounded boring, but he was used to it from a very young age. In addition, he found solace in the certainty of numbers. There was no room for desire when one added or subtracted. And at the top of that pile was a detailed proposal by Herbert.

“One should have all his agreements in writing...”

Her voice echoed in his head. He smiled to himself. He was mad when he picked her up for their second promenade. He was furious about what his father said and livid with himself that he allowed his father to affect him so much. It was her banter, her wit, and her determination that brought the heat back to his body.

More than heat.

A knock at the door brought him back to reality.

“James?”

It was his grandmother, and it was way past the time she retired to her bed. This meant that something was going on.

He got up and opened the door. He smiled at her and led her inside, pulling a chair to the fireplace. He rang for tea, since he knew her too well.

“Is anything amiss, Grandmother?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Could it be that I merely wanted to see my favorite grandson?”

“I am your only grandson.”

“Details.” Euphemia made herself comfortable.

James sat across from her and studied her. He let his body relax on the soft chair and stretched out his long legs in front of him.

She was nervous, and he was ready to alleviate her stress when another knock sounded at the door and a servant bearing a tea tray walked in.

James sprang into action and served his grandmother, who watched him with a mix of pride, love and guilt.

Whatever she was here for was going to spoil his mood, and she wasn't in a hurry. He grabbed the decanter and poured himself a measure of whiskey. He would need alcohol to face whatever brought Euphemia Bolton to his study at this hour.

They drank quietly for a while, the crackling of the fire the only sound in the room.

“So, Grandmother.” He smiled. “What it is you wanted to tell me?”

Euphemia looked at him over her cup. James nodded. They had an understanding.

“Your father wants to re-enter Society.”

James downed his drink.

“Lord Ashford is an old friend of his, and when he found out he was back in London, he extended a personal invitation to Solomon for the ball.”

“And he thinks it’s a good idea to accept it?”

James’s voice was icy, and Euphemia was not going to pretend that she didn’t hear the strain in it.

“It would be good for him to get back to normal.”

“Normal?” James chuckled. “I think we have all forgotten what normal is.”

“You are being cruel, my boy.”

James tapped his fingers on his glass once before he set it down with deliberate care. His grandmother’s words hung in the air between them, thick and heavy, pressing against something deep in his chest that he had no desire to examine.

“No less cruel than what was done to me,” he said sharply.

Again, the only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire.

“What happened was indeed cruel, James,” his grandmother acknowledged in a soft voice. “You lost the woman you loved most, a mother who was a rare jewel, one who truly and deeply loved you and your father.”

James got up and refilled his glass. It’d been years, but the pain flared anew each time memories of his mother flooded him. He was three-and-ten when she died. He had full recollections of her, all of them fond and soft and warm. There were times when

he wished he had never met his mother, when he wished he had lost her younger, but his memories of her were the most precious thing in his life.

“But to lose your father on top of that...” Euphemia trailed off.

“I didn’t lose him.” James stood up and started pacing to tamp down his anger. “Hechoseto abandon me.”

“James.” His grandmother looked at him with tearful eyes. “You are not the only one who lost her.”

“I was a boy!”

Euphemia leaned back. Not out of fear, but resignation to the truth of his words.

“I am not asking you to forgive him. That is between him and you. But he wants to go to the ball, James. But we all know he might not be ready for that. The ton can be?—”

“Cruel?” James cut in, conveying that he hadn’t forgotten about her accusation.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Yes. Cruel. He will never ask this of you, but I know he will feel better if you are there.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

Euphemia sighed in that way women sigh when faced with stubborn men.

“You are entitled to your opinion. Fine.” She got up. “What if I ask you to do it?”

James turned to his grandmother, a smirk on his lips. He knew exactly what she was doing. She was already asking him to do it.

She cupped his face in her frail, soft hands.

“You ask the impossible of me.”

Her smile was soft. “And yet you will do it.”

He huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “You have an extraordinary amount of faith in me, Grandmother.”

“You have yet to disappoint me.”

James closed his eyes for a brief moment, inhaling deeply before releasing a slow, measured breath.

“I’d hate to start disappointing you now,” he relented. “I will escort him to the

Ashford ball, Grandmother. Do not worry.”

Euphemia gave a warm smile.

“But,” he added, his tone sharp, “if he shows any sign that he is going back to what made him the talk of the ton, I will not tolerate it.”

“I understand.” His grandmother did, in fact, understand. “Thank you, James. You are a good boy.”

She turned and walked out of the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

## CHAPTER 12

### Dancing Card

The air at the Ashford ball was thick with the scent of beeswax and roses, laced with champagne and anticipation. On the balcony above, a quartet played a lively waltz, the melody weaving through the grand ballroom as couples twirled in effortless synchrony. The chandelier cast a golden glow, catching the glimmer of jewels adorning elegantly dressed ladies, their laughter mingling with the hum of conversation.

It was a night spun from magic, but Diana was not appreciating it. There was one thing that would make this night truly enchanting. Him.

“How do the Ashfords manage to create such an atmosphere in their balls?” Selina seemed charmed.

“I think it has more to do with the fact that they want their guests to enjoy themselves,” Richard said. “After all, Lady Ashford is a gentle, calm woman.”

“Diana?” Selina turned to her sister. “Are you looking for someone?”

Diana immediately schooled her expression and tore her eyes away from the entrance. “More like something. I heard that the Ashfords’ cook makes good Italian pastry. I would like to try it.”

Selina narrowed her eyes at her. “Sure. Italian pastry. Though I doubt that the Ashfords had placed their buffet outside.”

“Dear Diana, you seem awfully fixated on the entrance.” Richard hastened to assist his wife.

“How predictable of you both. A woman so much as glances toward the door and suddenly she is pining,” Diana scoffed.

“Not pining, but perhaps interested,” Richard said with a smile.

Selina stepped closer and looped her arm through Diana’s, smiling that mischievous smile of hers. “Tell me, my sweet sister, how are the promenades?”

Ah, so pleasurable, Diana was ready to admit, but she held back.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“They are going well,” she answered.

Richard threw his head back and laughed. “That is the vague answer I give my accountant when he inquires about expenses, Diana.”

“Well, that is all you’ll get,” Diana huffed.

“Oh, I would hate to think that you are suffering because of that auction,” Selina said in a mock dramatic tone.

Diana turned to her sister with an arched eyebrow. “You can sleep in peace, my gold-hearted sister,” she drawled.

“That can only mean you find the promenades... agreeable.” Selina smiled.

And then some.

Diana smiled back. But she knew she had to give Selina something more, or else her persistent sister would pester her.

“I must admit that Lord Crawford is a skilled conversationalist, which makes the whole experience tolerable.”

“I am glad to hear that Lord Crawford has been...devotedto his duties.”

“Devoted is hardly the word I would use,” Diana deadpanned.

“Oh?” Selina raised an eyebrow. “And what word would you use, then?”

Wicked. Infuriating. Impossible. Maddening. Thorough.

Diana had a very long list to choose from, but she kept her ideas to herself.

“I’d say he is dutiful and polite,” she offered.

“I have been friends with Crawford all my life, and I think it’s the first time someone called him dutifulandpolite.” Richard chuckled.

“Truth be told, I didn’t expect him to be so…”

“Charming,” Selina supplied.

“Accomplished,” Diana corrected.

“You expected him to be an unpolished rake, did you not?” Richard said with a satisfied smile. “Did he tell you he was the captain of Eton Society?”

Diana blushed as she remembered that conversation and where it led. She suppressed her emotions and focused on how heart-warming it was to see Richard proud of James.

“Yes, it did come up. We spoke about philosophy,” Diana admitted.

She thought that emphasizing that their conversations revolved around boring topics would be enough for Selina and Richard to think that the promenades were innocuous. Selina sure seemed disappointed, but Richard gave her an assessing look.

What?

Diana had no time to dwell on that, since the butler announced in his firm, loud voice, “His Grace the Duke of Pemberton, and the Most Honorable the Marquess of Crawford.”

The moment James was announced, Diana felt her treacherous heart flutter. Her eyes darted across the gilded ballroom to the stairs, where he was standing. Her breath hitched.

He was wearing a black evening coat and a dark waistcoat that fit his powerful frame to perfection and accentuated his sharp features, bringing out the blue of his eyes. James had always been striking, but tonight he was something more.

Yet, unlike the other ladies of the ton, who looked at him like he was the famous Italian pastry, Diana knew that the difference was not in his appearance. She noticed his tense jaw and his severe expression, his stiff shoulders and the way his lips were pressed into a thin line. Something heavy was weighing him down tonight.

“Excuse me, ladies.” Richard’s voice brought her back to the present.

She glanced at him as he weaved through the crowd to meet with James. She scowled at how tense Richard looked, how worried and how anxious.

Selina leaned in. “That is James’s father,” she explained.

Diana studied the old man by James’s side. If her fixation allowed, she would have seen the resemblance at once. She also noticed that she was not the only one studying the Duke. Wherever he went, conversations died down, and almost all the guests whispered behind bejeweled hands and fans.

“It seems that he is back in London for good,” Selina commented.

“Where was he?”

“He was in their country estate. There was a rumor...” Selina hesitated. “There was a rumor that he went mad.”

“Mad?”

Diana studied the Duke again. He seemed composed and civilized, though his steps seemed weary.

“Only according to the rumors.”

“But what happened?” Diana asked, intrigued.

“No one knows for certain,” Selina admitted. “Not even Richard knows for sure—or if he knows, he hasn’t shared that with me. All I know is that the rumors began after James’s mother died. Some say grief drove the Duke into seclusion. Others say it was something more... serious.”

Diana felt a lump clogging her throat. She realized that the infuriating man who teased her, who challenged her, who set her body on fire, was a real person. A person with scars of his own, not just that polished façade he let everyone see.

“Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.”

She remembered the quote that she found so seductive. Now, she saw it under a new light.

She looked for him in the crowd. It was so easy to spot him, his frame towering over everyone. Even if he wanted to hide, it was impossible.

He was speaking to Richard, his face impassive, his body language a study in careful control. Diana willed him to look at her.

The ball was in full swing, but Diana was fuming. James hadn't even spared her a glance. And she could only surmise that it was deliberate. Back at Herbert's, he had made a point of saying that they would meet at the Ashford ball. Had practically promised it. And now? Now, he was ignoring her as if she didn't exist.

Diana was patient and understanding. The fact that his father was re-entering Society must be taxing. She would be happy to be acknowledged even from across the room. A nod of the head, a tense smirk. She would answer with an honest smile to let him know that she understood. But being so blatantly overlooked? So pointedly ignored?

Diana took a deep breath. She was being foolish, and she knew it.

If James was determined to treat her like any other one of the ladies in attendance tonight, if he had decided to spend the evening avoiding her, then she would simply spend it elsewhere. It was indeed a beautiful night, and she had every intention of enjoying herself. Now that she was in the spotlight, she might as well bathe in the

warmth.

As if by divine intervention, she saw Lord Hexter approach her.

Perfect.

Diana gave him her widest smile.

“My Lady, I must insist that you do me the honor of granting me your first dance.”

“I am afraid this dance is mine.” The eldest son of the Viscount Sherton bowed to her.

Diana realized that somewhere between debating philosophy and experiencing lessons in pleasure, she had nearly forgotten that she was still one of the most sought-after ladies this Season.

“Gentlemen, you flatter me. I am so fortunate to have two gentlemen of your station insisting on a dance with me.” She gave them a warm smile. Both men seemed mesmerized by it.

The notoriously daring Lord Sherton leaned in. “The ton is fortunate to bask in your presence, My Lady.”

Comically transparent, but Diana managed to hide her smirk behind her fan—a gesture Lord Sherton took as a victory.

“Lord Hexter, I believe I owe you a dance.” She gave the man her hand.

“My Lady.” Lord Sherton pretended to be wounded.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“The anticipation of our dance will be rewarding enough, I hope.”

Not bad for a jilted wallflower, Diana had to admit to herself as Lord Hexter led her to the middle of the ballroom. He was a poised and good dancer, but his movements lacked the same thing his conversation did—interest. He was...safe.

At least Lord Sherton was more entertaining. He danced confidently, and he pulled her close, teasing the bounds of propriety. He seemed thrilled and emboldened to see her not shocked but amused by his attention.

“Lady Diana, you have brought upon me the envy of every man here.”

“Is that so?”

“How can it be any other way? I am holding the most beautiful lady here.”

How transparently flirtatious, but Diana found herself amused rather than annoyed.

“So, you are under the impression that every gentleman is desperate for my attention?”

“I know they are.” Lord Sherton cast a daring look down her body. “How could they not?”

“Well, that remains to be seen, My Lord.”

The reality was that Lord Sherton was right. Men were vying for her attention. They

lingered close for the opportunity to put their names on her dance card. Diana never thought that she would enjoy the attention. She who took pride in her steadfast indifference to such pursuits was now savoring the attention.

There was hardly any room anymore in her once empty dance card, and she doubted that the quartet had such a wide repertoire to accommodate all the gentlemen who wanted to dance with her.

She didn't stop. She didn't slip away. She forgot about the Italian pastry. She twirled around the dance floor. She laughed at slightly amusing comments. She held men's gazes in a way that made them flush.

Diana was having fun. After so long, after years of unattainable dignity, she felt... powerful.

But even in her blissful state, she had not expected the most eligible bachelor of the ton to approach her. Lord Ainsley had never noticed her, and he had never called on her. Yet, now he bowed to her.

"Lady Diana, it would simply be a crime to allow such an evening to pass without the pleasure of dancing with you."

The whole of the ton held their breaths. Even Selina joyously hummed next to her. Lord Ainsley was the most sought-after bachelor, the one mamas were throwing their daughters at. He was handsome and rich, well-mannered and reliable.

"Then I suppose I must do my part to prevent such a heinous crime, My Lord," Diana said sweetly, placing her gloved hand in his.

She felt all eyes on them as he led her to the dance floor. The other couples were looking at them openly. Yet, one thought slipped through her triumphant moment.

Is he watching?

Lord Ainsley was a proper dancer. If she thought Richard was a stickler for rules, she quickly reconsidered. After all, he had married her sister. But Lord Ainsley painted inside the lines. Always. He held her at a respectable distance, their waltz smooth and measured.

“You are an excellent dancer, My Lord,” Diana remarked.

“That is the mark of a good partner, Lady Diana. A waltz should be effortless.”

“Do you find all things to be effortless, My Lord?”

He smiled a reserved smile. “Of course. A well-ordered life and a quiet marriage with comforts to enjoy.”

Diana maintained her smile while she fought the urge to check if he had a pulse. The way he said ‘quiet marriage’ and ‘comforts’... It made her skin crawl. And yet, not so long ago, she too had longed for quiet and comfortable. Now? Now, she was changed.

And she was under no illusion about who brought about that change. It was all him. James had taught her this. Not just with his stolen kisses and wicked hands, but with his presence. With the way he saw her, the way he perceived her, the way he saw past her nickname. He had changed her, she had to admit as much. He had unlocked something inside her, and she had walked right through, emerging confident.

Thinking of him made her miss him. Before she could stop herself, she did what she deliberately didn’t do all night—seek him out.

She scanned the sea of faces and found him immediately. There was no way a man

like him could fade in the background even if he tried. What she didn't expect was to meet his gaze. She barely held her breath when his eyes locked onto hers.

Oh.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

His gaze struck her like a blade, sharp, unyielding, meant to carve itself into her skin. There was no softness in it, no teasing glint or playful arrogance. Just something dark and primal, something that burned too hot and settled too deep.

His gaze dropped to where Lord Ainsley's hand rested on her waist, then flicked back to hers, smug and dark. Heknew. He knew that Lord Ainsley's hands wouldn't make her gasp in pleasure.

Her body tingled with awareness, and she fought to keep her composure. The dance ended, but she barely noticed.

Lord Ainsley took her hand and kissed it in a proper way. "It was an absolute pleasure, My Lady."

Diana had to will herself to look at him, a pleasant smile on her trembling lips. "I am so happy, My Lord, that we prevented a crime."

If he appreciated her wit, he didn't show it. But he did look at her with interest, as if he was considering a possibility.

"May I call on you, My Lady?"

"It would be nice to discuss the trials of life, My Lord."

"And the security of it," he added.

Diana opened her mouth, but no words came out. Lord Ainsley chuckled as if it was

him who had rendered her speechless. It wasn't.

Behind him, James moved.

He didn't rush—he didn't need to. He walked like a feral beast among tame animals, his look dark and predatory, all aimed at her. He was coming for her with a clear warning. She had taunted the beast, and now she would find out how it was to be a prey.

Diana didn't care. Her pulse thrummed with exhilaration. She lifted her chin ever so slightly, her lips curling into the smallest, most imperceptible smirk.

She had done this. She had made him move.

## CHAPTER 13

### Battle of Wills

James was avoiding Diana. He deliberately made the herculean effort not to seek her out. Even Richard noticed that and didn't once mention her name.

James knew she was there. He had made such a foolish display of how they would see each other at this ball. It was...

Blast it! He had promised her. But he could not keep his promise, not tonight.

Tonight, he was James Bolton, the Marquess of Crawford, the son of the Duke of Pemberton. He was his father's son, bound by duty. His focus had to be on keeping away the vultures coming to pick at his father like the carcass-hungry nobles they were. He couldn't leave Solomon's side, and if he would even glance Diana's way, he was risking doing exactly that.

He breathed a bit easier since Richard rushed to his side to offer his open support and Lord Ashford came to cordially greet Solomon.

Still...

“Lord Crawford.”

James turned to find Selina standing in their little guarded group. “Your Grace.”

“Duke,” Selina greeted his father respectfully before turning to her husband. “Richard, I am sure you are utterly delighted to see an old friend, but leaving me alone by the ballroom was cruel.”

“I left you with your sister.” Richard was careful not to mention Diana’s name.

James hated that his friend knew him well, but he had not expected to hate the words coming out of Selina’s mouth more.

“Well, Diana hasn’t stopped dancing all night.”

James looked down at his friend’s wife, only to find her smiling at him. His head snapped toward the dance floor, and sure enough, there she was. Diana was in the center of it. Dancing. With someone. Someone else. Someone that wasn’t him.

James knew it shouldn’t matter. He had three more promenades with her and nothing more. He was her tutor, not her suitor. If anything, he should be proud of the outcome of their brief lessons. Diana was blooming in front of the whole ton, who watched as if pure magic was unraveling.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

She was so dazzlingly radiant and effortlessly charming. She was a flame, and all the moths were drawn to her, hypnotized. This washisdoing. His words, his hands, and his body broke the shell Diana was hiding in, pulled at the thread of her cocoon till she emerged.

He should be smiling as he watched her have the time of her life, enjoying the attention and the pleasure of being wanted. He should be admiring his masterpiece. Instead, his hand tightened around the glass he had drained too many times, and his jaw was so tense that he could hear his teeth crack.

“Are you all right, Crawford?” Richard teased.

“Go dance with your wife, Seymour,” James hissed as he watched another enchanted gentleman bow to Diana.

He heard Richard’s light chuckle. He listened as his father spoke with old acquaintances. But just as he feared, all his attention was focused on her. Hers wasn’t focused on him, though.

One after the other, men tripped over themselves to dance with her. She rejected no one, as if making up for lost time. And all the while, she hadn’t let her eyes drift away. She smiled sowidely, and at some point, someone probably said something pretentiously hilarious or safely daring, for she gasped.

It was not a real gasp. Not like the one she let out when he moved his lips over her neck and tasted her skin. James was sure that no one could make her feel that way. But the sheer fact that she allowed them to even try...

James turned to refill his glass.

“Now, that I didn’t expect,” Richard commented, mostly to Selina.

James saw him. From across the ballroom, Lord Ainsley made his way to where Diana was standing. If James’s name was whispered in secret by the ladies and uttered in terror by the matrons, Lord Ainsley’s was spoken like a prayer. He was perfect in every way. Healthy, wealthy, and utterly safe. There wasn’t a single father or mother in this room who didn’t dream of seeing him court their daughters. And now he had set his sights on Diana.

“I wouldn’t be surprised to see him call on her soon. He never shows open attention like that,” Selina noted.

James couldn’t help but glare at her. Sure, she was his best friend’s wife, but right now she was dangerously flirting with becoming his worst enemy.

“What is wrong, Lord Crawford?” Selina smiled that mischievous smile of hers.

Richard should have married anyone but this menace. But from the look he was giving her—a look of absolute devotion—James knew that there was never another option.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry. I am sure Diana will uphold her commitment to your promenades,” Selina added.

At the mention of their promenades, of their private lessons, James turned to watch the dancing couple that had the complete attention of the ton. His eyes darkened with wicked thoughts.

Yes, Lord Ainsley was perfectly safe. But James knew Diana. And Diana didn’t want

safe. Diana wanted daring and challenging, bold and confident. She wanted dangerous. Hewas dangerous.

So, he waited like the skilled predator he was. He knew that no matter how much she smiled at whatever the man was telling her, no matter how invested she seemed in their conversation, she saw the truth. The unshakable, inescapable truth.

He is not me.

The moment that thought came to James's mind, it was as if he summoned her.

Diana turned her head and immediately spotted him through the crowd. Their eyes met. The air between them became thicker, charged. James's gaze sharpened, dark and knowing, filled with something sensual.

And Diana caught it. It was in her sharp intake of breath and the twitching of her fingers, which were resting on Lord Ainsley's shoulder.

My turn, little wallflower.

"Richard," James said, his eyes still trained on Diana, "do not leave my father alone."

"Where are you going?"

James set his drink aside and smirked. "To change the game."

And then he moved.

"Dance with me."

It wasn't a request. It wasn't a plea. It was a statement.

Diana slowly turned to him and looked first into his eyes and then at his proffered hand. He sensed her internal battle, the urge to refuse him, the inability to do so. And then something else flickered in her eyes. Defiance.

Oh, a little chase.

“I am afraid my dance card is full, My Lord.” Diana blinked slowly.

“And I am afraid I must insist.”

“You are terribly demanding this evening, Lord Crawford,” she murmured.

“You are terribly defiant this evening, Lady Diana,” he countered.

He caught it, that little smirk on her lips, the one that told him she was intrigued. Truly alive.

“I suppose one dance wouldn’t hurt,” Diana relented and accepted his hand.

He pulled her a little bit closer and whispered, “I beg to differ, My Lady.”

He led her to the dance floor, and he pressed her to him. Diana inhaled sharply but schooled her expression as she placed her hand on his shoulder. She was mad at him, but this was delicious.

“I am pleased that you managed to make time for me on such a busy evening, My Lady.”

“I simply made do, My Lord.”

“And you did so wonderfully.” James grinned. “Tell me, how did it feel to have half

the men in here at your feet?”

“As usual, you are exaggerating.”

“I am sure I am not, though I admit I haven’t counted all the men here.”

“But you did count the men I danced with?”

James chuckled. “I did not. It’s not that they actually counted.”

“Yet, here you are, bringing them up.”

“I was merely noting how you seemed to enjoy yourself, My Lady.”

“And I gather it is now a crime for a lady to enjoy herself?” Diana gritted her teeth.

“Not at all.” James raised an eyebrow as his palm slid across her back. “But tell me, My Lady, was it the dancing or the attention that thrilled you most?”

Diana looked up with a frown that she managed to turn into a mock thoughtful expression.

“Hmm, difficult to say. Perhaps I should indulge myself more to reach a verdict.”

James’s eyes narrowed at the open challenge. All the tension and bitterness he felt all day faded away. He felt alive.

“No need, My Lady.” His voice was velvet and steel, all dark promises. “I’ll settle the matter for you.”

His fingers flexed just slightly on the small of her back—a movement no one would

see, but one she felt everywhere.

“You look most beautiful in my arms.”

Diana’s eyes flicked up to his, wide and shocked. She couldn’t believe that he said something so scandalous in the middle of the whole town.

It was delightful to see her so flustered. Still, his eyes sought out his father. Just for a moment, just to make sure everything was going smoothly.

“You can’t just say that and then look away,” Diana hissed.

James shifted his gaze back to her, his soul torn between his worry for his father and her. Looking into her green eyes, he struggled to make her his sole focus.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“It seems that telling the truth bothers you, My Lady.”

“It’s not so much about telling the truth—still debatable, by the way—but you telling it in front of everyone.”

James wanted to say something, something clever, something to tease her and make her blush. But he saw Lord Gretington move toward his father, and his back went rigid. That man was known for his cruel nature.

“I am worried about your well-being, My Lord,” Diana teased. “You passed up a perfect opportunity to torment me. You are not going soft on me now, are you?”

James heard her taunt, and his soul rejoiced at her banter, but he was after a different kind of prey, ready to pounce if his father showed any sign of distress. He would not allow Solomon to lose it and make a fool of himself, dragging his name down with him.

“James?” Diana’s voice cut through the tension. “Is everything all right?”

James heard the genuine concern in her voice, and it wrecked him. He decided to trust Richard to do his job and focused on her. Diana deserved as much.

He exhaled slowly, forcing his grip on her to relax slightly. His eyes flickered back to hers, searching, finding, lingering. She wasn’t merely filling the silence with idle chatter. She wasn’t teasing him for sport. She was asking out of real concern.

“It’s nothing, My Lady.”

“Lying does not become you, My Lord,” she huffed.

“A bold accusation, My Lady.”

“I am quite bold tonight, have you not noticed?” she quipped, tilting her chin up ever so slightly.

James exhaled again, this time smoothing his expression with a smile. A genuine one.

“I am sure you know my father’s... situation.”

“I do.” Diana nodded encouragingly.

“I am not totally certain that this is not... out of his depth. It’s been too long since he was last among the ton.”

“I of all people should know how cruel rumors can be.”

Of course, she would understand. Of course, she, of all people, would know what it meant to be the subject of whispered speculation, the quiet mockery behind polite smiles.

James’s grip on her loosened further. He nodded, and she smiled softly. Then, he pulled her closer with a dark look. He wanted to show her that he was completely focused on her now.

Oh, he was focused alright.

His hand, which was resting firmly on the small of her back, ached to wander, to explore. Like it did back in the gazebo. His eyes strayed to her full lips, and he longed to kiss them so badly, to swallow the little sounds she made when he pressed his body

against hers.

“You seem a little tense, My Lord,” Diana teased breathlessly, betraying her desire.

“With you in my arms, how can I resist, My Lady?” He gave her the most seductive smile.

“We are merely dancing,” Diana whispered.

“No. You merely danced with all the other men tonight,” he murmured, his fingers drawing small circles on the base of her spine. “But none of them know how it is to truly hold you.”

“You are insufferable!” Diana inhaled.

“And yet I am the one suffering.”

“I didn’t peg you as melodramatic, Lord Crawford.”

“Oh, but I am suffering.” James’s dark eyes boldly roamed over her body.

“You are being awfully bold,” she scolded, but her voice lacked heat.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Yet, you like me exactly like that, My Lady.”

“Do not presume, My Lord. I merely tolerate you.”

James pulled her closer, right at the bounds of propriety, her body almost flush against his tall, sturdy frame.

“Is that so, Diana?” he rumbled. “Is it tolerance when you gasp against my lips? When you tremble in my arms?”

Her nails dug into the fine fabric of his coat, and he chuckled. But she regained her composure quickly enough and schooled her features.

“I am just a diligent learner, My Lord.”

James looked at her with the intensity of a wolf circling his prey, his hunger barely contained. Diana clenched her jaw and coughed, the hand in his trembling.

“I need to keep up as your tutor, My Lady. Seeing how quick your progress is, we need to be more... thorough.”

Not one single word was spoken with an ounce of innocence.

“What is it that you are proposing?” Diana almost stuttered.

James groaned deep in his chest, and she felt the sound reverberate through her body.

“I have so much more to teach you, Diana.” His voice was low and daring. “Oh, so much more. But to do so, we need to be somewhere where we won’t be interrupted.”

Diana’s eyes widened.

Last time, James had nearly unraveled her by barely touching her skin in a half-hidden gazebo, with her chaperone right around the corner.

He was engrossed in thinking of the things he would do if he had her alone, in the dark, all to himself. How he would savor her, how he would ruin her, how he would teach her what real pleasure felt like. The kind that would make her body shiver, her back arch, and her lips part on a breathless moan.

His heart raced, and he struggled to keep himself in check in the middle of a respectable ball.

“Not interrupted?” Diana was intrigued, and that was all he needed.

“No intrusions, no stolen moments, no chaperones. You and me, Diana. Alone. At night.”

Diana looked around, sure that everyone heard the delectable, sinful things he was whispering to her. Then, she looked at him with a scorching look. James saw that his words had wrapped around her like a velvety promise.

He saw her inner conflict, how she avoided his gaze. He had felt her stiffen. It was absolutely wicked and inappropriate of him to suggest such a thing.

Come on, little wallflower.

He saw her bite her lower lip, her eyes glazing over as she most likely remembered

what those hasty moments did to her.

James blinked slowly, smiling in satisfaction, dipping his chin to gaze upon his prey.

“Curiosity is a scholar’s greatest virtue, wouldn’t you agree, Lord Crawford?” she murmured, staring into his eyes.

Good girl.

## CHAPTER 14

### Clock Chime

Diana’s nerves were wrecked. She may have refused to conform to Society’s expectations, but she never broke the rules, never crossed the lines. Now, she was ready to bounce off so far out of the lines that she wouldn’t even see them.

His proposal, his sinful proposal, echoed in her head.

“You and me, Diana. Alone. At night...”

Thatnight.

Diana grabbed her fork with such force that she was sure the silverware would snap in half. Stephen and Elizabeth were discussing something, but she could barely function, let alone have an intelligent conversation.

“Diana?” Elizabeth asked. “You seem exhausted, dear.”

Diana was exhausted. The agitation alone exhausted her, and she could barely keep still on her chair in the beautifully lit dining hall where she always had dinner even as a child.

Her sister-in-law regarded her with interest, but she smiled.

At any other time, Elizabeth would have noticed more. Her sharp intellect would have picked up on Diana’s agitation, and her feisty nature would have required answers. However, she was also exhausted, probably bearing the greatest news this house has heard since she married Stephen. Diana was twice lucky in a way.

“Are you alright, Diana?” Stephen went in full father mode. “Are you feeling hot? Is your stomach upset?”

Thrice lucky.

Diana realized that once Stephen became a father, he would focus all that excessive protective energy on someone else.

“I think I overestimated myself when I agreed to embroider so many pieces for the auction,” she was quick to reassure him.

“You did a wonderful job, though.” Elizabeth smiled.

Diana nodded and mustered as much of a smile as she could. She felt guilty for lying to them, but somehow she was certain that if she said, “I am sneaking out tonight to meet James alone and have him do wicked things to me,” her brother would die of apoplexy on the spot and leave Elizabeth a widow.

I am lying to protect them.

“I think I had better go to bed early,” she said quickly, reaching for her napkin and dabbing at her lips.

“That is a good idea, Diana,” Stephen agreed.

Diana smiled one last time and all but bolted out of the room. She went to her room, where Bess, her maid, waited to help her with her night routine.

Bess, the soft, quiet, loving girl. Bess, the dutiful and blissfully ignorant maid. Bess, who had a room on the ground floor with a window overlooking the back garden.

All Diana needed to do was get to that window. And she had a plan.

The hair was brushed, the nightgown was worn, and the covers were dutifully pulled over her body.

Diana clenched her teeth. It was time to set her plan in motion.

“Anything else, My Lady?” Bess asked dutifully.

This was the moment. Diana could just not go. Not set this whole thing in motion. It was dangerous, and if she was caught...

“I have so much more to teach you, Diana.”

His voice curled around her like a silken vice. Her fingers twitched against the sheets, restless, burning with the dark promise of his eyes. Her thighs pressed together beneath the blankets, taut with tension just from remembering the way his hands had explored her body.

“My Lady?” Bess prompted.

Diana swallowed, determined. “I feel so tired and restless at the same time. Perhaps some chamomile tea would help settle my nerves.”

“Right away, My Lady.”

The moment the maid was out the door, Diana bolted out of bed. She had three days to make a plan for tonight, and she was prepared. She took off her nightgown and hid it under the covers. From there, she produced the black, simple dress she had hidden earlier and threw it on. She dug a black hooded cloak out of the back of her wardrobe and her most comfortable slippers.

She didn’t have a lot of time, but she had practiced. Of course, she had practiced it. She took more pillows and a small, round one and arranged them on her bed. This trick was older than time, but there was a reason it was timeless. It worked.

She took a step back to admire her handiwork, and she was happy to see that it gave the impression of a body beneath the covers. Sweet Bess would never disturb her after seeing her so tired and gone to bed so early. It was a moonless night that secured darkness.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

When the scene was set in her room, Diana went to the door, wrapping her hood around herself. She had a goal—Bess’s window. The only clear path out of the manor that she was familiar with.

She smiled. She had specifically asked for her maid to have that room when she first came to the manor. It was just below her room, one staircase away and next to a small auxiliary kitchen. She didn’t want the poor girl to go to such lengths while catering to her needs.

It seemed that her kindness was repaid. However, to use such a sincere, considerate act for such scandalous reasons was evil.

Or an unexpected stroke of luck.

All she needed was to have Bess out of her room. Asking for chamomile tea, for instance, did the job. And she needed to hide. She knew exactly the spot—the only safe spot between her room and that window.

But now that she was standing before that very spot, she hesitated. This had seemed like a good idea in theory. Now, faced with the grim reality, she reevaluated the worth of her plan.

Diana stood before the grandfather clock, staring at it. Squeezing herself into the narrow body of the clock had seemed like a good idea, but now it made her reconsider her life choices.

“James, you better appreciate this,” she murmured in the empty hallway

She opened the wooden door, hiked up her skirts, and squeezed inside, drawing it almost shut. Almost. She had no intention of being locked inside the clock. She could feel the cold brass weights against her back, but she was shaking from agitation.

Her ears were straining to hear the one thing she was waiting for—Bess walking into her room with her chamomile tea. She had to be ready. The moment the maid was in her room, Diana had to move as fast as lightning and as stealthily as a cat. Time was literally ticking.

She was trembling, but it wasn't all from fear. The thrill, the forbidden nature of what she was doing was exhilarating.

This is madness.

But at the same time, her blood was thrumming with something dangerously close to delight. And the reward for her audacity. Him. All to herself.

Her chest heaved at the thought.

Footsteps. She heard footsteps.

Diana's focus became razor-sharp as every muscle in her body tensed. The footsteps passed her by, and she heard a knock on a door.

“Lady Diana?”

Then the creaking of the door.

It's now or never!

Diana opened the clock door, which she had made sure was well-oiled, and climbed

out of the ticking coffin. One glance at her door, hearing Bess murmur, “Poor thing,” and she ran down the hall.

She had a small window of time. Bess would probably take her tea to the kitchen to dispose of it and wash the cup and teapot before she retreated to her room.

Diana had to remind herself to breathe as she ran. It would be profoundly stupid to go to all this trouble only to faint halfway down the hall. She rounded the corner on silent feet. Then, she ran down the stairs, gripping the banister to keep from stumbling in her haste.

Left turn. Past the little kitchen. Bess’s room. The door didn’t creak.

“Lady Luck is on my side.” Diana chuckled in the darkness. “My courage has been rewarded.”

The window was right there. Her hands trembled as she unlatched it, pushing it open just enough to squeeze through. A rush of cool air kissed her skin.

Almost there.

Without hesitation, she hoisted herself on the sill and climbed through. It was wide and big enough to make it easy for her. Now, all she had to do?—

Snag.

Her skirt was caught in the latch and was not giving in. Perhaps this was the sign that she was snarled up in something out of her depth.

“Not now. Damn these dresses. I should have worn breeches. Blast it!” Diana cursed and pulled.

Nothing.

Oh God.

Diana cursed under her breath again and pulled at her dress with her whole weight.

Rip.

Her skirt was irreparably torn, but she was free.

She wrapped herself in her cloak, closed the window, and ran to the tall side wall. She sprinted across the short grass as fast as her legs would carry her.

There.

She spotted a small, forgotten door—a remnant of the times when the estate was smaller—hidden behind overgrown ivy. She had made sure the days before that the latch was still working, and she made sure to bring something to prevent it from latching back. She needed this gate open. It was not only her escape but also her way back in.

Once she was out, she glanced at both sides of the dark road. Her heart was pounding hard.

“I’ll wait for you in three days at the side of the abandoned Lesham Manor. I’ll wait till the sun rises, Diana,” James had promised her.

That was where she was going. Lesham Manor was next door. It had been abandoned for years, dark and empty. Diana turned and?—

James.

He was there, leaning against the curricule, his massive body imposing. His head was bowed, his hand over his lips as if he were lost in thought. Then, he sensed her and turned around.

Diana inhaled to slow her racing heart. Useless. The moment she saw him, it thundered even harder.

James was there, wearing a shirt with no cravat. The top buttons were undone, and a sliver of skin peeked from the opening—a call to her yearning hands.

It's a warm night, and it's about to become scorching.

Then, finally, she looked into his eyes. All the hiding and running and the ripping of her dress was nothing compared to what his look did to her heart. The moment his eyes landed on her, it skipped a beat. The look in his mercurial blue eyes shifted, from brooding to relieved, and then?—

Oh.

She felt it rather than saw it. The hunger.

His gaze swept over her, and it was as if he was touching her. Seeing her in black made him graze his lower lip with his teeth before he stopped at the torn fabric of her dress. The tear was just enough to expose the pale curve of her shins—a sight so scandalous that it made the muscle in his jaw twitch.

He pushed off the curricule, pinning her with the look in his eyes. Before Diana could even realize it, he stalked toward her. He grabbed her by the waist, one hand digging into her flesh and the other cupping her face. A sharp inhale from her, a deep, guttural sigh from him, and then his mouth crashed onto hers.

He devoured her as if he had starved to death during the three days they hadn't seen each other. His mouth was demanding, claiming her tongue, caressing it, luring it deeper. A wet, decadent kiss that made her knees buckle, only for him to pull her against his solid body, lifting her off on her feet. His hand slid into her hair and loosened it.

With a pained grunt, he stopped.

"You are here," he panted, almost in disbelief.

"That was the plan."

"And you came to me dressed like temptation itself?" His eyes raked over her body. "Tell me, Diana, who is teaching who here?"

Diana looked down at her torn dress and then back at his ravenous eyes. "It is simply an unfortunate wardrobe malfunction."

"Oh." He swiped his thumb over her lower lip. "There is nothing unfortunate with the way you look."

Diana blushed under his intense gaze, which betrayed his inner struggle. He was seriously thinking of ditching all the plans he had for tonight, pinning her against the curricule, and doing scandalous things to her.

He took a deep breath to compose himself, and Diana was intoxicated by the power

she had over him. She almost made him lose control. Almost.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Let’s go.” He helped her into the small curricule.

“Wait. Where is the driver?” Diana asked as she lowered herself onto the bench.

Instead of answering, James climbed in beside her and grabbed the reins. Like he had been doing since they met. He turned to her and smiled at her. A taunting smile at her surprise. Then, he clicked his tongue, and the horses took off.

The night stretched out before them, the road dark and open, and James stole her away into the night.

## CHAPTER 15

### Sweet Pastries

James was trying not to drive like a madman through the town. His grip on the reins was unrelenting. If he didn’t keep his hand in check, he would do something too reckless even for him. He didn’t know what he expected from the night. This was the first time in his dishonest life that he had asked a lady to sneak out with him.

Whatever it was, it wasn’t this.

Not her draped in black temptation, in that scandalously torn dress that revealed the flesh he wanted to devour so badly. She had no idea, no idea what she was doing to him, sitting right next to him, her perfume tickling his nose, her thighs brushing against his with every little bump on the road. And that kiss...

Diana didn't know how lucky she was that he had more self-restraint than he himself knew. He almost took her right there, against the curricule. He wanted to.

God, how he wanted to!

But he had even more delicious things in mind than a quick, heated tumble out in the open. And he was a man who knew how to enjoy the good things in life. And right now, she was the best thing.

"Are you usually this quiet when you steal a woman into the night?" Diana asked, breaking the silence.

"But I didn't steal you, My Lady. You came to me. Willingly."

Diana blushed, and he smirked. He might have made the proposal, but she was an accomplice. She accepted it.

"Details. Anyway, where are we headed?"

"I have a small manor in the city. It's not empty, but it's quiet. We will be alone there," James said with a dark promise.

James expected her to blush or jump up at the innuendo. But it seemed that this night, he was the one being taught control. Diana smiled. A knowing smile. He urged the horses to go even faster.

The small estate was up ahead. Ashbrook House has been in his mother's family for generations, and now it was his. It was a cute, little house that had nothing of the grandeur of the Pembroke estate or his residence here in London. It was, above all, charming.

He had ordered some of his servants to prepare everything for the night and then leave. Only the steward stayed in the house that was rarely used, but tonight he, too, was given leave to spend the night elsewhere.

James wanted Diana all to himself, away from prying eyes.

He stopped the curricule and went to help her down. She took his hand graciously as she pulled down her hood, admiring the place. James felt a little pang in his heart when he saw her admire something that felt a little too intimate to him.

“This is so beautifully charming,” she remarked.

“I am glad you like it.”

Diana looked up at him. Perhaps their previous encounters had given the illusion of something rushed, something to be stolen on dimly lit balconies, against the trees of St. James Park, inside dubious gazebos. But this time was different. James had every intention of wringing every last drop of pleasure from her body that night.

He guided her inside the house. The entrance hall was warm, inviting, with polished wood and a staircase leading to the upper floors. The air smelled faintly of cedar and the lingering scent of something sweet.

“Come,” James said after he took her cloak.

“You say we are alone?”

“Yes, My Lady. There isn’t much stuff here anyway.”

Diana followed him.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“So, you don’t use this place that often? But why? It’s so endearing!”

James’s hands twitched. This was his mother’s favorite getaway.

But he could not afford to let his thoughts wander, so he mustered all his rakish charm.

“And I shall endeavor to make it even more endearing.”

The dining room was already set. There was a small table near the fireplace—intimate, not formal. Candlelight flickered over silverware, and crystal glasses gleamed. But Diana noticed none of it.

James smiled contentedly to himself. On the table, there was an assortment of cold meat and cheese, but the main course was the array of pastries. He had seen how Diana enjoyed them, how her eyes lit up when she looked upon sweets, how she nibbled on them with delight.

“You... You did all this?” She didn’t fail to notice the gesture.

“Well, I pay people to do things. I would not call myself a skilled cook.”

“Still...” Diana tilted her head, regarding him.

The way she looked at him made his chest tighten. A tightness that had nothing to do with desire.

“You approve, My Lady?”

“I shall have to try them first.” She smiled.

James had almost forgotten why they were there. Almost. They had eaten a light dinner, and conversation just flowed so easily. Only when Diana decided to turn her attention to the sweets did James suffer. He watched her pink tongue dart out slowly and melt the sugared pastry.

She was savoring each lick, sometimes closing her eyes in delight and lightly moaning. James has never been jealous of a pastry and never wanted to be one so much.

Then, they moved to the velvet settee before the fireplace, wine glasses in hand. They were not close, not yet, but it was not like she was avoiding him, perching on the other side.

“I am afraid I have to ask again. You hid inside the clock?” James asked, amused.

“It is a big clock.”

“I am sure there is a closet or a dark corner you could have hidden in instead.”

“But no one would look for me in the clock.”

“And there is a good reason for that,” James mused. “No sane person would climb in there of their own volition.”

“Exactly! That is the brilliance of the plan.”

“Or reason to question your sanity.”

She glared at him, which made him shake with laughter.

James shook his head and sipped on his wine. "I guess you counted the... minutes till you saw me."

Diana laughed. She truly laughed. He noted that he had made her smirk in irritation, fume in anger, gasp in lust, but laugh? He hadn't made her laugh. And what a sight it was. Her body relaxed, her eyes reflecting the flames, the soft light caressing her limbs and the side of her face and her long black hair, which hung around her shoulders. The sound of her laughter was sweet like the chiming of a bell.

There it is, that tug in my chest.

He couldn't resist. He let his glass down and leaned in. He took a stray dark lock and tucked it behind her ear. It was a simple gesture but so intimate. Diana's breath hitched, and her eyes flicked to his. He let her see it. See how he had been holding back all night, how he was struggling not to devour her whole.

Her chest heaved violently. There was a battle inside her. She knew that she could back down now. End this. But she didn't want to. Her eyes roamed over his whole body slowly, reverently, letting him see her explore first with her eyes.

James groaned under her scrutiny, feeling her eyes caress his body.

The air shifted. His eyes darkened with lust, and his chin dropped. Her pulse quickened, he could almost hear it.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“I wonder, Diana,” James purred, “if those pastries tasted good.”

Diana was still lost in a haze when he drew closer to her. She could not think, her pupils dilated with desire.

“I guess I have to find out,” he rasped.

He leaned in, one hand on the back of the couch and the other on her waist, pulling her closer, their breaths mingling. He brushed his lips against hers slowly, just barely, just enough to make her lean toward him. He cupped her face, his thumb brushing her lower lip.

“So sweet already, Diana,” he murmured, his voice rough.

“You... you haven’t tasted me yet,” Diana pointed out.

“Do you want me to?” he whispered.

Her fingers curled into his shirt, and she shifted closer to him.

“Do you have any idea,” he asked in a molten, dark voice, “what you do to me?”

Diana barely had time to react before his lips crashed onto hers. She gasped, and he swallowed the sound, deepening the kiss and pulling her closer until she was half sitting in his lap. His tongue swept inside her mouth, teasing, demanding, claiming every inch of it, devouring her, coaxing out soft, breathless sounds that only made him kiss her harder.

His hands explored her body, and he longed to finally see what was underneath all her layers. His hand moved to the shoulder of her dress and tugged on the sleeve.

James was a patient man, but when he saw her skin and the lace of her thin nightgown, he could barely keep himself in check.

He tore his mouth from hers and kissed her jaw and down the soft skin of her neck. She moved on pure instinct, her thighs pressing together, and he smiled as he nipped her earlobe. She buried her hands in his hair, tugging lightly and making him moan. Her head lolled back, and her lips parted on a soft whimper. And he had barely started.

James's hand traced the column of her neck, his thumb pressing lightly over her racing pulse before sliding lower, barely grazing the swell of her breasts through the thin fabric of her dress.

“Ah!”

His thumb drew small circles on the swell of her breasts as he licked the sensitive skin behind her ear. He found the delicate neckline of her dress and tugged, the soft fabric sliding down her chest and shoulders, baring inch after inch of skin to his ravenous gaze.

James broke the kiss just long enough to look at her. “Shall I stop, Diana?”

She shook her head violently.

“Answer me,” he ordered, his breath hot on her skin.

“No... please,” she begged breathlessly.

“Oh, My Lady,” he whispered. “I will pleasure you. I will find every spot that makes you quiver,” he promised, letting his fingers dance lightly over her skin. “I will own each and every sigh.”

With a sudden yank, he freed her breasts. He cursed under his breath, his hips jerking just slightly, his hardness straining against his tight breeches.

No, tonight is for her.

He placed an open-mouthed kiss on her collarbone, and then he moved down, trailing kisses over her quivering skin. Both hands cupped her ample breasts, the white mounds spilling out of his palms just enough to make him hungry for them. When his thumb brushed over a stiff nipple, Diana almost catapulted off the sofa.

“No, Diana, I want you here,” he warned, kneading her flesh.

“I am... I am here.”

“Good,” he murmured.

Diana moaned in delight, his mouth, his hands, his body all devoted to her. The sound was music to his ears, but he knew he could make her more desperate, more breathless. Without warning, he flicked his tongue against her nipple.

“James!” Diana cried out.

“That’s it,” he encouraged.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

He licked and nipped and wrapped his lips around the rosy peaks, torturing her. Diana was trembling in his arms, and he had just started. She was so responsive to his touch, as if she was born to be in his arms, pressed against him.

“How very, very sweet,” he murmured against her skin, his voice thick with satisfaction.

His tongue did wicked things to her, lapping at and licking each peak with slow, torturous strokes. When he bit her lightly, she sobbed his name, her fingers savagely pulling on his hair.

His hand slowly trailed down her chest, over her stomach, and stroked her waist while he continued worshipping her breasts. Her whole being was tense in the loveliest way, arching into his mouth, pulling him closer.

James pulled her leg up and reached down to her ankle while giving attention to her neck, making sure her exposed breasts were squished against his chest. Diana dared to demand more, her hands fisting in his shirt. She dared explore more, and James obliged her. He pulled back slightly to tear his shirt off his body and give her the access she longed for.

At the sight of his bare torso, the defined, sinewy expanse, the dark hair that peppered his chest and his taut abdomen, her breath caught.

“Touch me, Diana,” he whispered against her lips.

“I...”

“It’s only fair, My Lady,” he teased.

He planted a feather-light kiss on her lips. On her jaw. On her neck.

“Touch me.”

Diana shivered, but her hands slid up his arms slowly, only her fingertips touching him. Now his breath caught at that simple, light touch. She stroked his shoulders as he sucked on her skin, licking that sensitive spot behind her ear. Then, she let her palms wander over his chest, her heat setting him ablaze.

He gritted his teeth, barely holding back.

“God, Diana,” he hissed.

The desperation in his voice only egged her on. Her hands roamed over his chest, tentative at first but then bolder, exploring the lines of his muscles and the fine dusting of hair that led below his waistband.

If James let her continue her exploration, the night would end up completely different from what he had planned. No matter how he craved to take her, to be lost inside her, he wanted to see her undone more.

He lifted her slightly and gently laid her on the settee, her back on the soft pillows. He caged her with his body, and she spread her legs on instinct.

“You are so beautiful, Diana,” he purred.

“James, I feel so...”

“If it’s too much?—”

“No!” She grabbed his shoulders for fear he would pull away.

He looked upon her, and his heart soared.

Diana was beautiful. No, she had always been beautiful. Like this, with her hair spread over his velvet pillows, her lips swollen from his kisses, her milky breasts catching the warm firelight, and her eyes heavy-lidded with desire, she was a goddess—adivinegoddess—and he was a mere pilgrim to her beauty.

And he was going to worship her.

## CHAPTER 16

### Silky Touch

Diana looked up at him. He was hovering above her, bare-chested. The flames in the fireplace cast sharp shadows on the angles of his face, making him look so dangerous. The way his eyes bored into hers, heavy, consuming, made her stomach flip.

She was a mess. A trembling, shaking, panting mess. Her limbs were weak, her nerves alight with something she could barely name—something deep and aching, something that coiled tighter the more he touched and kissed her.

“I want to show you, Diana,” he growled. “I need to show you.”

“Show me?” She was dazed.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Yes, show you, My Lady,” he murmured as he leaned closer.

His eyes flicked to her lips as if he hadn’t devoured them already. As if he would starve for them for the rest of his life.

Diana had never felt so wanted, so desired, so cherished in her life. Here, at this moment, she was the most important thing to him.

“Oh, the things I want to show you, Diana. Let me,” he purred against her neck.

“I am all yours tonight,” Diana gasped.

James straightened and kneeled between her legs, his sanity one moan away from snapping. She was doing this to him. She was the one driving him so close to the edge.

Oh, the power. Diana was drunk on all the sensations.

James’s lips curled into something dark, something smug, something triumphant. “You are, wallflower. You are mine. Tonight.”

One finger touched her lips, toyed with her lower lip, and traveled down her neck to her collarbone, to the valley between her breasts. His jaw ticked, his teeth raking over his lower lip.

Diana’s eyes fluttered shut. She writhed under him, arching into his touch. He didn’t stop till he reached her ankle.

His fingers curled around the hem of her dress, and he pulled it higher, his knuckles grazing the little hairs anywhere they touched. Slowly, like they had all the time in the world. Reverently, as if it was an unexplored land he needed to map carefully. And still, he was nowhere near where she was burning, where she needed him most.

“James, I need...”

James was on her again, his hot chest squishing her breasts, one hand pinning both of hers above her head. She gasped, and her body arched to meet him. Every cell in her body longed to touch him, to be touched by him.

“I know what you need, My Lady.” He licked her upper lip.

Diana let out a soft, desperate sound. He chuckled, and that dark, pleased sound that rumbled in his chest made her quake with anticipation. The promises that sound held.

James dipped his head to her neck, pressing his lips to her rapid pulse to seal his promise.

“But not before I make you tremble with want, with expectation. Not before I wring every ounce of desire from your beautiful body, Diana. You gave yourself to me.”

He hooked her leg around his waist and ground his hips against hers.

“I will do to you every”—his hand squeezed her thigh—“wicked”—a long pull on her nipple—“delectable thing I have dreamed of.”

Diana writhed under him, not knowing what was worse—his torturous hand, his scandalous tongue, or his shameful mouth.

“Anything, something,” she begged.

She didn't even know what she was begging for, but she knew that if he touched her there, she would explode. And if he didn't, she would die.

"Patience." James chuckled.

Frustration rose inside her, but before she collected herself, his hand moved up and spread over her thigh, which was a quivering mass. He drew patterns on her skin as his lips brushed her temple.

Diana let out a soft, choked cry, her hips bucking on instinct, her body seeking more—seeking him.

He chuckled again. "So eager, so responsive, my little student."

Diana knew she should be furious at him. But there was nothing else in her body other than the liquid heat that coiled low in her belly. Only he could free her from this torment.

But he was taking his time. His fingers lazily ghosted over the back of her thigh, kneading her flesh. Branding his touch onto her skin. Then, ever so lightly, he traced the edge of her drawers. A feather-light touch that made her twitch and hold her breath.

"You so desperately need me to touch you."

"I do, My Lord."

Almost there.

Diana bit her lip to stop herself from cursing, almost losing control. And then she felt the barest brush of his fingers through the damp fabric between her thighs.

“Ah!” she whimpered.

“That’s it,” he praised in a sinful voice.

He didn’t withdraw his fingers. Instead, he pressed more firmly. And although it was nearly not enough, Diana was writhing under him. Again. And again.

James rested his forehead on hers, swearing under his breath, inhaling through his nose deeply.

“So wet for me, My Lady.”

Diana would have blushed if she was not burning already, if she cared at all how beyond the lines this was. Her mind, her ever-wondering mind, had shut down, and her body was claiming the pleasure it was owed.

His fingers pushed the silk aside. Time came to a standstill. This was it. She knew it. The point of no return. He would touch her where she hadn’t been touched.

She expected fear, panic, shame. But the only thing she felt was a shift in her body to accommodate his exploring fingers.

The first stroke shattered her. An unintelligible sound left her lips, a sound she never knew she could produce, so low, guttural, and almost devastating.

James leaned up, one hand still keeping her arms pinned above her head. She knew why. If she were to touch him, he would throw all caution out of the window. She could see his handsome face tight with restraint, his lower lip permanently trapped under his teeth.

“More!” she begged shamelessly.

“Just like that. Let me hear you, My Lady,” he groaned.

His fingers mapped her core. He slid a finger into her heat, and she was wrecked. The sounds were wet and sinful.

She lost all control. She ached for his touch, her eyes hooded, her jaw slack, as she couldn’t believe what was happening to her. The pleasure was too sharp, too much. Her body moved as if it had a mind of its own, chasing each stroke, each wicked, teasing thrust of his fingers.

And then James withdrew his hand.

“God! No!” she sobbed.

“You are trembling, Diana.”

“James.” Diana fought to free herself.

“Tell me, My Lady,” he whispered in her ear. “What do you want?”

“James, please.” She arched her back, seeking some friction.

“Please what?”

“Give me what I need, please!” Diana all but screamed.

“And what do you need?”

“I...”

“Say it.”

“Touch me!”

James chuckled and moved lower, releasing her hands. Diana’s breath caught as realization dawned on her.

He can’t be?—

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

“Oh, I will do so much more.”

He didn't even let her think about more. He was already there, his shoulders wedged between her thighs.

“James, what...?”

James let out a dark, satisfied sound that sent shivers down her spine. Then, he looked up at her. “I told you, My Lady. I need to taste how sweet you are.”

Diana was ready to protest, to say something—anything. This couldn't be happening. Till it was.

His mouth was on her. She screamed. He growled against her, but he didn't stop. He devoured her with long, torturous strokes.

Diana lost all control of her body. She arched her back and pressed her head into the soft pillows. Her hands flew to his hair, her fingers tangling into the brown curls as he teased her, leading her to something unfathomable.

He was drinking her in like a starved man, all his being devoted to her. His fingers were tight around her thighs to keep her exactly where he wanted her. The muscles in his back were tense as he struggled to keep himself in check.

She was lost, her modesty in shambles as his tongue teased her relentlessly. The air had rushed out of her lungs, and her heart couldn't keep up with the rest of her body. She was climbing a peak that would kill her, yet she didn't care.

“Yes!”

She could feel him smile against her, and she ground against his devilish lips. Higher, and higher, faster and faster, harder and harder. Her body was a bow ready to snap.

What was happening to her?

And then he did that with his lips.

Diana shattered. Her entire body bowed off the settee, her vision going white as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her.

“James!” she screamed, shaking, writhing, gasping.

She was swimming in a sea of bliss, her body reduced to nothingness, unable to even blink.

James rose to his knees between her legs, his lips glistening. The look in his eyes was soft, warm. He leaned into her, his weight comforting. Then, he pressed his lips to her forehead, his thumb tracing small, soothing circles on her hip.

“Breathe, Diana,” he whispered, his voice rough with reverence.

Diana looked at him and mustered whatever strength she had left to cup his cheek in her hand. His eyes lit up, and he grabbed her hand and kissed the pulse on her wrist.

“By the way, My Lady.” He smirked. “You taste delicious.”

## CHAPTER 17

Punching Bag

It had been days. Days. And James still couldn't forget how she felt against him, how beautiful she looked against the velvet pillows, how intoxicating the way she trusted him to touch her where no one ever had.

And yet there was no way that he could get her out of his head. All his mind could do was replay that night, bring forth every curve of her body, the way her feminine and sweet scent filled the air, the softness of her skin.

All he could feel was her wet core, aching for his touch. All he could hear was how she gasped his name. And all he could taste was her skin, her juices. It was as if she was haunting him.

"Get out of my head, Diana," he whispered.

Even now, in his copper bathtub, with steam swirling around, she was still in his mind. He had a hellish day, neck-deep in inspections and work, obligations and receipts. But she found a way to creep into his thoughts constantly. And now, as he almost drifted off from exhaustion in the hot water, she was there. Breathless and open for him. Her head dipped back, sighing his name. Her hands tangled in his hair, trembling as she unraveled against his mouth.

James exhaled sharply through his nose, his chest rising and falling too fast, too unevenly. It was maddening. But no matter how hard he fought it, he could still feel her.

"Blast it!"

He closed his eyes and threw his head back, his Adam's apple bobbing. His breath hitched as his hips shifted beneath the water—an unconscious movement, instinct taking over. His fingers twitched at his sides. His thighs tensed. His own body was betraying him.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am*

A hand moved and touched his torso and then lower. Lower, where he was painfully hard. One touch, just one. His fingers wrapped around his length. His hips arched into his touch, his whole body thrumming with need.

His grip tightened. One stroke. Sharp pleasure shot through him. Another stroke and his mouth fell open. Harder now. A ragged groan tore from his throat.

His eyes snapped open. No! Not like this. His hand shot away, slamming into the side of the tub. He almost lost himself again. Like on that night with her. Control was slipping away from him when it came to her.

He had known desire before. Of course, he had. He had taken lovers, he had indulged. He had walked away from each one sated and detached, his appetite satisfied, his emotions unscathed. But this... this was something else. No woman had ever done this to him.

“Oh, Diana,” he snarled.

No. He would not find release alone, in the dark, haunted by memories of her. It would be with her, wrapped around her, inside her.

“Is the new recipe not to your liking, James?” Euphemia asked when she saw him playing with his food the next morning.

He didn’t even care what the thing on his plate tasted like. He managed to muster a smile for her and took a bite.

“I think it’s too sweet for my taste,” he muttered.

“And here I was thinking you have a soft spot for sweet things,” Euphemia teased.

“When they are overly sweet, they just spoil the taste.”

Euphemia shook her head at his wickedness. “Did I ever thank you for accompanying your father to the ball the other day?”

“Multiple times.”

Again, as if summoned, his father entered the room. James looked up at him, and his body tensed.

“Mother.” Solomon seemed almost happy. “Good morning, James.”

James only nodded at him.

“I have been wanting to check in on the Richerton ledgers and prepare them—” Solomon started.

“I have done that already,” James cut in.

“I was invited to the party’s talks to discuss the position on the latest legislature?—”

“The secretary has been informed of my position. When the legislature is out, we can have a more educated position. Do not listen to a word that man says.”

Solomon was taken aback by the cold way James addressed him. Even so, there was a slight look of pride on his face.

Which pissed James even more.

His father had no right to be proud. James's being in such a position was all his doing.

“And the proposed reforms on land taxation?”

James looked over his coffee cup slowly, blinking as if bored. “I’ve already ensured that our interests are protected. The matter has been handled, Your Grace.”

There was no mistaking the bite in his words. Not ‘Father.’ Not ‘Solomon.’ But ‘Your Grace.’ A title. A formality. A reminder.

Solomon stilled, his eyes flicking up to his son. James met his gaze, unflinching.

“Oh, our James is so capable,” Euphemia chimed in.

“Politics and money he can manage fairly well, it seems,” Solomon acknowledged. “It’s his personal life he has a hard time to put in order.”

James’s jaw ticked in irritation. His fingers curled into a fist at his side, but his voice remained level, cold. “I was not aware you had taken an interest in my personal life, Your Grace.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“I take an interest in anything that threatens the legacy of this family.”

James’s face contorted into such a thunderous expression that Euphemia coughed to make him rethink the words she saw brewing in his mind.

“I am simply carrying the legacy that was given to me.”

Solomon reared back at the open blow. He inhaled and tried to regain his composure. James was still surprised at how difficult it was for his father to see that he was no longer a boy.

“I am merely observing that you have cultivated a reputation that no respectable family in England would wish to be associated with.”

James chuckled cruelly. “Ah, the libertine rake. Mothers have been weeping in terror at the thought of their delicate daughters being in my presence.”

Solomon was not amused. His blue eyes, the same ones James had, turned icy cold. “No father with any sense would consider you a respectable match.”

James arched an eyebrow. “What a tragedy.”

His father’s jaw tightened. “You are thirty-two years old, James. You have squandered years of opportunity. You need a wife.”

“Need? I do not need anything. Perhaps you can stop meddling with my affairs.”

“You need an heir, or else all we have worked hard for?—”

“All I have worked hard for,” James bit out.

Solomon raised his hands. “You haven’t shirked your duties, son. I never said that.”

The moment that word—son—left his lips, James got up, ready to storm out.

“You have done well, James,” Solomon said slowly. “But you are still alone.”

James inhaled sharply. He clenched his jaw and straightened his shirt to keep his hands from doing something utterly stupid. Then, with a cold look, he regarded his father.

“I have always been alone, Your Grace.”

He kissed his grandmother and left the room, but Solomon had the audacity to follow him into the hallway.

“James.” His father’s voice carried across the hallway. “The amusements fade, the scandals grow old. What then? Build something, that is all I am saying.”

James didn’t even dignify that with an answer and rushed out of the house.

When in this state, there was only one place James could go. The ring. The only place he could unleash all this energy, the frustration, the anger. And that was what he did.

The moment he stepped into the Gentleman Boxing Saloon, he felt at ease.

The air was thick with the smell of sweat and the steady thud of skin against skin. The spacious, open room that was lined with weights, training equipment, and photos

was familiar to him. Here, he could take out all his wrath in a manner that wouldn't end in disaster or a scandal worthy of exile.

"It is never good news when you send word to meet here." Richard came to his side.

James said nothing, just removed his coat and waistcoat and almost tore off his cravat. He rolled his sleeves up, and just like that, he had shed all the polished, civilized look of a gentleman.

"Are we sparring or what?"

"Like I would allow you to murder anyone else tonight."

James exhaled, rolling back his shoulders, his breath coming sharp and controlled.

Richard moved first. Fast. Efficient. A quick jab that James easily dodged.

"Still quick, I see." He grinned.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“While you got slow.” James circled him. “Marriage has made you soft.”

Richard shrugged off the comment with a strict look. But his eyes were sharper now. Focused. “Well, if I win, I can go to Selina and celebrate.”

A sharp uppercut that nearly knocked James off balance. Nearly. James avoided it and landed a punch to Richard’s ribs.

Richard bounced away with that infuriating smile of his. “If I lose, I can play the wounded husband and have my wife take care of me.”

Another hit. Another dodge. Perfect rhythm.

Richard was cold, tactical energy. James was fiery fury. Soon, all the gentlemen gathered to watch them fight.

“While you, my friend,” Richard said between jabs, “will spend the rest of the night alone.”

James’s next punch came too fast, too forceful. Richard barely dodged, stepping just out of reach. But James was even faster, and another punch connected with his friend’s ribs.

“Oh, I touched a nerve, James?” Richard said casually. “Can it be that a woman has the mighty Crawford wound up?”

James landed a brutal, well-placed blow that sent Richard stumbling back. A ripple of

murmurs from the audience echoed through the room.

James stepped back, rolling back his shoulders. “This match is over.”

Richard, still grinning despite the pain, clutched his ribs and exhaled sharply. “Did I just live to see the day, James?”

“Go on and see how long you will live.”

James grabbed a towel to wipe the sweat off his face. He moved to the lounge and ordered brandy before he flopped down onto a leather chair. Not long after, Richard joined him.

“You are really in a foul mood, my friend,” Richard noted.

“It is in your best interest to keep your mouth shut, Seymour.”

“So, you just invited me here to be your punching bag, that’s what it is? Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” Richard scoffed, taking a long sip of whiskey.

James said nothing. Because his mind wasn’t there. It was elsewhere. On the woman he refused to think about. The way he felt, the way she felt when he was between her ivory thighs. He downed the brandy and asked for another.

Richard, ever the damn nuisance, studied him with that sharp, knowing look. James had always been grateful to have a friend like him, but right now James hated the way Richard knew that something was gnawing at him.

“You’re thinking too much,” Richard observed, swirling his drink.

“You are assuming I have time for idle thoughts,” James said curtly.

“James, talk to me. This is why you called me here. Unless I did something I am not aware of that deserved such a beating.”

James looked at him sideways. Richard was frowning, studying him. As if he knew. As if he was starting to understand that the casual banter about a woman wasn't just teasing. As if he could see what the mere thought of Diana did to him.

“Solomon seems to think that I have failed.”

Richard's face contorted with wrath. He was privy to everything going on in James's life, and James felt comfortable enough to talk to him about some of them.

“That is unfair.” Richard leaned forward. “You've done admirably. Your fortune is almost doubled. You're a ruthless bastard in Parliament, and many people respect you for that. And you've been doing it since you were a boy. I hope you are not taking all this nonsense seriously.”

“He thinks I failed as a man.”

“Ah.” Richard sipped on his drink.

James clenched his jaw. “He is wrong.”

“Is he?” Richard studied him.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

James's bloodied knuckles tightened. "I do not care what he thinks."

"Forget about Solomon, James. Do you feel you have failed as a man?"

James got up and shot his friend a baleful look. "Perhaps I hit you too hard. Go to your wife, Seymour."

Then, he turned his back and left.

He stepped out into the cool night air, rolling back his shoulders and exhaling sharply. The fight should have left him satisfied. The brandy should have drowned the unease in his chest. But neither had. His mind was still too full, too loud, caught between desire and rage.

Without conscious thought, he made a decision about what to focus on. He would see her soon. Diana.

## CHAPTER 18

### Bizarre Inquiries

Diana was going through her morning mail. Invitations to balls, musicales, and charity functions. She almost missed it. The envelope was different—heavier, thicker, and more luxurious than generic printed invitations. Then, she caught it. The Pemberton crest.

She hesitated. Her heart fluttered, and she bit her lip. Could that be a letter from

James?

Had he decided to find another way to torture her other than his voice, his words, his laughter, his body, his touch, his mouth?

No. Of course not. He would never do something this formal. That meant that...

Impatiently, she broke the seal and scanned the elegant handwriting before concentrating on the words.

Lady Diana,

I trust this letter finds you well.

I would be honored to extend an invitation for tea at Pemberton House.

I have been informed that you are acquainted with my son. I find myself rather curious about your person, and I would like for us to meet.

If you would do me the kindness of accepting, my carriage will collect you at three o'clock.

I trust you will find our conversation enlightening.

Solomon Bolton, Duke of Pemberton.

Diana read the letter. Again. And one more time. She wasn't sure how many times it was appropriate to read a letter from the father of the man who knew intimately how she tasted.

Surely once was enough. Twice, for good measure. Three times? Indulgent. But five

times? That bordered on madness. And yet there she was, reading it again as if the words might change. As if they might offer her an answer she did not have.

I have been informed that you are acquainted with my son.

Diana nearly snorted. Acquainted? She was acquainted with his mouth on her neck, with his hands on her body, with the wicked sound of his voice when he whispered things no gentleman should say to a lady.

Oh, acquainted alright.

Panic then entered the scene.

Did he know?

Did James's father know about their... agreement?

I trust you will find our conversation enlightening.

Diana struggled to read between the lines. Was he going to expose her? Accuse her of trying to ruin his son's reputation to perhaps force him into marriage?

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Alright, I need to ask.” Elizabeth’s voice brought her back to the sunny drawing room. “What is that letter you keep reading?”

“Nothing.” Diana hastened to fold the letter and place it by her teacup.

“Interesting how many times can one read nothing.” Her sister-in-law was too observant for her own good.

“It’s an invitation that I am debating whether I should accept.”

“Suitor?” Elizabeth’s eyes twinkled.

“Nothing like that. Just some social event.”

“I am teasing you. I knew from the way you read it that it was not a love letter.”

“Love letter? Elizabeth!”

Diana was still furious, while Elizabeth was shaking with laughter. She wished she shared the sentiment. But by three o’clock, she had to make a decision.

The carriage rolled up the drive at three o’clock sharp, and Diana climbed in. Not too long after, it rolled to a stop in front of the grand, imposing entrance of Pemberton House.

Diana couldn’t help but notice how beautiful the place was. She had expected something more intimidating like James. But it had a beauty about it, a delicate

splendor that made her smile. Somehow, this huge, magnificent place reminded her of the little house James took her to that night.

She was greeted by a butler who led her down a marble hallway to a large, well-lit study.

The Duke was waiting. Even if she didn't remember seeing him by James's side, she would still recognize him as his father. He stood up as she entered the room—a polite but distant gesture.

“Lady Diana,” Solomon said in a measured tone, bowing slightly. “I trust your journey was pleasant?”

“It was, thank you,” Diana replied, her voice tight as she curtsied.

She looked around nervously but discreetly, and quickly realized that whatever this was, James was not here. She started to panic, all sorts of scenarios going through her mind.

“Please, make yourself comfortable.” Solomon guided her to the small sofa in his study, leaving the door open and the butler standing outside.

Comfortable?

Diana smiled and took a seat. A fresh teapot was served already, and Solomon hastened to pour and offer her a cup. For a few moments, they just drank their tea in silence.

“Lady Diana,” Solomon began, eventually. “I knew of your father, but I never had the pleasure of meeting you or your siblings. You are the youngest, am I correct?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Diana smiled.

“I have heard that your brother is bearing your father’s title with honor and dignity.”

“Stephen is doing an admirable job of taking care of the family. I am grateful for that. He had to take on so much after our parents died.”

She noticed that Solomon tensed up at the last comment. He clenched his jaw, and his grip on his cup tightened. For a moment, he looked away, almost wincing in pain.

“I hear that he is happily married.”

“Very much so. I am lucky to have Elizabeth as my sister-in-law. I know there are some terrifying stories about sisters living with their brothers’ spouses. I can assure you, I couldn’t be happier to have her as a sister and a friend.”

“The Duchess of Seymour is also your sister. Richard is one of my son’s closest friends.”

Diana swallowed her tea at the mention of James. She watched Solomon, who was also studying her. It was obvious that he didn’t invite her to talk about her family. It was bound that James would be mentioned. The real question was what the endgame was.

“Yes, Selina got married to Richard four years ago.”

“A good match as well. Richard is a person of rare integrity. I am sure, judging by yourself, that the boy I’ve known for many years is happy with your sister.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Thank you for your kind words, Your Grace,” Diana said gracefully, but then she decided to try a little offense. “I also have one brother—Herbert. Still unmarried. I believe he is involved in a business venture with Lord Crawford.”

“I imagine it could be so. My son is not one to sit idly and just enjoy the income the estate generates.”

It was the Duke’s turn to study her.

Diana was smiling, but inside, she was wary. She had heard the rumor that the Duke of Pemberton was... well, mad. It was not an easy feeling to sit across from someone with such a reputation. She had been expecting a reaction when she brought up James.

Instead, she saw a look that she could only describe as pride. And then it withered, and the Duke’s shoulders sagged.

It seemed that James was right, after all. Gossip was never the whole truth.

Solomon Bolton was neither crazy nor mad. He was severe, yes, but not unkind or unstable. There was something measured in the way he spoke, something controlled in his every movement. For the first time since arriving at Pemberton House, Diana realized just how much the rumors had misled her.

“What are you reading at the moment, Lady Diana?”

The question threw her off. She knew that the Duke would be more interested in her

than her family, but for him to assume that she enjoyed reading...

He didn't ask if she was reading. He asked what she was reading.

"How did you know I enjoy reading, Your Grace?"

"You observe before you speak," he said. "You weigh your words. People who do that are either liars or scholars."

And the ton called this man a madman.

Diana smiled, truly smiled this time. "I have decided to try my hand at Thucydides, Your Grace."

"I will not even pretend to know anything about that. I am not a scholar, you see. It is James who is the reader in the family."

Diana's breath caught. Even hearing his name flustered her, and remembering their philosophical banter made her even more bothered. It was a part of James that she liked a lot. The other, she'd rather not bring up in front of his father.

"I understand that James has won five promenades with you," Solomon said flatly.

"Yes." Diana mustered her acting skills. "A little ruse from Selina to raise more money for the hospital. Lord Crawford graciously donated a generous amount to the cause."

"I am sure he found that auction quite amusing. So, I gather you are spending some time together."

Diana felt a shiver run down her spine. Surely, the Duke couldn't have known about

the agreement she and James had?

“Lord Crawford has honored his commitment,” Diana answered diplomatically.

Solomon set his cup down carefully, his fingers lingering on the delicate porcelain as if he were gathering his thoughts. His gaze remained steady on her. Not unkind, but assessing.

“What do you think of my son, Lady Diana?”

Oh.

Diana panicked. This felt like an ambush. Either a father who wanted to warn a woman away from his son or a father who was just interviewing a potential daughter-in-law. She would have thought all about that if she didn’t catch his body stiffen.

No, this was something different. She had the feeling that his question was not a trap. It was genuine.

Diana decided to trust her instincts.

“Well...” She smiled softly. “I can tell you this. Lord Crawford is not boring.”

Solomon relaxed and smiled back. “That is for sure. Never a dull moment with James. But don’t you find his... intensity overwhelming?”

Diana had to try really hard not to frown. She started having the suspicion that the Duke had invited her with one clear purpose. And that was to talk about his son.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

She took a sip of her tea, trying to gather her thoughts. Because right now, she was having a hard time focusing. Between trying to assess the situation and hearing his father speak of intensity...

Sure, James was intense, relentless, dominating, powerful. She had a front-row seat to all of it, his hands commanding, his breath on her skin making her lose all thought.

Yes, overwhelming might be an understatement. But that was information she wouldn't divulge to his father even on her deathbed.

"I agree that some would call it overwhelming. But others might call it conviction." She tilted her head.

Solomon's face lit up. Perhaps he was expecting some long list of complaints about the time she had spent with James. But she was a very satisfied participant.

"And how would you call it, Lady Diana?"

"I find it refreshing that Lord Crawford is unapologetically himself. If he is angry, he displays his distaste. If he is entertained, he laughs with his whole body. He doesn't really care what others think of him simply because he knows very well who he is."

Diana realized that she got carried away and talked too much about James—longer than a lady who was supposedly just promenading with him. But Solomon looked out the window in a thoughtful way.

"Yes. He was always like that."

Diana glanced at him, sensing the weight of his words. He was not speaking about the James the world knew. The same man she thought she met at her sister's auction. The rake, the charmer, the man who played games with his reputation and everyone else's expectations.

No, this was something deeper.

"And yet," Solomon continued, his tone thoughtful, "it is a difficult thing to sustain, always being at war with the world."

Diana's breath hitched. Solomon studied her face, and an understanding passed between them.

There was more to James's unforgiving persona. Diana had started to notice that beneath the charm and the wicked smiles and the shameless flirtation, James never let his guard down.

Except perhaps...

"I was surprised to find out that he was captain of Pop." Diana dispelled the heavy atmosphere.

Solomon smiled and was ready to say something when an elderly woman entered the room.

"Solomon!"

She had an air of practiced grace about her. Her back was straight, and her stride was steady. Diana recognized immediately that clever glint that James had.

So, this is the woman who created that perfect gorgeous, insufferable monster?

Diana rose instinctively and bobbed a curtsy. Solomon rose, too, with a warm smile on his lips. There was love in this vast house. It was sad that an unfortunate death kept it from blooming. She, too, had experienced loss. She knew how crippling it could be.

“Lady Diana, may I present my mother, the Dowager Duchess of Pemberton,” Solomon said.

“Nonsense.” The elderly lady waved a dismissive hand. “I insist that you call me Euphemia, please. I am way too old, and I’d rather finish a conversation without all these formalities that make it last twice as long.”

“A pleasure, Your?—”

A raised eyebrow from Euphemia made Diana chuckle.

“A pleasure, Euphemia.”

“Perfect.” Euphemia sat down beside her, and Solomon handed her a cup of tea. “You must be none other than Lady Diana. You are much more pretty than the rumors say.”

“Most kind of you.”

“So, you are the one my grandson trapped into five promenades with his insufferable self.”

Ooh, she is good.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

Diana was amused. She either insulted James before his father and grandmother or defended him.

“You seem too sure that he is the one who set the trap, Euphemia.”

The old lady bowed at Diana’s wit with a knowing smile. But as she sipped her tea, Diana did not miss the look Euphemia gave Solomon. It was brief, fleeting, but sharp. A scolding, without a word spoken.

And thus Diana understood. Solomon had called her here in secret. James would not have known. If Diana knew him a little, she was sure that this would make him livid.

With her mind clouded by everything that had just transpired, she barely noticed the carriage ride home. A thousand thoughts warred in her mind, but one rose above the rest. If she could help this family heal, she would do it.

## CHAPTER 19

### Rose Petals

The moment James stepped into his carriage, no amount of self-reproach could change that simple, irrefutable fact. He was impatient to see her.

Sure, this was another chance to feel the thrill of another lesson, the excitement of finding a way to keep her away from prying eyes. To have her all to himself, her lips, her body, her sighs. Yes, the pleasure was exquisite, even though he had yet to reap anything for himself. But he would be lying.

He also longed and craved for the sharpness of her mind, the fire in her eyes when she snapped at him, the breathless laugh she barely let escape when he pushed her too far.

He arrived at Westall Estate and was shown to the drawing room. He could barely hold back from brushing past the butler to get in and finally see her, bathed in the sun. He was considering a thousand things he could say to greet her, to vex and tease her only for her to whip him back with some clever retort.

He entered the drawing room with a mischievous smile on his lips.

“Welcome, Lord Crawford.”

He was greeted not by Diana, but by her eldest brother.

Stephen Wilkins was waiting for him with the ease of a brilliant strategist setting a trap. Only, James was not some innocent prey.

“So nice of you to personally welcome me in your house, Your Grace.”

“I figured that since you’ll soon stop coming around, I should at least welcome you once.” Stephen smiled coldly.

The Duke wasn’t even trying to be subtle—after the fifth promenade, James would no longer be welcome in Westall Estate.

Stephen stood by the fireplace, his stance deceptively relaxed. But James wasn’t fooled. Everything about him was controlled, measured. The kind of man who never needed to raise his voice to remind you who had the power.

“How ominous, Your Grace.” James smirked. “You can’t possibly mean that after the

fifth promenade, the doors of Westall Estate will be forever closed to me.”

Stephen smiled a hard smile. “Not at all. I merely figured that there would not be any more reason for you to visit. I am sure your schedule is quite busy.”

You will shift your attention to another prey, James translated.

“That is totally up to Lady Diana.”

“Ah, then my decision to greet you was right.” Stephen’s voice turned cold. “I am sure my sister will be glad that this silly prank Selina set up will soon be over.”

There was a pang in James’s heart. That was the deal. Five promenades and nothing more. They had two more promenades. After that...

“We shall see, won’t we?” James said in that smug way that was sure to make the whole of ton want to smack him. “I trust that Lady Diana is more than capable of making the right decision for herself.”

Stephen narrowed his eyes at him.

Twice now in a matter of minutes, James had given Diana the one thing that all the ladies of the ton craved—choice. Both men looked at each other and forfeited. No matter their silly manly games, Diana would do exactly what she wanted. And they both respected her for that.

“My sister will, in fact, make the best decision for herself and see that this unpleasant situation should be nothing but a prank to laugh about.”

James was furious to hear him reduce what he and Diana shared to a prank. He would very much like to throw in Stephen’s face the way his little sister came undone by his

mouth. Instead, he exhaled sharply through his nose, shaking his head with something dangerously close to amusement.

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“How fascinating,” he murmured, adjusting his cuffs, “that you speak with such certainty about what Lady Diana will find amusing.”

Stephen’s jaw tightened.

James smirked and went for the kill. “I am sure you know as well as I do that Lady Diana has a mind of her own.”

Before Stephen could reply, the door flew open with a sharp crack.

“Is there a particular reason my name is being tossed around like a piece of evening gossip?”

Diana walked in, bathed in sunlight and utterly magnificent, her gaze darting between the two men with a mix of suspicion and irritation.

James instantly forgot about Stephen. All that mattered at that moment was how bright her eyes were as she looked at him, making his heart ache to bask in that light. How cute her lips, which he could not wait to see form sharp remarks or let out sighs of pleasure.

“My Lady.” He bowed to her, eyeing her with a wicked look.

He went to her, took her hand, and bowed to kiss it, earning himself a sharp cough from Stephen. But he paid no mind to the Duke. He was truly excited to see her, and somehow she seemed to be even more lovely than he remembered. And the small smile she gave him said that she, too, was happy to see him.

“Diana,” Stephen said warmly.

James heard all he needed to hear in that simple address. The man was not trying to protect the family’s honor and all that. He was genuinely worried about his little sister. James could respect that.

“Tea, My Lord?” Diana asked.

“I think the day is splendid, My Lady!” James smiled a genuine smile. “How about we visit the Chelsea Physic Garden? I am sure Mrs. Bremford would appreciate it, as well.”

Diana’s eyes widened at his open implication. Many distractions there for the impressionable chaperone and many hidden corners for intimate lessons.

She shook her head in that reprimanding way of hers that wasn’t the least bit convincing. “Lead the way, My Lord.”

Gravel crunched beneath their feet as they strolled deeper into the lush, fragrant haven of the Chelsea Physic Garden. Sunlight filtered through the trees, casting dappled patterns over the stone pathways, and the air hummed with the scent of blooming lavender and warm earth.

It was a perfect day, and James was determined to make it even more so.

“This is splendid!” Diana was genuinely excited.

James felt proud. He had made her eyes shine so bright and her lips curl into a sincere smile.

What was this strange satisfaction of making her happy? It had nothing to do with

physical attraction. Somehow, this simple act made him feel a sense of fulfillment that no other achievement had managed to do.

He looked down at Diana, her delicate arm wrapped around his. His body was on fire—he desperately wanted to touch her. Or teach her how to touch him. The thought hit him hard, and he bit his lip to hold back a deep moan.

“I am glad you enjoy it, My Lady,” he said in that deep voice that he knew made the small hair on the nape of her neck rise. “Though with all these winding paths, I am afraid you will stray away from me.”

Diana smiled, and her fingers brushed the petals of a flower. James followed that gesture and longed to feel that touch on his skin.

“I have yet to determine whether escape is necessary, My Lord.”

James smirked, stepping closer. Not close enough to touch, but close enough that she would feel him there.

“I do enjoy a chase,” he murmured.

Diana turned to him, her eyes gleaming with something deep. But it was not the lustful look James was hoping to see. It was something unreadable.

“What if I don’t want to run?” Diana retorted. “Would it bore you, My Lord? I hate to think that I have to resort to such physical exertion on such a hot day.”

James pulled her even closer while glancing at the chaperone, who was too far back down the path.

“I do have some other kind of physical exertion in mind that you might find more

pleasurable.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

Taking one last look at Mrs. Bremford, who was leaning over some rare rose shrubs, James grabbed Diana's hand. He led her off the path, his grip firm but gentle, and guided her between two towering hedges. And Diana let herself be carried away.

He pulled aside the cascading wisteria to hide them. The moment they were away from inquisitive eyes, he didn't even hesitate. He was starving for her, and he wasn't going to deny himself the nourishment he needed.

He cupped her face, and his body folded to reach her lips. He knew that it wasn't going to be slow, but this kind of whirlwind caught him by surprise. His tongue found its way to hers in a wet, hard kiss that made him growl. His hands dropped to her waist, and he pulled her flush against him, not even air separating them.

"James," she gasped as she felt his hardness.

His lips fell on her neck, to that spot he memorized, that spot that made her whimper and tremble in his arms. His fingers fluttered over the neckline of her dress, and he bit her lower lip softly.

"Oh, I feel like I am unwrapping a present, Diana," he whispered in her ear.

Her fingers curled into his coat, gripping it hard. How responsive she was to his touch, as if she were made the way he liked. His fingers brushed the edge of her sleeve, his thumb pressing into the fabric, ready to pull?—

"I bet you were spoiled as a child," Diana said between sighs.

James froze. There was something in the way she said it. It wasn't just a jab. He leaned back and looked at her. Her lips were swollen, and her cheeks were flushed. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths, and he could see how her breasts ached for his touch.

She wanted this, wanted him. But her eyes...

"Diana," he murmured, slow and careful. "What are you doing?"

She blinked up at him, all wide-eyed innocence.

Diana did a lot of things, from being blatantly honest to downright hurling insults, but feigning innocence? Never.

"Just making conversation, My Lord."

James studied her. His instincts, the ones that never failed him, the ones that had kept him alive in every game of wit and power he had ever played, were whispering now.

Something wasn't right.

He straightened on purpose to intimidate her. And it worked. Diana swallowed.

Oh, there is something she is not telling me.

"Just conversation, My Lady?" he asked pointedly. "And what would you like to know?"

"Just... I was... You know that I am an orphan too, and it just hit me that you?—"

"Now? While I was kissing you, that thought crossed your mind?" James taunted. "I

think I should be offended.”

Diana looked away for a second. For her to back away from a battle meant that she was mustering her courage for a serious attack.

“I was thinking that this loss connected us. And then I thought that you at least have your father.”

James felt a cold shiver crawl up his spine. Why was she mentioning his father?

He tilted his head and looked into her eyes. Diana avoided his gaze.

For the first time since they met, Diana was lying to him. A sharp pain gripped him.

“Diana!” he pressed.

She had the decency to respect him enough and stop playing around. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and looked him right in the eyes.

That is my Diana.

The fire inside him died down.

“I met your father.”

James took a step back, and his hands slipped from her waist. “You did what?”

“Your father sent me an invitation for tea. I couldn’t refuse. James, I just?—”

“You went behind my back?” James heard how hurt he sounded.

Diana heard it, too, under the rage in his eyes.

“James, I assumed you knew. I expected you to be there, but then I realized...”

“And yet you didn’t tell me.”

“Because I knew you’d react this way,” Diana countered.

“So, you thought to what? Ease me into it when I was too crazed to realize? It seems that the student has surpassed the master,” James spat. “You quickly learned to use your charms for your own gain.”

“James! I was trying to help.”

“Help?” James snarled.

“You don’t understand.” Her voice rose, her frustration flaring. “James, I sat across from a man who has spent years grieving for his wife, who has spent years regretting the distance with his only son. I know what it feels like to lose a parent. I know what

it does to a person. I wanted to spare you?—”

“How dare you!”

Diana’s breath caught.

James stepped closer. His voice was lower now, sharper, lethal. “How dare you insert yourself into my family, into my pain, as if you had any right to interfere?”

“I only?—”

“So, we had some fun, a mutually entertaining agreement, and you thought that you had a claim on me?”

Diana’s chest rose and fell too quickly. His words landed like blows. He looked menacing like this, unhinged. As if he was utterly appalled that she dared more than a simple carnal exchange.

“I see,” she said flatly.

She stiffened, her hands shaking.

James saw it. The way her chin trembled, the way she blinked too quickly, fighting whatever storm raged behind her eyes.

But he was too furious to tamp down the rage inside him. He didn’t even know what he was angry at. His father abandoning him for years, him coming back, Diana betraying him, allowing her to come so close, foolishly believing that?—

“I think it’s best that I take you home.” James turned his back on her.

She said nothing on the way back, her hands fisting into the skirt of her dress. James was torn between his uncontrollable wrath and the undeniable need to comfort her. But he didn't. It was better like that. She got too close.

He helped her out of the carriage, looking away as she took his hands. "Have a great day, Lady Diana."

He turned to climb back into the carriage.

"My Lord," she called. "We have one last promenade, do we not?"

James clenched his jaw. Then, without another word, without looking at her again, he stepped into the carriage and rode away.

## CHAPTER 20

### Brandy and Regrets

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

The air inside was thick with smoke and regret. The curtains remained drawn, so it could be day or night outside. James didn't really care. His only concern was that he was running out of brandy.

He could barely remember how long it had been since he practically shut himself away in his bachelor's lodgings. Of course, he left his house. There was no way he could stay under the same roof as his father, no matter how it broke his grandmother's heart.

He sat in his study, his shirt unbuttoned, his cravat discarded, staring blankly at the fire. The embers glowed, mocking him. They had burned out too quickly. So had he.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he should be doing something. Anything. But he had no will to do anything. He was caught in an endless loop of anger and regret. And most of all her. A constant repeat of everything that was her. From the moment she took the first jab at him to that final "I see" that dripped ice on his cold soul.

The glass in his hand was empty again. Had he finished it? When? He wasn't sure.

A knock sounded at the door. James ignored it. The knock sounded again. Louder. More insistent.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, running a hand over his face. Whoever it was, they could damn well go away.

The door burst open. James blinked.

Richard strode inside, looking around with a mix of concern and disgust. “Christ,” he muttered, kicking a discarded waistcoat out of the way. “I thought you were dead.”

“I’ll try harder next time,” James slurred.

“What in God’s name are you doing?”

“Drinking myself into a stupor.”

“I gathered.” Richard gave him a pointed look. “And after that?”

James raised his empty glass. “Refilling my cup.”

Richard snatched the glass from his hand and tossed it across the room. It shattered against the wall.

James glared at him. “Was that necessary?”

“I’ll break the next one, too.” Richard’s voice was sharp. “Get a hold of yourself, James.”

James exhaled slowly, dragging a hand through his hair. “Leave me alone, Richard.”

“So you can slowly kill yourself?”

James looked up and blinked.

“Or I can have Stephen come over and kill you himself,” Richard threatened. “What did you do?”

James got up and went to the liquor cabinet. He needed something stronger to get

through this conversation.

“What do I always do?” He chuckled cruelly.

“I am not joking. Selina told me that Diana was ill. That girl has never been ill all the years I have known her, and now she is shut away in her room.”

James’s body locked up, and he gripped his glass tighter. Diana was...

He shouldn’t care.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he offered coldly.

“Sorry to hear that? I had to physically restrain Stephen from coming here and decapitate you. And to be honest, I was coming here with more or less the same intention. I believed that I would find you with some fling, having the time of your life while Diana... And I find you like this.”

James sat back on the sofa, his elbows on his knees, his head dipped. He should have never come back to London.

“James.” Richard approached him and put a hand on his shoulder. “What is going on? What happened?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

James looked up at his friend. He saw genuine concern in his eyes. It would have been so much easier if Richard did what everyone else did—blame everything on him.

“Solomon invited Diana to tea behind my back.”

“Oh.” Richard sighed. “Don’t tell me you blamed Diana for it.”

James looked away.

“You bloody idiot!”

“She was trying to tell me that Solomon was struggling, that I should give him a chance.” James got up and started pacing.

“How absolutely monstrous of her to want you to have a relationship with the only parent you have left,” Richard snapped.

“What relationship?” James shouted. “The man abandoned me when I needed him the most! I was thirteen! I just lost my mother, and he just sank in his sorrow. As if I wasn’t enough reason for him to live!”

James was fuming, his body tense, his features distorted, and yet his blue eyes hid something that looked more like regret than anger.

Richard leaned back as if he was physically hit. Then, he looked at his friend and nodded. “I understand. It was cruel what happened to you. You have every right to be

angry with Solomon.”

James’s chest was heaving, and he was frowning. He staggered back to support himself against his desk. It was as if saying those words out loud took every last ounce of energy he had left.

“Have you told him how you feel?” Richard asked.

James looked down, his shoulders sagging. “What difference would it make?”

“James, you’ve been running all your life, ever since I met you. Too afraid to sit still for one moment.”

The two friends looked at each other, and a deep understanding passed between them.

“Do it for yourself, my friend. Just say what weighs down your soul. You might be surprised.”

James straightened his back. He was tired, but not in a way that would make him just give up. Not in a way that would make him think that things could not get worse, so he might do as he felt.

Richard was right. James couldn’t live in this constant anger. He had let this grievance define him for too long. He had held onto it for far too long. It was time to put it to rest.

“And have a bath, for Christ’s sake.” Richard smiled.

James snorted.

James stood outside the house he grew up in and looked at it as if for the first time.

He had so many fond memories there. There was so much love in this house. The three of them. They had loved each other so much, and their love multiplied when it came to him. A life filled with laughter and hugs and smiles and jokes.

He clenched his jaw as he entered the house. The butler did not dare to stop him as he stormed to his father's study. He found him sitting at the desk, a glass of brandy in hand.

Solomon barely raised his gaze as James pushed the door open. "James."

The greeting was measured.

"You had no right." James slammed the door shut behind him.

Solomon raised an eyebrow. "Come now, son. A man should be more specific when making accusations."

James balled his fists. "Diana. You had no right to go behind my back."

"I was merely trying to see if the girl was a suitable match."

James saw red. The outrageous man had left him to assume the duties of a duke when he wasn't ready. Now, he had the nerve to meddle in his life because he "was feeling better" as if he had the flu and was indisposed for a few days.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" James spat.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

Solomon's gaze sharpened. "Your father, last I checked."

"LastIchecked, you ungraciously bowed out of that role."

Solomon's cold façade crumbled. His face contorted with pain. Still, he managed to compose himself when he turned to James.

"You had no right—" James took one step forward.

"I had every right!" Solomon stood up. "I wasn't going to sit back, watching you waste your life away and soil our good name."

"What good name? I had to live my life followed by whispers of you being mad!"

Solomon looked shocked.

"Oh, right!" James barked, his voice dripping poison. "You wereaway. I was here. I had to go to college and university and be pointed at as the boy whose father had gone mad."

Solomon looked away, his jaw ticking.

"So, I decided if they were going to point, I would give them a new reason to do so."

"Calling you a rake was the solution? Earning yourself the reputation of a scoundrel was your way of?—"

“You weren’t here!” James shouted. “You have no right to judge me!”

Solomon swallowed. His fingers tightened around the glass in his hand. He put it down and placed both hands on the desk, his chin dipped to his chest.

“And what would you have had me do, James?” His voice was low and controlled, but he was shaking beneath it.

“I don’t know.” James laughed bitterly. “Be a father, perhaps? Stay? Face your grief like a man instead of crawling into the dark and leaving me to fend for myself?”

Solomon’s eyes snapped back to James’s. “You think I wanted to leave you?” he croaked.

“I don’t give a damn what you wanted.” James’s voice was sharp as a blade. “I know what you did.”

Solomon’s chest rose and fell too quickly. He rounded the desk. “James?—”

“No.” James took another step forward. “You weren’t there, damn it! You weren’t there when I was a boy shouldering the weight of a title that should not have been mine to bear alone.”

“I...” Solomon exhaled, his voice cracking. “I thought I was protecting you.”

“Protecting me? You did a lousy job at it.”

Solomon closed his eyes for half a second, regret written all over his face. “I thought my grief would poison you,” he admitted.

James looked over his father’s shoulder and ran a hand through his hair. Pain, sharp

pain lanced through him. The same one he felt that night when his father woke him up with the news that changed his life forever. With the same look he had right now. The one of complete defeat and utter grief.

“I loved your mother so much,” Solomon continued. “She meant everything to me. I thought if I stayed, if you saw me like that, you would drown in it, too.”

James felt sorrow and anger flood him.

“So, you left me to drown on my own,” James said firmly. “I lost her too, you know.”

Solomon collapsed on the closest chair and dropped his head in his hands. And James saw his body shake.

His father was crying.

The shock was so great. He had never seen his father cry. Not even after his mother died.

James watched, stunned, frozen, unable to move. His father, the Duke of Pemberton, the man who had always been untouchable, unreadable, was crying. Not silent, dignified grief. Not a single tear wiped away before anyone could notice. He was shaking. His shoulders shuddered, his breath came uneven and harsh, and his hands were gripping his head as if to hold him together.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

James had never seen him like this. Not when his mother died. Not when he left. Not ever. And now, he didn't know what to do. He should feel relieved, satisfied, vindicated. He didn't. Because, for all his father's failures, for all the years of neglect, he had never once imagined this—this broken man before him.

"I am so sorry, son," Solomon said between sobs. "I failed you. I abandoned the only good thing I had left."

James had to sit. His legs could no longer support him. He never imagined how much he longed to hear those words.

He exhaled as if he was exhaling for the first time in years. Solomon looked up at him, and James's jaw dropped at the sheer grief he saw on his father's usually stony face.

"I don't expect you to forgive me, James. I have no right to even ask that. I just had to make sure..."

"Sure of what?" James whispered.

"That you wouldn't be alone. I know you hate me, and Mother... Mother is old. I couldn't bear the thought that you'd waste away alone."

James sat back in surprise as Solomon chuckled bitterly.

"And I dragged that brilliant girl into it."

Diana.

“I thought that perhaps she could be... And you like spending time with her. So, I figured I would get to know the man you are now, how you’ve grown from the boy I knew so well.”

James felt his eyes sting and balled his fists.

“I was right here,” he muttered.

“You were.” Solomon shook his head. “But I was a coward. Fearing that you’d tell me all the things you just told me. Fearing that’d hear the person I love most in the world lay out all my failures.”

Love.

James’s jaw tensed, and he shook his head to keep his body in check. This was not... He didn’t know what he expected would happen when he came in determined to confront his father, but this was not it.

“I don’t know, James.” Solomon let his body sag on the chair. “I don’t know how to fix it.”

Then, he looked straight at him, his eyes bloodshot from crying. His look was soft, caring. The look James hadn’t seen since he was a boy.

“But I will die trying, my boy.”

James got up and went straight to the sideboard. He filled two glasses of brandy and handed one to his father. The two men looked at each other and then downed their drinks.

James looked at his empty glass as if it held the mysteries of the world. Then, he looked at his father.

“I don’t know if it can’t be fixed,” he admitted. “But we can try.”

Solomon sat up.

“On my terms,” James added.

Solomon didn’t care. He nodded with a strained smile on his lips. His body leaned toward James, but he held back. His lips were trembling.

“Thank you, my boy.”

“I never said?—”

“It doesn’t matter.” Solomon had never looked more alive. “Even this is more than I deserve.”

James poured more brandy for both of them, and they drank while watching the crackling fire.

“She is something extraordinary, though.”

James didn't even try to hide his smile. Diana was so much more than that.

### CHAPTER 21

#### Pricked Thumb

Diana told everyone she was ill. It was so much easier that way. Easier than explaining the state she was in now. How was she to justify why she was staring off into nothingness all day, why she couldn't get but a few bites down, why she only wanted to be under the covers and sleep?

"Diana?" Selina's voice carried through the door.

Diana closed her eyes and pulled the covers over her head. She didn't want to talk to anyone, least of all her sister. It was her cruel prank that led her to this state.

"Go away, Selina," Diana said with a fake cough. "I would hate for you to catch something."

That was the same lie she told again and again. She heard her sister's footsteps retreat.

Diana bit her lip for the millionth time to keep from crying. What she was crying about anyway?

"So, we had some fun, a mutually entertaining agreement, and you thought that you had any claim on me?"

His words echoed in her head.

Her stomach churned. She dug her nails into the pillows. She squeezed her eyes shut. But closing them only made it worse. Because then she could see him. All of him all at once. His smirk and the emotionless way he talked to her, the scorching kisses and the cold shoulder he gave her.

“Idiot!” she screamed into her pillows.

How could she have been such a fool? How could she allow herself to fall for a man like him? Because she knew that was what she had done. Slowly, jab to jab, witty comment to warm embraces, she fell for James Bolton.

She turned onto her side, curling in on herself, wrapping her arms tightly around her body as if that could hold her together. But she was breaking at the seams.

She should have stayed in the shadows. She should never have let herself get carried away. She would have her heart intact and her soul unfractured.

Diana knew she should hate him with all her heart. But instead, she missed him. Her throat constricted, and her chest ached. She couldn't bear his absence, and the idea that she might not ever see him again made her crumble.

Damn you.

“I am happy to see you better,” Elizabeth said, looking at her.

Diana decided that if she didn't want her brother to bring all of the doctors in England to cure her weird ailment, she had to get out of her room, eventually. And she didn't want to worry and upset Elizabeth. So, it'd been a couple of days since she emerged, pretending that she had recovered.

“I do feel better, thank you,” Diana said with all the mirth she could summon. “What did I miss? Did you go to the Etherton musicale?”

They made small talk, and Diana was carrying her end of the conversation as well as she could. She admired herself for how well she was keeping it together. She was sure that slowly, she would mend the tear in her heart the way she picked up the embroidery she had abandoned. She even smiled at the sharp remarks Elizabeth had made on all the social events she had missed out on.

Yes, she would be fine, and time will heal all. She was beaten down before, and she would rise up again. And this time, there was no public humiliation, so for sure she would recover in private.

This, too, shall pass.

“Lord Crawford calling on Lady Diana,” the butler announced.

Diana’s heart stopped. Her hands stiffened, and blood ruined her embroidery. This couldn’t be. Her shuttered mind must be playing a cruel trick on her.

“Lord Crawford!” Elizabeth got up.

Diana was rooted to the spot, her eyes refusing to rise from her bloodied handiwork.

“Please come in,” Elizabeth continued.

With her back to the door, Diana didn’t dare turn around. If she didn’t, all this illusion would go away, for sure.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Lady Diana.” She heard his voice.

Her heart raced with fear, her nostrils flared with fury. A shiver crawled up her spine.

Pull yourself together, Diana!

She wouldn’t do this. Wouldn’t let him see that he still had this effect on her. She took a deep breath and schooled her features into an indifferent expression.

She turned to him. There he was, in her drawing room as if everything was all right between them. Yet...

She frowned. He seemed different. His cravat was somewhat hastily put together, and his coat was slightly askew as if he’d dressed in a hurry or hadn’t slept. And his face was tired.

Do not overthink this.

She decided that he was probably having late, debauched nights while she yearned for him.

“Lord Crawford,” she greeted flatly.

“I heard that you were feeling better, so I came to visit.”

Did he come to gloat? That insufferable?—

Diana tilted her head in a slow, deliberate motion.

“How thoughtful,” she said lightly. “Though I assure you, my illness was nothing serious.”

James blinked, his jaw tensing. He looked deeply into her eyes, searching.

Nothing here but resentment, My Lord.

Diana made sure to affect her coldest look.

“How fortunate for you. I hope you didn’t suffer much.”

“Not at all,” she said smoothly. “It was fleeting, you see. I imagine you are familiar with such things.”

Her words fell between them like ice shards.

“That is great.” He smiled too broadly. “So, I suppose it would do you good to be out in the fresh air. The weather is splendid.”

He is not proposing to...?

“I think a walk in the Kensington Gardens is warranted. Don’t you think, My Lady?”

Diana shot him a glare. She didn’t even bother to hide how not amusing she was finding this.

“I believe that I am not feeling that well.”

“You just said it was fleeting,” James reminded her.

“That is why I had better avoid any relapse.”

“Come on, Diana,” Elizabeth chimed in. “Fresh air would do you good.”

“After all, it’s our fifth promenade.” James looked at Diana with a strange glint in his blue eyes.

“Ah,” Diana bit out. “I had forgotten about that.”

“I haven’t. Am I not owed one last promenade, My Lady?” James smirked. “I have paid good money for it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

Oh, I will make you pay for it. I will push you in the Serpentine and keep you under.

Diana was fuming. With such grand plans in mind, she agreed.

At least James would have the pleasure to leave for the afterlife on such a lovely day. The Kensington Gardens were in full bloom—a breathtaking sight.

Manicured lawns extended as far as the eye could see, peppered with ancient oak trees and elms. The air was filled with that satisfying smell of fresh earth mixed with the intoxicating fragrance of roses. The river was flowing softly, giving the space a sense of tranquility.

The two of them were anything but. He had led them to a more secluded part where Ms. Bremford got so easily lost. That meant no witnesses to keep Diana from committing murder.

“The gardens are quite lovely today,” James said nonchalantly.

“Yes. The trees do seem to be where we last left them.”

James bit back a smirk.

Diana wanted to slap him across the face. She had no idea why he would call on her after their last interaction, but this new kind of torture was stretching her patience thin.

“You seem to be tense, My Lady.”

“You truly have an amazing ability to state the obvious, My Lord.”

“I feel I am the cause of your foul mood,” he ventured.

“How rarely insightful of you,” Diana said through gritted teeth.

“Diana...”

Oh no.

She stopped walking so abruptly that James nearly took another step before catching himself. When he turned to face her, she was already glaring up at him, her chest rising and falling with the sheer force of her fury.

“I forbid you to call me that again, My Lord. You lost that right when you called me entertaining. I, for one, stopped having fun.”

James opened his mouth to talk.

“Do not interrupt me!”

His mouth snapped shut.

Diana took a furious step toward him, her voice trembling. “I do not know what cruelty made you call on me today, but I would appreciate it if we ended it soon and pretend we have never met from now on.”

“Diana... My Lady, please allow me.”

Diana raised an eyebrow expectantly.

“I behaved like a brute,” James said earnestly. “The moment I heard what my father has done...” He took a deep breath and swallowed. “I hated him for so many years. When my mother died, he chose to wallow in his grief and abandon me. I felt hurt, insignificant, unworthy. And when he came back and laid a claim on me and my affairs, I lost all control.”

His voice dropped. “You were caught in a war that was never meant to touch you. And for that, Diana... My Lady, I am sorry.”

Diana’s fingers dug into her palms. “And that gave you the right to treat me the way you did?”

“Diana...” James winced.

She raised a hand, stopping him cold.

“No. You had no right.” Her eyes narrowed on him. “I am sure your excuses bring you comfort, but rest assured, I am not placing all the blame on you. I take half the blame.”

“You are not to blame,” James tried.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“But I am.” Diana’s jaw ticked. “I was foolish enough to believe that this was more than just an amusing series of lessons. I am sure that you are having the time of your life seeing me so tense, as you put it. Came to gloat, perhaps. Bask in the knowledge that you have managed to hurt me.”

James drew in deep breaths and attempted to grab her hands. She recoiled.

“Oh, I know I made the unforgivable mistake of seeing too much of the real you.” Diana chuckled coldly. “I let myself care for a man who saw me as nothing but a diversion. A man who left me standing there, humiliated and broken.”

“Please—” James expelled a harsh breath, his chest rising and falling too fast.

Diana shook her head, not wanting to hear anything more from him.

“There, Lord Crawford, the infamous rake of the ton. Have your moment of glory.” She was trembling with rage and sorrow. “You can pride yourself on making the jilted wallflower fall in love with you.”

The moment those words left her lips, she realized with dread what she had said.

The air was heavy with her confession, both of them breathing heavily, locked in a stare.

“You love me.”

Diana shook her head and took a step back.

“You love me,” James repeated, this time a little softer, as if tasting the words.

Diana swallowed and willed her lungs to draw in air.

No, no, no...

“Say it again,” James murmured.

She spun on her heel, but he caught her wrist.

“Let me go!” she hissed.

She blinked and dug her nails into her palms harder.

Do not cry, do not cry, do not cry.

She had already given up so much. She had to get away and make sure they never crossed paths again so that she could forg?—

“I love you, Diana.”

Her heart stopped. Her ears were ringing.

James stepped closer, unshaken, unstoppable. “I love you so much.”

Diana shook her head furiously. She was shaking, her whole body trembling as if dipped in ice-cold water. “You’re lying.”

“I am not.” James took another step forward, and his hands found her waist.

“You can’t be serious right now!”

James stilled as if hit by an invisible wall.

Diana wrenched free and stumbled back, her eyes burning, her breathing shallow.  
“You don’t get to say that. This game is over. You won.”

James staggered back a step as if she had struck him. She took the opportunity and ran away from him.

## CHAPTER 22

Handwritten Notes

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

The moment Diana stepped through the front doors of Westall Estate, she ran. She ignored the startled look from the footman, the way Elizabeth called after her. She didn't stop. Not until she was in her chambers, the door slammed shut behind her.

Her breathing was ragged, her chest aching as she pressed herself against the door, her fingers trembling at her sides. She took a few steps, only to collapse before she reached the bed, gripping the covers and taking them down with her.

She let the tears run down her cheeks, hot and burning, born out of fury and something that was brewing deep in her soul. She sobbed and didn't even bother to stop or cover it.

"Diana?" Elizabeth was at the door.

"I..." No other words came out of Diana's parched throat.

"Diana!"

"Go away!"

She heard footsteps retreating and sighed in relief. She wanted to be alone for good. She had no power to do anything but cry.

"I love you..."

Diana squeezed her eyes shut. No. She wouldn't think about it. Wouldn't think about him. But her treacherous mind refused to obey. She could still feel the warmth of his

hands on her waist. The way he had sounded so certain.

He was lying. He had to be. James Bolton did not love. He moved through life as he pleased, indulging in games and pleasure and wicked amusement. And she had simply been another diversion.

Diana let out a strangled breath and dug her nails into the sheets as if she could claw the memory out of her mind.

“Diana, I brought tea, and I am coming in.” Elizabeth was back at her door.

“No,” Diana tried.

But it was too late. The door opened a fraction, and Elizabeth came in bearing a tray. The moment she saw her in that condition, she set the tray on a side table and fell to her knees beside her. Without a word, she wrapped her arms around her. And Diana let her.

A fresh wave of tears flooded her. She gripped Elizabeth’s sleeves, holding onto them as if she could anchor herself to the world again. Her body was shaking, and she sobbed in Elizabeth’s arms.

Elizabeth held her, allowed her to let it all out. No judgment and no questions.

After a while, Diana’s sobs ebbed. The storm had passed, but the clouds were still looming in her soul. Softly, Elizabeth took her by the hand to guide her to the small sofa and rubbed circles on her back, still not prying. She poured her a cup of tea and patted her hand, before stroking her hair.

“I was such a fool,” Diana said as she wiped her tears.

“I am sure you were not.” Elizabeth smiled. “I’ve known you for a while, Diana. And there are many things that I would call you, but fool would never cross my mind.”

Diana looked up at her sister-in-law with a grateful look.

“Now, will you tell me what happened?”

“I... James...” Diana said simply as if that would explain everything.

“Yes, I gathered as much. I had to rush down to prevent Stephen from going straight to him. I found him in the armory.”

Diana looked up in shock. Elizabeth was smiling.

“This is not a joke,” Diana sighed.

“I assure you it is not. Just some embellished truth. I mean, I didn’t find him in the armory, but he was asking for his coat.”

Diana shook her head.

This was a mess. And it was all her fault. She should have known better than to make a deal with a rake like James. How did she think she could protect her heart from him? She was a novice, and he was a master. She was doomed the moment she stepped onto that wretched balcony.

“I bought us some time,” Elizabeth continued, sipping her tea calmly. “I told Stephen it is not prudent to kill the man his sister loved.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

Diana's head snapped toward her so fast that she felt dizzy. Elizabeth gave her a warm look, knowing and soft.

Diana felt tears well up in her eyes again. Was it that obvious?

"I... Oh God." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

Elizabeth was waiting patiently, still rubbing slow, comforting circles on her back.

"This wasn't supposed to happen." Diana shook her head.

"I do not believe we have any control over such matters."

"How could I have fallen for a man like him?"

"Diana, you didn't fall for a man like him," Elizabeth said with the wisdom of a woman who had been exactly where Diana was. "You fell for him."

"I did. I love him," Diana said, looking out the window as if wishing that the tight feeling in her heart would evaporate.

"But he...?" Elizabeth trailed off.

"I love you..."

Diana closed her eyes at the memory. A man like him must be mistaking passion for love.

“He said he loved me,” she muttered.

“Excuse me?” Elizabeth was obviously not expecting this.

“He said he loved me. Twice, I believe.”

“Twice?” Diana looked at Elizabeth to find her gaping in shock. “I am sorry, Diana. I had mentally prepared a list of appropriate names that I would call him after you told me he let you down gently.”

“What does it matter what he said?”

“What does it matter? It does matter!”

“Then if what he says matters, then let me tell you that a few days ago, he said, ‘So, we had some fun, a mutually entertaining agreement, and you thought you had any claim on me?’ Which versions of him should I believe?”

“He said what? The heartless scoundrel!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Oh, I am so glad I prepared all those names.”

Diana smiled the most bitter of smiles, but her heart winced at the little joy and snuffed it out.

“So, you see,” she sighed. “There is no use in taking his word at face value. He doesn’t love me. He is just playing a game.”

Elizabeth frowned, deep in thought. Her romance with Stephen had not been so smooth either—Diana knew well.

“I saw how he looked at you, Diana.”

“Like a hunter circling his prey, I am sure,” Diana scoffed.

“Like a man longing for something.”

Diana got up, upset. Her anger was making her stronger than she expected.

She turned to Elizabeth with fury in her eyes. “Lust. You mean lust.”

“Oh, I know longing from lust, Diana.”

“James... That man looks at anything with a skirt with interest,” Diana said shakily.

“Hardly a testament to his devotion.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Yes, I know.” Elizabeth sipped on her tea, calm and composed. “Desire can be fleeting, an amusement, as he so cruelly put it. But longing, Diana, true longing, is something else entirely.”

Diana turned her back on her. She didn’t need to listen to that. To any of that. The fact that she had her doubts was proof enough.

“It makes no difference, Elizabeth.”

“It makes every difference!” Elizabeth protested. “Do not let fear?—”

“Of course, I am afraid!”

Diana was trembling from her overwhelming emotions. She was fisting her skirt, which was crumbling under the tension. Her lips were pressed into a thin line, her brow furrowed.

“I can’t stand it, Elizabeth. Not another humiliation. I will not be allowed to think that again only to be crushed.”

“Diana, I know, but?—”

“I barely survived the first time.” Diana sat back down, swaying to calm her nerves. “I still remember it. Standing there with the man I thought would be my husband. Then, she walked in, and he looked at her with such...”

“Longing,” Elizabeth supplied.

Diana looked up at her.

Elizabeth just nodded. “I know it must have hurt. But that doesn’t mean you need to keep living in that moment, let one thing define you.”

“It wasn’t a moment.”

“He was a boy who didn’t know what he wanted,” Elizabeth stated bluntly. “You didn’t love him anyway.”

Diana’s jaw dropped.

“You never even once looked at him the way you looked at James, Diana. I know it, you know it, and I am fairly certain that he knows it too.”

“I am not the same foolish girl.”

“You are not.” Elizabeth smiled. “You learned to build walls around your heart.”

“It’s easier this way. I know what I am now. I know that I am no more than a game to him, and I’d rather walk away with my dignity intact than risk becoming the joke of Society again.”

“So why are you crying?”

Diana’s chest tightened, and her breath caught in her throat. She didn’t know how to answer, didn’t know what words could possibly explain how she felt inside. What push and pull had her going mad.

Her pulse quickened as she looked over Elizabeth’s shoulder.

“I do love him. I am not denying that.”

“You are denying him, though.”

“I... I am afraid,” Diana admitted, hanging her head. “Being abandoned by a man I didn’t love hurt me and almost destroyed me. James... If I let myself believe him, if it’s all a lie, then I won’t survive it.”

Elizabeth grabbed both her hands. The two women exchanged a look of empathy and love.

“If survival is what you are looking for, then yes, forget about him. Lock yourself up with your threads and your books. You’ll be safe, I can guarantee that.”

Diana swallowed. That was for the best. It was. It should be.

“But if you are looking to live, not just survive, then you can’t keep running from your heart. Take the risk, Diana.”

Diana fell silent, her hands trembling. She turned back toward the window, watching the gentle sway of the trees in the garden below, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

“I love you...”

What if he meant it? What if he wasn't just playing a game? Diana thought of the times he laughed—truly laughed. Of the way he could have taken her. God, Diana would have freely given herself to him. But every time, he made it all about her, unhurried, almost like he was cherishing her.

The battle inside her was raging. Fear had the higher ground. It knew the lay of the land, had established its dominion over her soul for years now. But hope... hope was persistent. Like he was.

Diana went through the next days in a haze, mechanically doing what she always did—being in her drawing room, buried in a book. Elizabeth never once mentioned anything to her, quietly waiting for her to make a decision. And all Diana could do was exist in a state of wishing that this all would go away while unwilling to be parted from even a small memory of it.

“Lady Diana?” The butler came in. “An invitation for you.”

He extended the silver tray, and she looked up from her book with utter boredom. Then she saw it. His letter.

Diana's heart skipped a beat as she took the letter. Her name was written on the front in a familiar hand, the elegant script unmistakable. James's script.

Her hands shook.

It was an invitation. Simple and elegant. The Pembertons were hosting a ball for the first time after many years. Nothing else. Just her name on that simple piece of paper. But she knew what he meant.

Come.

## CHAPTER 23

### Annotated Edition

James had never been more nervous in his life. It wasn't the fact that he and his father were hosting their first ball after perhaps twenty years. It wasn't the burden of his father being the host after everyone whispered behind his back. It wasn't even the fact that this was another step to mend his broken relationship with him.

None of that mattered. Not compared to the real reason he had opened Pemberton's doors tonight. Her.

This night should have been a triumph. His once-considered mad father was standing a few steps away, at the entrance, welcoming the guests that poured in with a regal nod and a witty remark for every one of them. Euphemia was sitting in her armchair, strategically placed where she could see everything, and she was glowing with joy.

The ballroom was brimming with ladies in silk gowns and gentlemen in shining boots mingling under the soft light of the old chandelier.

"Your mother would have been happy." Solomon came next to him.

James smiled at the thought. His mother would have been happy, indeed. Not about the ball—though she always loved balls—but about the two of them making an effort. He looked up into his father's eyes.

In a rare public display of affection for a man of his station, Solomon placed a warm hand on his son's shoulder. "Have I thanked you?" he asked with a smile.

"Daily." James nodded.

"And may I never break this habit," Solomon said and went back to his host duties.

James bit his lip, and his eyes strayed to his grandmother, who was surrounded by other ladies of the ton. She gave him a small, loving nod.

And yet his soul was restless. This was all good, but not good enough if she wasn't going to come. James had never known fear like this. Not the kind that coiled in his stomach, slow and insidious. Not the kind that made his fingers twitch at his sides, betraying his nerves.

"James!" Richard's voice called.

James turned around, his heart filled with hope. Richard and Selina were making their way toward him. But he let his eyes wander behind them.

"It's just us," Richard sighed.

James's heart sank. Maybe he should have done more. Other men did all these grand gestures. Buckets of flowers and sonnets, love letters and groveling. If he had done that, she would have known?—

"His Grace the Duke of Westall, and Her Grace the Duchess of Westall, accompanied by Lady Diana Wilkins," the butler announced.

James's spine went rigid. His pulse surged in his throat, and his breath caught in his chest. He turned, his heart hammering as he looked upon her.

Diana. She came.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

The moment she stepped forward, the light caught her gown. Midnight blue, dark, enchanting, rippling like water, mesmerizing him. It clung to her curves in a way that made him swallow thickly, the fabric shimmering with each measured step she took. Her raven hair was arranged in an elegant updo, and yet one curl was caressing her neck. James was jealous of that curl.

And those eyes! God help him, those eyes. Green as storm-tossed seas, burning with something that he could not decipher. Till they landed on him.

James exhaled slowly, steadying himself, but it was no use. For the first time in his life, he was thrown off, unable to muster that distance that accompanied almost all of his interactions. All he longed for was to be closer to her. So, he moved.

“I am so happy to see you again, Lady Diana,” Solomon greeted warmly.

James smiled at how his wallflower had bewitched all of the Pemberton household. Him, most of all.

He stopped right in front of her. “Dia—” he almost blurted out. “Lady Diana.” He bowed.

Diana curtsied, but James did not miss the way her fingers curled slightly into her skirt, nor the way her breathing was just a fraction too controlled. She was nervous.

Good. So was he.

“Lord Crawford,” she greeted, her voice smooth, too composed.

“I must have this dance,” James said and took her hand.

Diana stared at him as if assessing him.

If he was about to enter the afterlife facing judgment, he would feel less turbulence. He didn’t care what Heaven and Earth thought of him. All that mattered was that she found him worthy of this. Just a chance.

“Well, if you must,” she answered graciously.

He guided her to the center of the ballroom, and the whole world faded away. Her hand was warm and steady in his, her body so soft against him, his palm feeling the curves of her body.

Life was poured into his body after days of agonizing limbo.

They just looked at each other as they danced in perfect sync. It was quiet. Tense. Unspoken words hung in the air between them, thick and suffocating. Then, Diana coughed lightly, her fingers tightening around his. James braced himself.

“My Lord, I must apologize.”

“No, you don’t,” James said softly. “You came.”

Diana gasped upon hearing the longing in his voice. She swallowed and looked over his shoulder.

“And yet I do,” she insisted. “At our last promenade, I was... cruel.”

“I remember you being anything but.” James leaned a little bit closer. “You had every right to behave the way you did. Hell, I deserved far worse. One might say you were

too lenient with me.”

She blinked up at him as if taken aback.

“The fact that you came, and you are apologizing, is a testament to how courageous you are,” James continued. Then, he added in a wicked light tone, “I didn’t make it easy on you, after all.”

Diana shook her head, trying to hold back a smile. “No, you certainly didn’t.”

“But would you say that I have been sufficiently chastised?”

Diana’s eyes lit up. This was them. This light, witty banter. Only now, they had added another layer—that of trying to be honest.

“I would say that chastisement is not nearly enough, My Lord.”

“Fair point.” James chuckled. “I should beg, then. I confess I have little experience in the matter, but I’m a fast learner, and for you, I’ll apply myself.”

Diana couldn’t suppress her smile anymore. And James felt his heart lighten, his body relax, his breath come easily. He had a fighting chance, and he would not waste it.

The night unraveled with music and laughter, and everyone was having a great time. Couples swirled under the golden light, men engaged in discussions animated by brandy, and ladies laughed at some absurd gossip.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

It was late, and yet no one wanted the night to end. And least of all James.

He danced with her and barely left her side to attend to his duties as a host. He had to endure Richard's glances, Selina's teasing, and, most of all, Stephen's cold hard looks. But he had an ally in Elizabeth.

Not that he cared. He wouldn't leave Diana's side even if an army dragged him away.

And then an opportunity presented itself. They were left alone, just the two of them. James didn't say anything. He just took her by the hand and led her to the dark corridors of his home. His grip was firm yet gentle as if he feared she would pull away. His heart soared when she followed him without asking anything.

He stopped in front of an ornated door and opened it before leading her inside. Diana looked around the soft-lighted room, and James watched as she took it in. The air smelled of polished wood and parchment, of ink and something faintly new.

"A library?" she asked, walking further into the room.

James let her explore, watching as she let her fingers touch the books on the floor-to-ceiling shelves. He chuckled softly when she stopped at a particular tome and let out a cry of excitement. She clapped every time she saw a beautiful copy.

"Where did you find this book?" Diana asked as she took a volume out of a shelf. "I have been looking for it for ages."

"I know. You told me."

Diana's eyes snapped to his. James remained absolutely calm.

Diana frowned and looked around once more at the books on the shelves. Books she loved. Books she wanted to read. She furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Look at the shelf to your left."

Diana did and let out a little scream, her hands over her mouth.

"Not this edition of Meditations." She took the book out. "This is the edition with Professor Netherton's notes!"

"The very one."

She turned the book over in her hands, her fingers tracing the worn leather. Her breath hitched, the weight of realization pressing into her chest. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper.

"James?"

"I renovated it just for you, Diana. This library. Just for you."

"I... I don't understand."

Her chest heaved, her eyes widened. Her lips parted slightly to let out a soft sigh of surprise.

James stalked toward her. Deliberate, devastatingly slow. Looking into her eyes, drowning in them. He was so close to her, his eyes roaming over her face, her eyes, her lips. His precious wallflower.

He wanted to touch her. God help him, he wanted to gather her into his arms, bury his face in her soft neck, and never let go. But he didn't. He couldn't. Not yet.

"It's yours, Diana," he said.

"What...?"

James came impossibly close, his fingers playing with a strand of her hair. He was barely controlling himself.

His eyes softened, and he smiled. "It's yours if you will have it." He leaned in. "If you will have me."

Diana's jaw dropped, her fingers digging into the leather of the book she was still somehow holding. She tilted her head as if questioning reality itself, and her quick breaths said that she was overwhelmed with emotions.

James saw them all. Disbelief, fear, and... warmth. Hope.

He had to do more than offer her a book. His lips curled into something between a smile and a grimace, as if he were pained by what he was about to say.

"I have never been good, Diana. I always did as I pleased, taken what I pleased, consequences be damned." His hand slid down her hair, his fingertips brushing the line of her jaw before dropping to his side, curling into a fist. "But for you, I want to do better. Be better."

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

Diana blinked and breathed heavily as if she didn't believe what she was hearing.

“So, I am asking—No, I am begging you. Will you have me? Because I cannot, will not, live in a world without you.”

She searched his eyes for an inkling of doubt. He withstood her inspection, firm and open, inviting her to see the truth of his words. Time ticked, eons rolled as Diana passed judgment on him. Then, her eyes gleamed, and she lifted her chin.

“It seems that you excel at begging, after all, My Lord.”

James blinked. She...

His chuckle was low, dark, wicked. He took a step closer and pinned her against the shelves, his arms caging her in.

“Oh, I can beg in so many ways.”

His voice was low, a velvet promise. And James always made good on his promises.

Diana swallowed hard, her pulse a frantic thing in her throat. He tilted his head, his lips barely grazing the spot behind her ear. Just enough to make her shiver.

“Tell me, my wallflower.” Another brush of his lips, softer now, like he was drinking in the taste of her hesitation. “Are you mine?”

She looked deeply into his eyes. Then, the precious book slipped from her fingers and

fell to the floor with a thud. She grabbed the front of his coat and pulled him down to her.

Their lips collided, and James couldn't hold in a deep groan, the air knocked out of his lungs. His hands moved to feel her, all of her. He missed her so much. He had thought he had lost her for good. And now she was his. His to savor and cherish and annoy and make happy.

One hand slid into her hair, untangling her dark curls, feeling the strands spill through his fingers. She shuddered as he fisted her hair softly to angle her head just right, just the way he needed to devour her properly.

His other hand moved to her waist, pulling her so close yet not enough. Heat slammed into him like cannon fire the moment she rocked against him, the unmistakable friction sending a sharp, desperate thrill straight to his spine.

James growled—a deep, primal sound he himself didn't recognize. “Diana.”

Her body was moving against his, her tongue caressing his, her fingers in his hair. Then, she moaned. One needy, breathy sigh. And he snapped.

His hands found her thighs, lifted her, and pinned her harder against the shelves, his hips trapped between her legs, tangled in her skirts.

Then, God, he moved slowly, gently, his thigh creating delicious, unbearable pressure. Her head lolled back against the shelves as she gasped at the friction, and James kissed her neck, licking her skin. He rocked against her with slow, measured thrusts. He could feel his length straining against his breeches, aching to feel more of her.

“Christ!” he groaned.

His hands cupped her breasts, and he couldn't stop. Not now, not ever. He tugged her dress down impatiently, and her milky breasts spilled out. He latched on an erect nipple, and Diana whimpered.

"I missed you, my precious wallflower," he murmured against her skin.

He grazed her nipple with his teeth, and she shuddered, cradling his head closer.

"Let me hear it, Diana." He looked up into her glazed eyes. "You are mine."

Her chest rose and fell fast, her pupils blown, her lips rosy and swollen, ruined by his kisses, parted on a breath that nearly undid him. Then, he heard her voice—soft, raspy, breathy.

"Yours."

"Yes," he grunted in satisfaction. "Mine."

There was no stopping him now.

## CHAPTER 24

### Crackling Fire

Diana could not have thought of a better place in the world. This, this cozy room right here, filled with books, warmed by the hearth, lit by candles, the moonlight pouring in through the big glass windows... She knew that this room would forever hold a special place in her heart.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

She was almost floating as James kissed her jaw, her neck, and her collarbone. His adept fingers moved unhurriedly as if he had all the time in the world. Then, she felt her gown pool around her waist, leaving only her fine chemise, which suddenly felt too sheer, too fragile under his gaze. She moved on pure instinct to cover herself, but James wouldn't have it.

“My flower, didn't you say you are mine? All of you.” His voice dropped to a soft, silky purr that wrapped around her.

“James,” was all she could utter.

Her senses abandoned her because other than his name, nothing came when she saw the way his eyes darkened as he took her in.

His only response was to take her hands and kiss her when her pulse hammered in her wrists. Then, he claimed her lips in soft, light kisses meant to make her melt into him. His fingers traced a slow, reverent path along the neckline of her chemise, his breath hitching slightly.

One small tug and she felt the sheer fabric slide off her shoulders, brushing her stiff nipples as it fell to the floor. Diana gasped at the feather-light touch.

“Utterly—” James kissed her lips—“devastatingly.” He licked the sweat on her neck. “Perfect.”

He grabbed her in a way that he never had before. As if his self-control had shattered and he had unleashed himself on her, barely registering what was happening in his

body.

Diana felt a rush of power. She was making this man, this magnificent man, lose the last shreds of his logic, and she was intoxicated by that knowledge.

With a swift move, he lifted her and wrapped her legs around his waist, his mouth crashing onto hers. The fact that she was naked and he was fully clothed made her feel so deliciously wicked.

Her fingers slid up his neck, through his hair, and she leaned into the kiss with fervor. More now than ever, she could feel his hardness, what she was doing to him.

He lowered her onto a comfortable armchair, the plush velvet beneath her back a stark contrast to the way he felt against her. He leaned back, and Diana swallowed.

In the flickering light from the fireplace, she was bare to him. Yet, she didn't feel exposed. She felt cherished as he drank her in hungrily, as if she was his only sustenance. She saw it as clear as day, the one thing he had denied her fearful heart.

He loved her. And he wanted her. Only her.

"Christ, Diana," he growled.

His eyes wandered down her heaving chest, her heavy breasts, her smooth belly, her mound, where she was so ready for him. His eyes devoured her, the look in them palpable as if he was touching her. And she longed for him to touch her.

"James, please," she moaned softly.

His eyes snapped to hers. Predatory, dangerous, greedy. One word from her and he would eat her whole. She longed for nothing else.

“Please, touch me!”

He growled again, a warning and a promise at the same time.

“I won’t stop, Diana. If I touch you now, you will truly be mine.”

“Don’t stop. I am already truly yours in all the ways that matter.”

Silence. A pause in this heated, heavy moment.

She spoke the truth. Giving her body was easy. But truly giving her heart and soul? That was special. And suddenly she could see that he saw it too. His eyes were still dark with hunger, but now they held something more profound. He was hers in all the ways that truly mattered.

“Is it true, Diana?” His voice softened just a little. “Are you really mine? Forever?”

She smiled and nodded.

He, too, smiled softly, before he leaned in, his massive body covering hers till he reached her lips. He placed one soft kiss there—a promise, a vow—then another as his hands found her waist. Another as her nails grazed his back. One more as he licked her lips. Again as their tongues met. Then, they fell. There was no going back.

With quick moves, he bared his chest, and Diana’s hands rose to it on instinct. He hissed at the contact as he kissed her neck, nipping it softly. His lips and fingers followed opposite paths. He moved down so that her breasts were level with his chest and slowly kissed his way to them. At the same time, his hands rubbed small circles on her ankles, then slid up her calves, the sensitive skin behind her knees, and her smooth thighs.

She was so overwhelmed with sensations that she gasped when she felt his wet mouth on her breasts, licking and teasing. She arched into him, knowing where his touch could lead, the end she was craving.

He didn't let her recover, his fingers grazing the inside of her thighs, making their way up, closer to her core.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Easy, my flower,” he murmured, his lips grazing the sensitive swell of her breasts. “I want to savor you.”

Diana shuddered as his fingers traveled higher, just barely brushing where she ached for him the most. A helpless sound escaped her lips, half plea, half surrender. He groaned in response, his warm breath fanning her skin.

“So soft,” he whispered. “So ready for me.”

“Ah!”

All coherent thoughts flew out of her mind when he touched her therein a deliberate, lazy way meant to unravel her. He pulled back and looked down at her, but she could barely focus as he kept touching her, circling and stroking. She was like the string of a bow, ready to snap, but he wouldn’t allow it.

“James, just... more!”

He bit an erect nipple, and she almost screamed. Her nails dug into his shoulders, sure that she would soar high if she didn’t ground herself somehow.

“Look at me, Diana,” he commanded softly. “I want to see you unravel.”

Her eyes fluttered open, hazy with pleasure. She barely had a moment to breathe before he pressed deeper.

Their gazes locked as his fingers explored her, pushed more, and he looked on the

verge of something dangerous.

“James!”

“You are amazing,” he purred.

Her thighs clenched around his hand, a sob tearing from her throat. A tingling feeling swelled inside her like a wave. Then, it stopped.

“No!” she wailed.

“I can’t hold back anymore, Diana,” he muttered, his voice rough.

His hands made quick work of his breeches, baring him but not completely—he was too impatient to do this properly. He moved closer, his hardness at her entrance.

His breathing was labored, his body taut with restraint. He hovered over her, his eyes taking in every inch of her bare skin, his hands trembling as they hovered just above her.

“Diana, if you tell me to stop, I will stop,” he grunted.

“Don’t. I want this.” She moved a fraction, just to feel him.

He swallowed hard, his gaze softening, and he leaned in to kiss her forehead.

“This might hurt a bit, my flower,” he cooed. “I will be gentle, I promise. Just trust me.”

“I do. I trust you.”

And with that, he positioned himself carefully, the tip of his length prodding her entrance. Diana's breath hitched, and she instinctively tensed up for a moment, but his hands immediately moved to soothe her, caressing her in a way that made her melt.

"Relax, my love. Just breathe for me," he said tenderly, peppering kisses on the corner of her mouth.

Diana exhaled deeply, and that was when he pushed forward cautiously. She felt a pang of discomfort, but he was there, his lips over hers and his eyes locked onto hers. Her need overwhelmed her fear once more, her love for him dominating everything. The sensation was unfamiliar but also incredible, carrying the whisper of a promise. The promise of utter bliss.

"James, please," she whispered.

"Remember, my flower," he moaned in her ear. "I am the one doing the begging here."

She felt all of what they had been, all of what they were, all of what they would be. She let go of her hesitation, surrendering to him completely, trusting him with her body, her heart. And with a slow, deliberate thrust, he entered her fully.

"Ah!" She bit her lip.

It was not pain, not exactly. Not as she had expected. She felt him stretch her in a way that bordered on pleasurable.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

James didn't move for a while. He kissed her forehead, her cheek. He wrapped his arm around her waist, caressing her back softly. His other arm supported his weight as his fingers played with her curls.

But Diana wanted, needed him to move.

"James, I just need..."

He didn't let her finish. He moved inside her, slowly at first, letting her adjust to the feel of him inside her, the feel of them becoming one.

"Oh!" It was like seeing light for the first time.

Her body was on fire as he moved oh so gently, oh so reverently. If she felt a wave before, now she was drowning in emotions that she could hardly contain. She could hear herself panting and calling out his name, but she barely recognized her own voice.

"God, you're perfect," he groaned, his voice low.

Diana struggled to focus on him and was floored to find him so overtaken by the same emotions that overpowered her. His handsome face was so tight and relaxed at the same time, his body shaking and so in control. His hands were everywhere, as if he would be one with her if he tried hard enough.

She, too, sought to mold herself to him. But then he quickened his thrusts, and she felt that rising pressure in her core. He was still tender, but his moves became more

urgent, more purposeful, bordering on wild.

A savage sound tore from his throat. His forehead dropped to hers, and he bit his lip. Seeing him so out of control, Diana felt herself budding, opening fully to him.

“James,” she breathed, her voice full of wonder, full of need. “I?—”

“Let go, Diana,” he murmured, his lips brushing hers in a sweet, desperate kiss. “I’m here. Right here.”

His moves became more erratic, more fierce, forceful. He adjusted his position, his hands on her waist holding her tight. He threw his head back in a moment of surrender before he looked down at her with all that he was, no walls.

It was all Diana could take.

The surge of ecstasy that crashed over her was unlike anything she had ever felt. Intense, all-consuming, and sweet. Her body tightened around him, and she gasped as the world around her faded away. All that was left was him and the heat of their connection.

Her body was still shuddering when she felt him give one last deep thrust, and his body tensed above hers. She heard him mutter her name, his grip on her tightening as he let go, his release filling her.

“Mine,” he moaned.

They stilled, catching their breath and their sanity. Their breaths mingled, their bodies still locked in the aftermath of what they had just shared. The fire crackled softly in the hearth, casting golden light over their tangled limbs.

James pulled away first, worried that he was crushing her with his weight. He smiled as he tucked a sweat-damp curl behind her ear. She smiled back.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his voice filled with concern.

“I do not think I have ever felt better.”

He leaned in and took her lips in a soft, sweet, devastating kiss. She let out a long, blissful sigh, stretching lazily beneath him, a teasing smile playing on her lips.

“You know,” she mused, her voice still a little breathy, “I wonder what Epicurus would say about all of this.”

He chuckled as he rose, only to sit on the armchair and cradle her in his arms.

“I think he would be thrilled, seeing how diligent we were in the pursuit of pleasure.”

She laughed, a sound so light and utterly carefree that made him stare. Something in her chest swelled at the sight of him like this, relaxed and truly happy.

Then, he laughed, too.

She turned her head to look up at him, frowning. “Why are you laughing?”

He let out a slow, satisfied sigh, amusement glinting in his blue eyes. “I was just thinking how wrong your brother was.”

“About what?” She arched an eyebrow.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

James smirked, brushing his knuckles over her cheek. “He was convinced we would be over after our five promenades.”

“James!” Diana gasped, swatting at his chest.

“What?” He caught her hand and kissed it lazily. “On the other hand, he was terrified I’d corrupt you.” His eyes gleamed wickedly as he tugged her closer. “And there, my love, he was on point.”

“You are impossible.” Diana let out a scandalized laugh, burying her face in his chest.

“And yet you love me.”

“I do.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He looked at her with absolute adoration. She felt need pool in the pit of her stomach, and she glanced at his lips, ready to?—

He got up suddenly and lowered her onto her feet, before gathering her clothes.

“Let’s go!” he said.

“Why the sudden hurry?” She pouted, crossing her arms over her chest. “And where exactly are we going?”

James saw the lustful look in her eyes and smirked, earning himself a raised eyebrow.

“To ask your brother for your hand, so I can thoroughly corrupt you, My Lady.”

## EPILOGUE

Diana barely remembered the exact moment everything changed. One moment she was dodging her brother's sharp glares, trying to look presentable despite the scandalous path that had led her before him after spending a good part of the night in the Pemberton library, the next she was standing in the modiste's atelier to be fitted for her wedding dress.

And then she was standing at the altar, in that dress, with James looking dashing by her side. The whole of the ton was there, whispering in shock and excitement. The jilted wallflower and the rake.

She barely remembered uttering her vows or hearing James speak his. But she would never forget how he looked upon her as if she was the most precious thing in the world.

The moment they were pronounced husband and wife, he had squeezed her hand and pulled her to him for one chaste kiss on her lips, which still looked too scandalous for the congregation's eyes.

And here she was, in Pemberton House, her new home, as the Marchioness of Crawford. The wedding reception was exquisite—James had insisted on taking care of it all by himself. And he had given her a reception, a testament to his love for her, how he saw her. It was delicate and daring. So very him, so her, so them.

Everywhere Diana looked, she saw little traces of their story. Beautiful flower arrangements everywhere, all with Chinese magnolias in them. A naughty wink at

their stolen moments. Above, a sea of wisteria cascaded from the tall ceiling, delicate blossoms in pale ivory and soft lavender twining down like silk ribbons, their scent a heady whisper in the air. A promise that he would never hurt her the way he did under that tree.

“You like it, My Lady?” he murmured.

She looked up, and her face lit up even more. He was so handsome, not because he had sharp features, the most piercing blue eyes, and the fullest lips. But because he was happy, free, himself, finally at ease with who he was and sure of the man he would become.

“I love it.”

“Then dance with me.” He took her hand.

“James, we are the hosts. We need?—”

“I only need you,” he whispered in her ear.

Diana stiffened, a sharp intake of breath betraying her. But before she could reprimand him, he was already leading her to the center of the ballroom. She was still not used to this, to the freedom to touch him, to be held by him so openly. But even knowing that, James’s grip on her was too bold, too daring, full of possessiveness and heat, as if he had already forgotten they had an audience.

“My Lord,” she warned softly.

He only grinned, leaning in. His gaze was that of a feral predator dressed in a gentleman’s clothes.

“I am barely holding back from kicking everyone out and taking you right here. I want to hear your screams echo through our halls.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

Diana whipped her head around, scandalized, suddenly very aware of the hundreds of guests around them.

“James!” she hissed.

He chuckled darkly, utterly unrepentant.

“You survived my brother during the engagement and the wedding ceremony. It would be a pity to lose my husband before my wedding night. You are pushing your luck,” she muttered, her cheeks scarlet red.

James hummed in agreement as he pulled her closer, pressing her against him in a way that was surely indecent.

“I have all the luck in the world, my flower.” He tilted her chin up with one finger, his lips hovering just above hers. “Because I have you.”

The dance ended, and as if conjured by their words, Stephen and Elizabeth materialized next to them.

The men were still fighting to find their balance, and Diana looked at Elizabeth, who smiled at the male need to assert power when they actually had none.

“James,” Stephen said coldly. “Do I have to say it?”

“I am sure it will be a warning that would include dismemberment.”

“I am glad we are in agreement.”

James nodded and looked down at Diana, who was still shocked to hear her overbearing brother speak to her husband like that. She was ready to give him a piece of her mind when James spoke softly.

“You don’t have to like me, but I vow...” He looked squarely into Stephen’s eyes. “I will cherish and protect her. Her happiness will be all that I will strive for. And if anyone hurts her...” His eyes darkened, and his voice dropped. “If anyone hurts her, I will need a hand in that dismemberment business.”

Stephen’s eyes darkened too. Did those two bond over tearing people’s limbs apart just now?

“How about we leave people’s limbs where they are meant to be?” Elizabeth cut through the tension.

Then, she pulled Diana into a tender hug that brought tears to her eyes.

“I will miss you,” she murmured.

“I think you will be occupied,” Diana said with a watery smile. “And we will be seeing each other all the time.”

“I am so happy.” Elizabeth pulled back and stroked her hair. “I am so proud you took the risk.”

“Thanks to you, I will truly live.”

They hugged, only to be interrupted by an invasion.

“I am here!” Selina announced, sweeping into the conversation like a queen claiming her throne. “I am ready for my thanks and a deep, sincere apology.”

Diana looked up. Richard was pulling James in a warm embrace, but her sister was regarding her with an open challenge.

“Thanks?” Diana narrowed her eyes at her.

“Oy, I want my dues too,” Herbert chimed in behind her.

“You are insufferable!” Diana huffed.

“I think you meant insightful,” Selina corrected. “Or is it brilliant?”

“How about perceptive?” Herbert offered.

“I would love to hear that we are simply ingenious for setting that auction up.”

“How about rash and irresponsible?” Diana retorted.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:11 am*

“I agree, but look at what our little scheme resulted in,” Herbert crowed.

“As if you knew this would happen!” Diana countered.

Selina took her sister’s hand and gave her a soft, loving smile. “I didn’t know. I just hoped.”

Diana’s irritation faded. Love swelled in her heart as she melted in her sister’s embrace. She closed her eyes in contentment.

“Do something like that again,” she said overly sweetly, “and I will strangle you.”

Selina and Herbert burst into raucous laughter.

“No, I am utterly serious!” Diana insisted.

Selina hurried into her husband’s arms, and Herbert pulled James in an earnest hug.

Diana thought that her heart would burst with happiness. The music shifted, settling into a quieter, sweeter melody. It was then that Solomon stepped forward, his eyes warm.

“A dance, Diana?”

No, her heart could definitely swell more. The man looked so touched and moved as he took her hand and kissed it.

James came to her and wrapped his arm around her waist. "I was ready to ask her the same thing," he teased.

"I think I am due a dance with my daughter," Solomon teased back.

Diana wanted to cry at seeing them so at ease with each other, putting in the effort to mend what was torn but not destroyed. Who knew that her threads would help others, too?

"Step away, boys." Euphemia invaded their little circle. "She won't dance with either of you. Not before I hug her."

"Euphemia." Diana embraced the elderly woman.

"You are a true blessing, Diana. You poured love into our home."

"Love was there. I merely woke it up."

"What a nice way to say that you kicked some sense in the men of this family."

The four of them laughed, and Diana felt like she was living a dream.

"Fine." James pretended to relent, placing her hand in his father's.

But before she could walk away, he leaned into her ear and whispered, "Tonight, you are all mine, after all."

"Follow me," James said to her when the wedding reception was still in full swing, well into the night.

Diana let him guide her through the dimly lit halls, her fingers nestled in his hand, the

warmth of his touch sending a thrill through her even now. Even after all they had been through. Even after all that was already hers.

At the entrance, a footman stood waiting, and he handed James a thick, fur-lined cloak. James draped it around Diana's shoulders, his fingers lingering on her collarbone—a soft, lingering touch that made her shiver.

Outside, parked in the quiet glow of lantern light, was the same curricule from that fateful night. Only now, it was wrapped in garlands of flowers, the soft petals swaying in the cool night breeze.

Diana gasped, turning to James. “Where are we going?”

He helped her up, his hands firm and possessive on her waist, then climbed in beside her and grabbed the reins.

“I need you alone.” His voice was low, rough with need.

He turned to her with the same wicked gleam in his eyes that had ruined her long before marriage ever could.

“Let’s run off into the night again, Diana.”

Diana laughed, shaking her head as the curricl lurched forward. She loved her wicked rake so much.

“Only this time,” she mused, “I don’t have to climb out of some poor maid’s window.”

“Why not? The endeavor tore your skirt so delectably.”

“Not my wedding dress!” she gasped, scandalized.

He groaned dramatically, pressing a hot kiss to her neck. “I will do all I can not to tear it off you.”

She knew where they were going. That cute, little place they shared a night in. Now, she was going back as the lady of the house—a role she had never imagined she would have. Being completely his, not just for five promenades.

They entered the house, and it seemed as deserted as it was back then. James took her cloak and guided her once more into the familiar living room, which somehow already felt like home.

“We are again alone in here.” He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her back against his front. “You can scream my name all you want.”

His hands roved over her, touching her everywhere.

“I know how you like to scream, Diana.”

Her breath hitched, and she bit her lip. “Only because you know how to make me.”

“God, yes!”

He didn’t even bother to take her somewhere appropriate for their first night as a married couple. He just lowered her onto the table, which was laden with her favorite pastries. He picked up one and lifted it to her mouth. She bit into it and then licked her lips slowly.

She, too, knew what she was doing.

“I may know how to make you scream, but you know how to make me beg, my flower.”

She took another bite from the pastry, and James smiled.

“Am I allowed to kiss you now, or do you want to finish your dessert?” he teased.

“It was a poor choice to give me a pastry at this moment, James.” She smirked.

“You mean to tell me that you prefer pastries to me?”

She shrugged and bit into the pastry once more.

“Hm,” James murmured as if deep in thought.

He dipped his finger in a chocolate mousse that was on the table and placed it on her lips. She opened her mouth and licked his finger clean. He moaned deeply, his body locking tightly, his breath coming in shallow bursts.

“Oh, I think we will find a way to compromise, My Lady,” he said darkly.

He stepped into her, his hips trapped between her legs. Then, he kissed her. And God, it was unlike any kiss they had shared before. This was not the kiss of a rake stealing a moment in secret. Not the desperate hunger of lovers lost in temptation. This was a vow, a promise more sacred than any spoken at the altar.

His mouth found hers in a slow, devastating kiss, his lips moving with a reverence that burned, a devotion that unraveled.

“I love you,” he murmured against her lips. “Tell me you know that.”

“I know. And I love you,” she said softly.

Their foreheads touched.

“Is this real?” Diana muttered, lost in bliss.

“It is, my love, my wallflower, my life,” James whispered.

“Well, according to Plato, reality—” Diana teased.

James interrupted all philosophical wanderings with another scorching kiss.

This was their life, their love. This was forever.

The End?