



Duke of Pride

Author: *Olivia T. Bennet*

Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "You're the last woman I should want...and the only one I can't resist."

Victoria wasn't born a lady — she inherited the title, along with the ton's scorn. Unable to fit in, her salvation comes in the form of a lonely duchess. Until her infuriating son ruins everything...

Duke Stephen never expected Miss Victoria to become his mother's companion. Nor that she would end up in his arms...naked. Now, the feel of her delicious curves haunts him. And one thing is clear: she has to go...

Even if that means finding her a husband himself.

Only, every time another man's eyes linger on her, Stephen loses control. And he knows the danger. One slip, one taste of a "lady" like Victoria, and everything he's ever built comes crashing down...

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

Total Pages (Source): 94

CHAPTER1

Broken Wheels

“Your Grace?”

The butler peeked outside, his eyes struggling to pierce through the darkness. At first, he seemed annoyed and even scared of the late visitor, but then his eyes adjusted, and he could now discern who the tall, broad man standing before him was.

“Let me in, Alfred.”

The door swung open, and Stephen, the Duke of Colborne, confidently walked into the house, filling the hall with his frame. He was dripping on the polished floor, but there was nothing to be done about that.

Stephen had known traveling at night in this weather was foolish, but the urgency of the news left him no choice. And now, drenched to the bone, he was paying the price. A broken wheel had forced him to abandon his carriage and walk the remaining distance to Colborne House through the slick London streets in a downpour.

The butler struggled to come to grips with his presence. He took his master’s wet coat and then remained almost speechless while the massive man removed his boots.

“Y-Your Grace, we were not expecting you.”

“That makes two of us, Alfred,” Stephen said coldly and made his way to the stairs.

“Y-Your Grace, your mother has?—”

“Do not wake up my mother,” Stephen cut him off. “It’s too late, and I do not want to worry her.”

“No. I mean, yes, Your Grace, but I must?—”

“Whatever it is can wait.” Stephen was losing his patience as the cold bit into his skin.

With sure strides, he ate the stairs up to his room, already loosening his tie and unfastening his soaked coat.

“I just wanted?—”

“Alfred!”

Stephen wanted this night to end and had no patience for any small talk or trivial estate matters. All he wanted was to get out of his soaked clothes, get warm, and get a good night’s sleep.

“Your Grace.” Alfred seemed apprehensive of his sharp tone. “I just wanted to?—”

“Whatever it is, bother me with it in the morning,” Stephen added in a tone that left no room for argument.

Leaving the butler stunned in the hallway, Stephen entered his dark room and shut the door behind him to spare himself from his butler’s inquiries. The familiar room was illuminated just by the fireplace.

This was the room he grew up in—a warm blanket of nostalgia came over him. His

family always spent more time in Colborne House than the countryside estate. And he hasn't set foot in the place for more than a year.

After his father died, he left for the countryside. He needed time to process his death, his new station, and his new responsibilities. But now he was back. Not under the best of circumstances, but still... He missed it.

He stood looking into the fire as he adjusted to his old room. It felt both familiar and foreign. As if he belonged and somehow not fully. He had written to his mother, Dorothy, the only family staying in the house, and his sister, Annabelle, now the very pregnant Duchess of Heartwick. But setting foot here? It'd been a minute.

"Home, sweet home," he muttered to himself.

He undid his cravat and unbuttoned his shirt and his breeches. He removed all the wet clothes off his ice-cold skin. He found it strangely odd that there was a fire burning in an unoccupied room in the middle of the night, but he was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. The truth was that he was not looking forward to sleeping in a cold room, so he welcomed the warmth seeping into his prickling skin.

Now, he needed something dry to wear and then sleep.

Stephen was sure that his old dressing room still contained lots of his clothes, so he would for sure find something suitable.

Luckily for him, the dressing room was just beyond the door on the far side of the room, so he made his way there. He opened the door and let the faint, flickering firelight illuminate the smaller room.

He crossed the threshold, not waiting for his eyes to properly adjust to the darkness. That's when his body collided with something. Something warm and soft. Something

that let out a surprised whimper as it stumbled backward due to the impact.

Page 2

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

Not something, but someone.

Stephen acted out of pure instinct, and his arm shot out, snaked around a waist, and pulled. In the darkness, he could not see, but he could feel.

A very naked, very feminine body was pressed against his, trapped by his arm, his hand resting on a curvy hip that filled his palm. It was wrong to focus on that sensation. Those hips were now flush against his, and that sent a jolt of awareness through his body.

His chest was met with the swell of a bosom, hot and heavy. The delicate peaks pressed against his skin through the faint sheen of raindrops still clinging to him, nothing else between them. His breath hitched, and for a moment, he was nothing but sensation.

His arm instinctively tightened around her, his fingers flexing over smooth, bare skin. And then, God help him, he felt everything. The slope of her back, the gentle curve of her waist beneath his fingertips, the shape of her, pressed along his entire length. The logical part of his brain shut down, his instincts took over, and his body reacted violently, hardening, tightening.

A sharp gasp filled the room, and a desperate inhale confirmed what his touch was painfully aware of. There was a woman in his room. A woman. A very naked woman.

The sound shot through him like lightning, igniting every nerve in his body. She felt this too. His naked body, the way her softness molded into his hard frame, how painfully aware he was of her skin. Her scent, an intoxicating orange blossom,

invaded his nostrils.

The realization sent a fresh wave of heat through him. His muscles tensed, his hand frozen on the warm, supple curve it gripped. Because if he moved, if he shifted even an inch, he would have to acknowledge what exactly he was touching. Then, he would want—no, he would need—to conquer more.

Stephen fought that feral part of him that urged him to throw everything out of the window and just touch more, feel beyond, lean in, taste, lick, take, push. So easy, so close, so warm, so soft.

He was still coming to grips with the unreal situation he was in when, suddenly, blinding lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the whole room for just a few seconds. It was enough for Stephen. As the light fell on the face of the mystery woman, he immediately recognized her.

“Victoria?”

Victoria Crawford. His baby sister’s best friend.

Was he hallucinating? Was the impact of the crash bigger than he had thought? Did he suffer some head trauma that made him see people who had no business being in his room in the middle of the night? How else could he justify the fact that this woman was currently entangled in his embrace in the most compromising way?

“Victoria?” he repeated.

The repetition seemed comical, as if he was expecting a figment of his imagination to actually answer. But then again, how could this be an illusion when she felt so tangible in his arms, and touch, all warm flesh against his cold one?

Cold? Oh, he was anything but cold now, this sudden embrace filling him with more heat than he would feel even if he threw himself into the fireplace behind him.

But then again, his ears caught it. That gasp. It was so real, so panicked, that Stephen became certain that he was not hallucinating. No, this was Victoria, in the flesh. Only in her flesh. And he just called her by her name.

Of course, that is the problem. The lack of honorifics, not the fact that we are both naked.

“Victoria? What are you?—?”

“Get out!” Her voice was commanding but still low enough so as not to alarm the household.

Stephen was taken aback by how she had come to grips with their situation faster than him. The only proper response to the situation was to remove his hands, turn around, and get out. Why hadn’t he thought of that sooner?

Victoria stepped out of his embrace and practically pushed him back into the bedroom.

Stephen stumbled back into the room and found himself facing a closed door. He blinked a few times before he realized that the dressing room had no other exit. At some point, Victoria would have to step outside with the added advantage of having a whole wardrobe at her disposal to rectify her... nakedness.

While he was left with two options: one undignified and one miserable. He could either wrap himself with warm, dry bedding or wear his soaked clothes. Stephen thought that he could spare both of them further embarrassment and protect whatever shreds of dignity remained, so he put on his wet clothes.

He should be focusing on the way his clothes seemed to be made out of ice or the sheer absurdity of him being screamed out of his own dressing room. And yet his mind had chosen to focus on other things.

On the way she felt under his touch, the way her waist dipped, and the way her hips flared. How soft her skin was. How her large breasts pressed against his chest. How her gasps felt on his skin.

Do not even think of those things!

This was a disaster, and yet his body refused to acknowledge it as one.

The door creaked open, and Victoria emerged with deliberate poise yet obviously flustered. She was wrapped in a deep green dressing gown that hinted at curves he was now shamefully familiar with. Her hair was slightly damp, loose down one side—thoroughly indecent by Society's standards, but perhaps the least shocking thing about the night.

His eyes landed on a water droplet trickling down her graceful neck, and he followed its slow descent, feeling suddenly thirsty.

Page 3

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

No! Absolutely not.

He inhaled sharply, and that made her downcast eyes flick to his. He felt that sapphire look in his bones, but Victoria quickly looked away, slightly over his shoulder.

It was time he took control of this uncontrollable situation.

So, Stephen, now in his damp clothes and fraying dignity, crossed his arms and fixed her with a look that could have frozen the Thames.

“You’ll forgive my confusion, Miss Victoria,” he began coolly. “But last I checked, women do not typically reside in the Duke of Colborne’s dressing room.”

She arched an eyebrow. Gone was the shy, coy look.

“Perhaps not in the Duke’s dressing room, but certainly in the rooms that were given to them. And you didn’t knock.”

“It is my dressing room,” he argued, emphasizing each word as if he were explaining arithmetic to a child. “I am not exactly sure where you grew up, but I am certain you are aware of how rooms work.”

“And I am sure you know how correspondence works. If you had informed the household of your arrival, all this would have been avoided. Instead, you barged in with all the grace of a stampeding bull. In fact, the bull might have paused to light a candle, at least.”

“I was not aware I had to ask for permission to enter my room. How is the fact that this is—and excuse me if I tire you with the repetition—my room irrelevant?”

Victoria was shaking with restrained wrath.

“I was told that the rooms were unoccupied. Unless you possess the ability to haunt your residence, Your Grace, I had every right to think that I was in my private quarters.”

Stephen frowned. This was getting more ridiculous by the minute.

“And, pray tell, who granted you access to these rooms?”

“Your mother,” Victoria stated as if this was obvious and he was the daft one. “You did not presume I run around Mayfair, picking locks to sneak in, did you?”

“I am sure you did not.” Stephen was starting to get annoyed. “I was also informed that your brother inherited a perfectly suitable mansion.”

The way he emphasized ‘inherited’ did not go unnoticed by her, but she decided to let it slide. Still, she drew a deep breath, her chest heaving. And just like that, Stephen felt all the sensations he was fighting so hard to stifle and bury so deep slowly reemerge.

No!

“Does your brother know that you are currently in the quarters of a gentleman?”

“I am sure I wrote to him about my move almost a year ago.”

There was too much information in that single sentence that Stephen opened his

mouth to say something but failed.

“I see that your brain is just as difficult to cooperate as your shirt,” Victoria drawled, eyeing his hastily adjusted shirt, which clung to his body.

Stephen felt her gaze as if she had actually touched him. His jaw clenched.

“My brother is attending to the family business in India. Your mother was kind enough to ask me to stay with her so neither of us had to be alone.”

Stephen blinked at the deluge of information that did more damage than the weather outside.

“I am your mother’s companion,” Victoria continued, annoyed. “She is not paying me, of course, so you could say it is more of a friendly arrangement that?—”

“I was never informed about this!” Stephen snapped.

“It may have been the knowledge of how logically and rationally you would have reacted. As you are now, screaming in the middle of the night. Unless the plan is to alert the whole household of our... situation.”

Stephen was too tired to deal with all of this right now. And she was annoyingly right yet again. Born into nobility or not, Victoria was still a lady of the ton. And the mere fact that they were in the same room, unchaperoned, would be enough to raise a scandal. Not adding all the other... elements into the equation.

“I think it’s best for us to discuss this once the sun is up,” he said as softly as his trembling body allowed.

Page 4

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

“The best idea you had all night,” Victoria quipped.

She turned to leave, her dressing gown swaying gently around her ankles as she made her way to the door.

Stephen dropped onto the edge of the sofa before the warm fire, dragging his hands over his face, his fingers pressing into his temples to fight the oncoming headache—or perhaps to squeeze out the ghost of her warmth still clinging to his skin.

Her hand was on the door handle when she paused.

“Your Grace,” she said, her voice softer than before.

No trace of irritation, no cleverness. Just a quiet tremble wrapped in formality.

Stephen looked up. Her back was still turned to him. She hesitated, then slowly looked over her shoulder. Her eyes flicked to his, and for a moment, all the fire in her seemed to waver, the storm behind her gaze calming into something... unsure.

“Did you...” she began, but the words stuck in her throat. She swallowed. “Did you see anything?”

Stephen let out a long breath, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, pinching the bridge of his nose before straightening.

“Whatever do you mean, Miss Victoria?”

She shifted, her eyes falling to the floor for a moment before she looked back at him again. Braver now.

“Did you... see me?”

The question struck like a crack of thunder and threatened to shatter his resolve. She was still waiting for an answer.

“No, Miss Victoria,” he replied smoothly. “As you so delicately put it, I barged in here like a bull. I did not even light a candle.”

He watched her carefully as he spoke. Her gaze searched his face as if reading the truth to his words, his noble bearing, the honesty in his eyes, the control in his voice. She let out a soft breath, barely audible, and nodded. Without any more delay, she finally left the room.

With a maddened sigh, Stephen leaned back into the sofa, the leather groaning beneath him. He hadn’t lied. In truth, he hadn’t caught the faintest glimpse of her in the darkness, not even in that brief flash of lightning. But he had felt her, every inch of her.

And somehow, that was worse than anything his eyes might have seen. The memory lived in his skin now, seared into his hands, etched into his palm, where her waist had fit too perfectly. That kind of knowing was far more dangerous.

CHAPTER2

Rules

Victoria went downstairs for breakfast even before the staff had the opportunity to set the table right. But she had given up pretending she was going to sleep well into the

night as she tossed and turned in her bed. She decided to drown her frustration in buttery croissants.

She was ready to do exactly that when Dorothy, the Dowager Duchess of Colborne, walked in with her usual smile, having had a good night's sleep, unaware of what unfolded under her roof.

“Victoria! You are up early!” Dorothy approached the table.

“His Grace is here!” Victoria blurted out.

Dorothy stopped in her tracks and looked around as if her son would be conjured by sheer thought. Which, given the Devil he was, might happen.

“Stephen is here?” She seemed beyond herself with happiness. “He didn’t send word.”

That would have saved us the... incident.

The ‘incident’ was what Victoria decided to refer to as the dressing room debacle from now on. Her mind kept betraying her, replaying the way his hand had landed, not clumsily or by accident, but firmly, as though claiming the curve of her hip.

It was scandalous. It was outrageous. And, worst of all, it was unforgettable. Victoria didn’t see anything, and that was the main reason she believed that he hadn’t either, but she felt him everywhere, and that was somehow worse.

“I haven’t seen him for so long,” Dorothy lamented, her voice filled with longing.

She turned to head back out of the room, but then she paused and looked at Victoria.

Page 5

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

“Oh, dear!” she gasped, realizing the implication of Stephen arriving in the middle of the night. “He must have been shocked to find you in his room.”

In his dressing room, to be more precise.

Victoria bit her lip to chase the memory of the ‘incident’ away. It would do no one any good to inform Dorothy exactly how both her companion and her son were entangled, naked, in the dark.

Blood rushed to Victoria’s cheeks as she thought of his stormy blue eyes. She shook her head sharply and took a sip of her tea, now lukewarm. No, this would not do. She would compose herself. She would regain her balance.

“Please tell me he did not overreact. He can be so...”

So massive and solid? Hot? Dangerous? Because he could be all things and then some.

“He was surprised, of course,” Victoria replied carefully. “But he was an absolute gentleman.”

She may have stretched the truth a little bit too much there.

“Ah,” Dorothy sighed.

“He insisted I return to bed, but I thought that it was too much to keep him out of his room.”

Dorothy nodded and smiled.

Victoria opened her mouth to ask why the Dowager Duchess had failed to inform him about her presence in the house as her companion when the air shifted. She knew instinctively why, the way innocent prey would freeze when a dangerous animal prowled around.

The Duke entered the room—fully clothed, thank the Heavens—in confident strides. Not that it helped at all. He was fully dressed last night, too. Well, in wet clothes that clung to his body, almost transparent. In addition, he hadn't bothered with a cravat or properly buttoned up his shirt, so Victoria got a glimpse of his collarbone. A sight that has proved to be more upsetting than she would have thought about mere bones on a body.

Focus on something else, for all that is holy!

Victoria decided to notice how Dorothy's face lit up when she saw her son, and she smiled.

The older woman stood up and wrapped her arms around her son. For a few precious moments, Stephen returned the embrace before he tensed.

"Dear, you never sent word that you were coming," Dorothy said.

"I did not exactly plan to come, to be honest." Stephen took his seat at the table.

Then, he turned to Victoria painfully slow, as if he too was mortified of their late-night 'incident.'

"Miss Victoria," he greeted.

“Your Grace.” Victoria smiled for Dorothy’s sake.

They resumed their breakfast.

Victoria could already feel the change in the air, the shift that his presence brought. Breakfasts with Dorothy were usually fun and light, filled with crazy stories, gossip, and plans for the day. Now, it was all cups clinking against saucers and the soft rustling of clothes.

Dorothy looked at Victoria, imploring her to end the silence, but Victoria motioned that she was on her own in that venture.

“You are staying for long, I hope,” Dorothy said sincerely. “Or even better, you are back for good.”

“It depends on how a certain matter is resolved.” Stephen’s deep voice filled the room.

“A certain matter?”

Stephen took a letter out of his pocket and handed it to his mother. He kept drinking his black tea, looking at her over the rim of his cup.

“Well, that is...” Dorothy frowned.

“Concerning,” Stephen supplied.

Page 6

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

“I was going to say ridiculous,” Dorothy huffed. “Here, Victoria, see for yourself.”

Victoria read the letter Lord Prevost had sent to Stephen. She knew him. He was the next-door neighbor. It was a short letter that basically warned Stephen that his mother “had lately gotten involved with the wrong crowd.”

Her back straightened, and her fingertips slightly dug into the paper.

“Mother.” Stephen’s voice sent a chill through the room. “How could you have not told me about Miss Victoria living here? For almost a year, from what I gather.”

“Because, dear, I knew precisely how you would react.”

“And how, pray tell, is that?” His tone was clipped, though there was the faintest tick in his temple.

Somehow, Victoria found the fact that he was so tense was pleasing. It served him right for being so...

If she waited long enough, the word would for sure come.

Or perhaps it had better not.

“Like you are now, in fact?” Dorothy offered.

“Concerned and rational?”

“Absurd and irrational,” Dorothy dared.

“Mother, you are a duchess. Your household should reflect that dignity.”

“And it does.” Dorothy’s expression remained unchanged.

Victoria scoffed at that.

Stephen caught the faint sound and turned his attention to her. She felt the weight of his gaze pin her to her chair, his piercing blue eyes locking onto hers. The intensity seeped into her skin and down to her bones. But she was not going to cave just because he was looking at her with those ridiculously azure eyes of his.

“I am glad that you find it funny,” Stephen chastised as if she were an unruly subject before a magistrate.

Victoria’s breath caught at his tone, and then her anger flared.

“You disapprove of my presence, Your Grace?” she asked, lifting her chin. “And here I thought the pleasure was mutual.”

Dorothy coughed delicately into her napkin, but Victoria saw the hint of amusement in her eyes.

Stephen’s gaze darkened. “You know precisely what I mean.”

“Oh, but I do not,” Victoria countered smoothly, tilting her head. “Please, do enlighten me. What is it about my presence that offends you so deeply?”

Stephen’s jaw ticked. Seeing him torn between propriety and the need to speak his mind as he saw fit was enough to sweeten her sour mood.

“Miss Victoria, surely even you recognize that your presence here invites speculation.”

“Do forgive me, Your Grace, but I hardly think the ton lies awake at night, whispering about whether or not the Dowager Duchess’s companion is causing scandal in her drawing room.”

“Lord Prevost seems to be doing exactly that.”

“So, that is what this is about?” she challenged. “A bitter, old man with too much time and too little entertainment writes you a letter, and suddenly I am a matter of concern?”

Stephen’s jaw tightened. Victoria’s nostrils flared. Neither backed down.

Dorothy watched in awe as if she didn’t believe such a scene was unfolding at her breakfast table.

“It is not just Lord Prevost. You must see how your presence here?—”

Page 7

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

“My presence,” Victoria cut in sharply, “has been of comfort to your mother.”

“That is not the issue.” Stephen inhaled slowly, the muscle in his jaw flexing as he spoke.

“Then what is the issue?”

A pause. A long pause. A pause in which Victoria saw something flicker in his gaze. It could be hesitation, perhaps, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. When he finally spoke, his voice was as firm as ever.

“Women of your kind do not belong in houses like this. They tend to be brazen and improper.”

The words settled heavily between them.

Victoria went stiff. Her heartbeat stuttered, her hands curling into the folds of her skirt.

Women of my kind...

It was not her wit, her independence, or their long-standing animosity that made him so determined to keep her away. It was the simple, unchangeable truth of her birth.

“You are displeased,” she said, her voice deceptively light, “because I was not born with a title.”

“It is not personal, Miss Victoria. It is not about you. It is about how people might read into this.”

“How convenient. You say it is not personal, that it is not about me, yet somehow, I am the problem.” Victoria narrowed her eyes at him.

“Argue all you like, Miss Victoria, but facts remain facts. My mother?—”

“Her Grace,” Victoria cut in, “invited me here. Yet you keep treating me as if I invaded your house and set up camp in the east wing.”

Victoria was shaking with anger. She was torn between storming out of the room crying or getting the butter knife and testing its sharpness on human flesh.

“I am merely stating that your presence here is not something that would be kindly looked upon by?—”

“Society,” she spoke over him, almost biting out the word. “Yes, yes. How tiresome it must be, having to uphold such burdensome standards.”

“There is a reason that standards exist,” he protested.

“Then by your standards, it is perfectly fine to look down on me because I was not born into nobility?”

Stephen looked at her as if he wished that murder was not illegal in most cultures. Victoria had cornered him. This was her victory. She drew first blood.

Stephen regrouped and folded. Only temporarily, she suspected.

“I do not look down on you, Miss Victoria,” he said, his voice turning even colder. “I

merely don't want you around my family."

The temperature in the room dropped further. The only thing that could be heard was the proverbial ice solidifying between them.

"Stephen!" Dorothy realized that this was turning improper, and fast.

Stephen exhaled through his nose, his gaze raking over Victoria as if assessing the extent of the challenge she had just issued him.

"There will be rules."

"Rules, Your Grace?" Victoria arched a single, mocking eyebrow.

"Yes. If I am to remain at Colborne House, and you are to keep your... position here, then certain boundaries will be established. Firstly, no one will disturb me while I am in my study. I have matters to attend to, and I will not have my time wasted with frivolous interruptions."

His eyes flicked briefly to Victoria before settling back on his mother.

Victoria clasped her hands in front of her and smiled sweetly. "But Your Grace, what if the house is on fire?"

Page 8

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

“Then you may inform me of the matter after I have finished my work,” he retorted dryly.

“Gladly,” she said in a tone that said she would sit back and watch him being burned alive.

“Secondly, I expect the household to maintain a level of decorum befitting its master. That includes keeping unnecessary noise to a minimum. Lastly, there will be no social gatherings. No visits from unwanted company. No unnecessary disturbances to the order of the household.”

“So, to summarize, lonely, boring, and quiet,” Victoria murmured.

“Precisely,” he said in a tone that conveyed that her sarcasm was not appreciated.

“Are those all the rules, then? Or shall we also be forbidden from laughing in your presence? Are we to be spanked if we don’t comply?”

A flash of something dark and hungry passed behind his eyes. Something devious and hot shot through her. He bit the inside of his cheek and looked at his mother instead.

Be thankful for the small things, Victoria.

“Mother,” he asked, “did I make myself clear?”

Dorothy nodded, the saddest look on her face. “Yes, dear,” she said quietly. “You have made yourself quite clear.”

Victoria felt the need to scream in his face that he had no right to come in after so long and ruining everything, but she knew that insufferable or not, Dorothy loved her son. And she missed him. To have him back after so long was a true gift, and she would pay any price for that.

That didn't mean that Victoria would just sit back and see him treat his mother like a child, not even asking what she wanted or what made her happy. Victoria knew how hard the past years had been for her friend, and she wouldn't allow anyone to force her back into her melancholy.

“Are my rules understood, Miss Victoria?”

Still, this was the Duke's house, and he had every right to set the rules. Victoria was nothing but a guest, after all, and though his mother was the Dowager Duchess, he was the real master and he could question anyone's presence. So Victoria did what was proper and beat a strategic retreat.

“Understood, Your Grace.”

His expression did not change, but his eyes—those sharp, stormy blue eyes—darkened. Victoria had expected contempt, irritation, and perhaps even triumph. But this? This was something else entirely. He picked up the gauntlet she had thrown, and he seemed determined. No, not determined. His look was deep, unreadable. Hungry. And she was the next meal.

The air between them tightened, stretched thin. Victoria's pulse quickened, her breathing suddenly uneven, her body betraying her in ways she refused to acknowledge.

No.

This was a man she detested and could potentially grow to hate. She could not be this affected because he was just looking at her. But for a brief second, she thought that maybe she was the one who would regret this.

CHAPTER3

Library Nightgowns

To say that Victoria was livid would be an understatement. The rest of the day, she was simmering in a mix of irritation, annoyance, and righteous wrath.

Rules? He strode in here and dictated rules as if he were...

The master of the house, actually.

Regardless. He had no right to snuff all the joy out of this house.

Victoria still remembered how Dorothy had been when she first moved in. Closed off, never smiling, depressed, and given up on life, on herself. She looked older than she was—she had given up on her appearance and all will to live. Slowly, they found joy together, and Victoria was proud of how far her friend had come. And now to have her son deprive her of the simple joys...

But since there was nothing to be done—for now—regarding the Duke of Colborne, she thought it might prove productive to aim her anger at the main cause of this insufferable change in her daily life.

To that purpose, she took out her notebook to list ways she could get back at Lord Prevost without any suspicions coming back to her.

So far, she wrote,

-Train a pigeon to poop on his hat;

Page 9

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

-Replace his favorite snuff with pepper;

-Somehow obtain a goose, set the goose loose on his property, and let nature take its course.

“I wonder,” Dorothy said from her place in the cozy drawing room, “what could have the poor notebook done to have you look at it with such menace.”

“It’s not the notebook; it’s the person I am imagining teaching a lesson or two.”

“Spare poor Stephen.” Dorothy smiled.

“He is next in line,” Victoria said dryly. “But His Grace would be oblivious in the countryside if our esteemed neighbor didn’t intervene.”

“To be honest, I am grateful that Stephen is back.” Dorothy looked apologetically at her. “I just wish that it was for the right reasons, not because some bitter old man wrote these preposterous things.”

“You see? So where do we find a goose?”

Dorothy fell back in her chair, laughing, and her good mood was contagious.

“Well then, if it’s satisfaction you seek, I suggest something a little more immediate.” Dorothy handed her a still-warm pastry. “Apple tarts. Fresh from the kitchen.”

Victoria took a bite, moaning appreciatively. Apple sweets of any kind were her

weakness, and the Dowager Duchess knew that well.

“You are a woman of infinite wisdom.”

“I strive to be.”

As Victoria indulged in the pastry, Dorothy studied her with that ease that had been flowing between them since the first time they met.

“You know that I don’t agree with Stephen that your presence here is a problem, right?”

Victoria almost choked at the mention of the man she decided was her arch-nemesis. But she chose to focus on the fact that Dorothy was trying to make her feel better.

“I’d hope so, given the times I have pretended not to notice that you cheat in cards,” Victoria commented.

“I might have to revise my feelings.” Dorothy pretended to be wounded.

“Dorothy, you and Annabelle have always been supporting, accepting. I would allow you a thousand cheats in whist.”

They chuckled.

“In all seriousness,” Victoria continued softly, “I owe you so much. Your friendship and your support when I needed it the most. When my brother and I clashed...”

She still remembered that heated argument, the words they exchanged with Maxwell. If Dorothy hadn’t been there to offer the solution of becoming her companion to get away, her relationship with her brother might have become irreparable.

“You do see the pattern of you clashing with men, though, don’t you, Victoria?”

They both burst into more laughter.

Between the sweetness of the pastry and their even sweeter way of dealing with adversities, Victoria felt the bitter taste of Stephen’s words lose their edge. It didn’t matter what others thought, only those who mattered to her.

Doesn’t he?

She ignored the senseless notion and enjoyed the rest of the day with Dorothy. They walked in the garden, where Dorothy regaled her with stories of past scandals so outrageous that Victoria laughed until her stomach ached, nearly tumbling into the rosebushes more than once.

By the time the afternoon sun turned golden, they were curled up in the drawing room, reading and drinking tea, their conversation punctuated by occasional exasperated remarks about whatever nonsense the novel’s hero was up to.

It was the kind of day Victoria cherished—light, easy, filled with laughter and warmth. And the best part? Other than a brief appearance at lunch, Stephen stayed in his study most of the day.

As she reached for another biscuit, Dorothy set her book down with a quiet sigh and studied Victoria over the rim of her teacup.

Page 10

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

“My dear,” she began, her tone careful but affectionate. “I do hope you won’t let Stephen’s behavior sour things between you.”

Victoria arched an eyebrow, chewing her biscuit slowly.

Too late.

Dorothy, ever perceptive, must have read the thought in her expression because she gave a soft chuckle, shaking her head.

“Yes, he was dreadfully rude. But you must understand. He has been raised to guard his family name above all else. That kind of expectation... it’s difficult to shake, even when one wishes to.”

Victoria took a sip of tea, considering that.

Did His Grace wish to?

He certainly hadn’t seemed particularly troubled by his arrogance last night. But then her gaze flicked to Dorothy, to the way her smile dimmed just slightly at the edges, as if she had learned to make peace with things she wished were different.

Victoria had long suspected that Stephen’s rigid ways did not bring his mother much happiness. But Dorothy, being Dorothy, merely waved a hand and dismissed the thought before it could settle.

“It’s in his nature to be protective,” she said lightly, picking up her book again. “Even

if that protection sometimes feels a bit too much.”

Victoria frowned at that, but Dorothy had already returned her attention to the page before her, effectively ending the conversation.

She could not ask her friend to rebel against her own child, she understood as much. Especially when Dorothy thought she had lost him and now he was back. So Victoria kept the rest of the evening as light as she could.

“Thank you for today,” she said when it was time for Dorothy to retire.

Instead of answering, Dorothy pulled her in her embrace. Victoria closed her eyes in delight and returned the hug.

“Have a good night.”

Victoria tried to make that last wish a reality and finally sleep. She went through her routine, hoping that the familiarity would bring slumber. Alas, even exhausted as she was because she didn’t sleep the night before, her body refused to relax.

The day had been perfectly pleasant, all things considered. Dorothy had made sure of that. But now, alone in the silence of the night, her mind wandered back to him. To his sharp words, his infuriating presence, the way he had looked at her like she was a problem to be solved, or worse, an inconvenience to be removed.

How dare he?

And yet she swallowed all his insults about her all day.

She was used to the ton looking down on her family even before her brother inherited his title after a tragic turn of events. She cared about that. She Wouldn’t lose her

precious sleep for two days in a row because of the most irritating man in existence.

But to sit back and watch him judge Dorothy? Take the few joys she had left, when he left her in her solitude?

“Blast it!”

With an exasperated groan, she threw off her blankets and slipped out of bed. If she couldn't sleep, she might as well do something more productive than thinking about the Duke of Colborne. So, she got out of her room and made her way to the library.

Reading was her favorite thing in the world, and she was sure that a good book would at least ease her mind and take any dark thoughts away. Unless she found a book titled *How To Kill A Duke and Get Away With It: A Beginner's Guide* there. Which she hoped she did.

But her luck was abysmal and horrible. The moment she entered the library, she realized that it was already occupied. In the glowing light from the fireplace, sitting on an armchair, a book on his lap and a glass of brandy absentmindedly in his hand, was him.

“Oh,” was the only thing that came to mind the moment she realized she was not alone.

The golden glow of the fire illuminated his face, casting shadows over his chiseled features. His dark hair was slightly tousled, and his shirt was open at the collar, the top few buttons undone.

Wearing cravats should be mandatory at all hours of the day!

Victoria's eyes flicked to his collarbone once more. He looked comfortable but not at

ease. There was a tension in the set of his shoulders, in the way he swirled his drink idly but did not sip it.

The house must have more than twenty-five rooms—she had never bothered to count them—yet somehow it seemed in the after-hours, out of all the rooms, they ended up in the same one. The probability of that happening was small if she were to go by sheer numbers, but here they were.

Page 11

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

“I will get a book and leave you to...” Victoria vaguely gestured in his direction. “Whatever this is.”

And then she turned to her favorite section of the library, filled with scientific books. Not so much on her beloved mathematics, but she had decided to study the few there again and again.

While she looked for the book, she realized there was something very wrong—the Duke hadn’t uttered a single word to her.

Could he be plotting to kill her too?

Victoria frowned. A prickling awareness spread across her skin, like a touch she had not felt but somehow knew was there. Slowly, she looked over her shoulder at the man filling the room with his presence to the point that she felt suffocated.

Stephen was watching her. No, that was not exactly accurate. He was observing her. No. Not that either. He was drinking her in, his eyes roaming over her body in a slow, deliberate way that made something inside her coil.

It was then that realization dawned on her.

Oh, good Lord.

She was in her nightgown. Not an indecent one, certainly not sheer or scandalous, but thin enough, soft enough, to remind her precisely how little separated her skin from the cool night air.

The mathematical parameters to their proximity after the sun had set seemed to include meeting while one or either was indecorously dressed—if at all. The odds of that happening two nights in a row were astronomical.

Heat rose to her cheeks, and she straightened her spine, willing herself not to fidget under his scrutiny.

“What are you doing here?” His voice was low, rough, and hard.

“I am getting a book,” Victoria spoke slowly, mirroring the condescending way he had talked to her the night before. “I didn’t realize I needed to repeat myself.”

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. His eyes locked onto hers, something unreadable flickering in their depths.

“I meant, what are you doing here?” His voice was intense. “Inmyhouse. Inmylife.”

Victoria inhaled sharply. Of all the arrogant, high-handed, impossible things he could have said, he chose this.

“I am your mother’s companion,” Victoria said in a tone that conveyed that she found the question... well, senseless.

“Why?”

“Because I happen to find her interesting and because she asked me graciously. Qualities that I happen to love in your sister, in case you were wondering why I am friends with her.”

“My sister is married.” He set the crystal tumbler down. “As you should have been.”

“Excuse me?”

It was too late in the night and too absurd to be having this conversation with him. How dare he talk to her like that? Who gave this unbearable, arrogant man the power to dictate what she should have been?

“I said”—he got up—“that you should have been married by now. At your age, even a woman in your... situation should have already secured a husband.”

Victoria weighed the tome she was still holding and mentally calculated how hard she had to hurl it at him for maximum damage. But she was not going to waste a source of valuable knowledge on him.

“Ah, yes,” she scoffed. “How remiss of me to have neglected my duty of attaching myself to the first available man. One kind enough to look past my unfortunate situation.”

“Perhaps that is the exact purpose of all of this,” Stephen said in a glacial tone that made the fire dim a little. “Why you are walking around in your nightgown.”

Victoria’s rage flared.

He can’t be implying...?

This despicable, obnoxious man! Perhaps the tome was not that valuable, after all.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Victoria bit out, “but it rather sounds like you are implying that my presence in your house, specifically in your library, in my nightgown, at this precise moment, is some sort of desperate attempt to secure a husband. And seeing that there is no one else around, you seem to be under the impression that you are the intended target.”

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

His silence was damning. He raised his chin and looked down at her.

“Oh, you cannot be serious.” Victoria’s nostrils flared.

“It is not an unreasonable conclusion.”

Victoria barely held back from baring her teeth at him. Instead, she gathered her wits and lowered her voice to a cold hiss.

“I assure you, Your Grace, if I had any desire to trap a man into marriage, I would at least choose one I liked.”

Stephen’s eyes flickered, something sharp flashing behind them.

She didn’t stop. He had crossed a line, and that worked both ways. And since he dared to imply such a thing about her, he basically just set the standard for the rest of their interactions.

So, Victoria unleashed her sharp tongue.

“I would choose a man who challenges me intellectually,” she continued. “A man with wit, with charm, with a sense of humor. A man who possesses the ability to laugh.”

Stephen’s expression darkened. His jaw clenched, and for a moment, Victoria thought that she had finally succeeded in shattering that infuriating composure of his and she would see the man under the facade.

But no. When he spoke, his voice was low, measured, and controlled.

“I would caution you, Miss Victoria, to remember your place when addressing a duke.”

“Oh, yes. My place, my situation. Somewhere beneath you, isn’t that right?”

“You misjudge me.”

“I highly doubt it.”

“Miss Victoria, I am not trying to be cruel.”

“And yet you seem to excel at exactly that.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, and he exhaled through the nose sharply. “Miss Victoria. I asked you to address me properly.”

“You seem to forget that my brother is a duke, whether you like it or not. I am well aware of how to address one. I am being quite reasonable, given the circumstances.”

“Since you mentioned your brother, what would he think about all of this?”

“That’s irrelevant. He is too far away to be able to do anything about the matter.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Excuse me for not submitting fully to your interrogation. What was the question again?”

“Why are you with my mother?”

“Apparently, for the chance to walk around in my nightgown and catch a fine man like you.” Victoria’s words dripped with venom.

“Miss Victoria!” Stephen barely contained himself.

He seemed ready to snap, his eyes blazing. He was too tall, too broad, and though she was well aware he would never go over the limits of what was proper, his massive body locking up like that made him look less of a gentleman. A side of him she didn’t want to unearth. So, she retreated a little and decided to answer earnestly.

“Because I like her. I consider her a good friend. She is kind, she is brilliant, and she is alone,” Victoria sighed. “Or at least, she was. Before I came.”

Stephen inhaled, and his jaw dropped.

“And now you come along, ready to condemn her into the same loneliness—a loneliness that was partly your fault.”

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

“My fault?” Stephen frowned, taking a step toward her.

“You left her here all alone and never visited. You knew that she was in here with no one. Annabelle is heavily pregnant—she can’t visit. What did you expect her to do? Wither away? Would you have preferred that?”

Stephen’s jaw tightened, and he momentarily looked away. Her blows were hitting the mark.

“Then the neighbor writes you some nonsense, and here you are to introduce order, ready to rip away the one thing that has made her happy in your absence. And yet you claim you are not cruel.”

Stephen seemed shaken, as if she had physically pushed him back.

Victoria was ready to speak more of her mind when he tilted his head and took another step toward her.

“Such passion,” he murmured.

She felt something dangerous coil around her, dark and seductive. Damn his blue eyes! Damn that deep voice that formed perfectly articulated words to torment her.

No!

She had self-respect and self-control. She was not going to sit and let him call her passionate as if it were a bad thing. She would show him passionate.

So, she laughed. In his face.

“Oh, please,” she scoffed. “What would a man like you know about passion?”

She regretted it the moment she saw his eyes turn stormy. He moved slowly, stalking closer to her. She took a step back because he towered over her, even though she herself was tall.

“Are you certain I know nothing about passion?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Her throat went dry. She went rigid and numb at the same time as he invaded her personal space.

What is going on?

“Quite certain,” she managed, though her voice lacked its usual bite.

His gaze flickered to her lips. Her heart stopped. Stephen leaned in, so close that she could feel the whisper of his breath on her skin. The scent of him, dark and rich, wrapped around her like an invisible snare. Brandy and firewood. And his natural musk, clean yet sharp.

Not fair.

For one tormenting moment, she thought he might actually kiss her, not out of passion, but simply to prove a point. To show her that he could, that he was in control, that he was passionate. Victoria was ready to surrender and scream that she believed him before he—they—did something disastrous.

He didn't kiss her. Of course, he didn't. Because the Duke of Colborne was a man of

control, of discipline. And for the first time since they met, Victoria was grateful for those otherwise deplorable qualities.

But then she saw his arm rising, his fingers catching the edge of her jaw, a feather-light touch that sent something sharp and hot curling low in her stomach.

Victoria swallowed. Hard. Her hands curled into fists at her sides, her nails biting into her palms as if the sting of it might ground her. No one had ever touched her like that. Even she wasn't sure what that exactly was.

"Look at me!" he ordered.

It came out more like a growl than actual spoken words. His tone set her rebellious nature on fire. But that growl... His voice was laced with something so dark and searing that Victoria swayed just a little as if little-headed. But she, too, was a creature of tenacity, so she met his eyes. Ocean blue against sapphire. Ice and fire.

"When does your brother come back, Miss Victoria?"

"In a month." Victoria was glad she could summon such information under his gaze.

"Well then," he said lowly, "you are allowed to stay for a month. After that, you will go back to your brother."

Victoria's face fell. Going back to Maxwell meant clashing with him again.

Stephen seemed to notice her displeasure. He forced her straying eyes back to him. He frowned but said nothing. He didn't care enough.

“Is that understood, Miss Victoria?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Good.”

She saw nothing good in all of this.

CHAPTER4

Breakfast Surprises

Stephen was still trying to understand how, instead of putting her out of his mind by going to the library, he ended up seeing her again. This time in her nightgown, with her hair down, almost barefoot. Somehow it was worse. No, not worse. It just added to an image his mind was building without his consent. Because his body had explored how she felt under that nightgown that made her eyes even brighter.

“Get it together, Stephen.”

He had made two mistakes the night before. The first was to talk to her. Ever since she had walked into his life, Victoria had the unfailing talent to test his ability to hold back anger. What on earth made him think that a late-night encounter was a good idea, especially when she was so vulnerable...

He scoffed at that last thought. Victoria, vulnerable? She wasn't, was she? She stood before him like a queen, utterly unimpressed by his title, his presence, or the

dangerous thoughts he was having about her.

The second mistake was to touch her. One might have thought that he had touched her enough already on his first night back in the house. He was trying to make a point, he remembered that, but then she challenged him—she always does, blast it!—and he was drawn to her, eager to teach her a lesson, remind her who he was. He had felt the warmth of her skin, the delicate line of her jaw beneath his hand. And, worst of all, she had let him.

“All right, we are not allowing this impossible woman to reign over this household,” he said to himself, preparing to face her over breakfast.

Determined to regain the control that had almost slipped away from him, he went down the stairs to the dining room.

“My boy!” His mother got up to hug him.

He returned her hug and almost smiled at the genuine joy she showed at having him in the house.

At least one person is happy to see me.

Speaking of which. Where is Victoria?

He quickly noticed that the bane of his existence was absent this morning. He should have felt relief that he could enjoy his breakfast, but for some reason, he felt the opposite. He couldn't help but wonder if he had been too blunt, too cruel with her last night. He had made some accusations that might have been unreasonable in her eyes. She couldn't be avoiding him for what almost happened, could she?

“I had the cook prepare your favorite apple pie. Lucky for you, he had even more

practice since you left,” Dorothy said in a cheerful voice that was enough to drag him out of his thoughts.

“How so?” He sat down and took a sip of his tea.

“Apple pies are Victoria’s favorite.”

He almost choked on his tea at the mention of her name, as well as the fact that against all odds, they had one thing in common.

Instead of answering, he looked around the room to distract himself. He frowned. This was not how he remembered the dining room to be. It looked more cheerful but in a balanced, tasteful way. It made the place more alive, like a real home.

Then, he looked out the window, and he noticed more colors outside, too. He set his cup down and walked to the grand window. He looked upon the pandemonium of colors, the buzzing of bees and butterflies.

Before his departure, the garden was a green, curated landscape of carefully trimmed bushes, proper and fitting for his station. That was the garden he grew up in. He could barely recognize these grounds as his. They were wild, brimming with color but in a way that made complete sense. This was an artful chaos.

Stephen tried to hate it, but he failed. He couldn’t take his eyes off it.

“Mother,” he remarked, still at the window, “the gardens are... different.”

“Aren’t they lovely? It makes my day to just look out my window at the roses this time of year.”

“They are indeed lovely,” he admitted, and his mother smiled widely. “And the

room.” He gestured around the dining room as he retook his seat. “It looks warmer and quite tasteful. Everything seems carefully planned and wisely chosen. You really did an excellent job, Mother. It looks sophisticated in a very unique way.”

“I am glad you noticed the changes. We also renovated the big drawing room.”

“We?” Stephen frowned.

“I am not going to take credit for all the amazing changes you see in the house. The truth is that Victoria did most of the work.”

Stephen’s fingers tightened around his cup.

Of course, she did.

That woman invaded his room, his library, his dining room, his damned gardens. And his thoughts, it would seem.

He was ready to make some comment about how many liberties were given to a woman who was supposed to be the lady of the house’s companion. But when he focused on his mother’s face, ready for a scolding, he saw it light up with joy.

He noticed how healthier she looked, how livelier, not a shadow of herself like when she was taking care of his father. How hard that must have been for her. How lonely she must have felt when he left.

It warmed his soul to see his mother so cheery and full of life. And no matter how much he tried to deny it, he knew that it was Victoria’s positive influence. Perhaps he was harsh the night before, accusing her of things instead of focusing on the good she had brought into his home.

That is the precise moment when Victoria chose to make an entrance. She went straight to his mother and leaned in for a kiss as she apologized for her tardiness. All

he could do was study her.

She was wearing a simple morning gown, modest but cut in such a way that it hugged her body in the right places. The color was bluish-green, and it made her eyes seem even sharper, brighter, like storm-tossed seas beneath a sunbeam. He hated that dress with a passion.

Stephen had never noticed that Victoria was one of the few women who didn't have to tilt her head back that much to look up at him. But instead of the willowy body that most tall ladies of the ton had, hers was curvy, full. He had felt those curves intimately and had seen them through her nightgown the night before.

For the love of God, Stephen!

"Good morning, Your Grace," she greeted smoothly as she took her seat, her voice the very picture of polite restraint.

Ah. So that's how we're playing this.

Last night, she had no problem speaking her mind, throwing all decorum out of the window and making blunt comments.

He inclined his head, his voice measured. "Miss Victoria."

They tucked into their food quietly.

Stephen quickly realized that his mother had indeed spoken the truth when she said that Victoria liked apple pies if he were to judge by the way her eyes lit up at the delicacies.

"Dear!" Dorothy suddenly got up.

“Yes?” both he and Victoria answered.

They exchanged angry looks that were quickly interrupted by Dorothy’s sheepish smile.

“Stephen, there is something else I want you to see as well. I will be right back.”

“Mother!” he called, but she was already out of the room.

An awkward silence fell over the dining room the moment they were alone. A silence way too heavy for his liking. There was something inside him that simply couldn’t resist vexing Victoria. Perhaps if he made every moment unbearable, she would leave voluntarily. And—if he were being honest—it pleased him to see her affected.

“I see you are making an effort to be civil this morning,” he commented.

“I assure you, I have no intention of engaging in any uncivilized behavior.”

“How refreshing.” Stephen let out a quiet snort.

Victoria’s jaw ticked. He smirked at this small victory—seeing her so vexed yet trying to resist the urge to hurl insults at him.

“I didn’t realize I had so much to thank you for,” he said, his tone mild, setting his tea down with deliberate precision. “The house. The gardens. The entire redecoration of my home. Making yourself at home here.”

“More like making this mausoleum a home. Someone had to.” Victoria sipped her tea.

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

“How fortunate for me that you were available,” Stephen drawled.

“Indeed. And how fortunate for me that you weren’t.” Victoria gave him a smile that conveyed all the insults that no lady should know.

His jaw clenched, and she blinked slowly, enjoying her victory. Not that there was a competition, of course. That would be ridiculous and childish.

“It is a wonder you’ve survived in polite society this long,” Stephen bit out. “The ton is unforgiving of behavior such as this.”

If he meant it as an insult, Victoria picked up the gauntlet, took a good look at it, and tossed it aside. Her lips quirked up as she inclined her head toward him in fake politeness that seemed to be her chosen mood for the day.

“Your Grace, this is where you are mistaken,” she declared and leaned in with a wicked smile. “You should be wondering how polite society survivedmethis long.”

Annabelle, his sister, was quiet, shy, reserved—a proper lady. How in Heaven’s name did she come across such an exasperating woman? And why would she admit her into her inner circle? How did luck have it that out of all the eligible, soft-spoken ladies of the ton, his sister had to befriend this menace?

“You think you can survive on this ill-timed candor?”

“To each his own, I guess. I mean, you seem to exist on a steady diet of rules and disapproval.”

The way she looked at him—strong, defiant, bold...

Stephen felt his blood boil, but instead of being directed to his head, it redirected to another part of his anatomy. He longed to throw her on the table and shut that running mouth of hers, make her sorry she ever challenged him.

What?

He had never let such a dark thought consume him before.

He was this close to snapping. Victoria sat across from him, entirely at ease, sipping her tea as if she hadn't just reduced him to a barely civilized man contemplating all manner of scandalous actions. Yet, he saw the tension in the way she bit her lip and swallowed.

"There he is!" Dorothy barged back in with some kind of creature in tow.

Something large, powerful, undeniably canine trotted beside her skirts with the kind of effortless confidence that suggested it had never once questioned its right to be inside the house.

It was a mongrel. Not some fine, pedigreed hunting hound. Not the sort of sleek greyhound or obedient spaniel that respectable families kept. It was big, lean but solid, with thick dark brown fur. Its ears were slightly uneven, one standing high, the other lazily folded, giving it a rakish, almost roguish look.

He seemed to have been surviving off wit and sheer force of will. Stephen would have respected the animal if it weren't currently sitting inside his dining room.

"Euclid!" Victoria jumped up and hugged the beast.

The beast pressed its head into her lap. She stroked its fur, her fingers running through it in slow, rhythmic motions.

For one horrifying second, Stephen wondered what it would feel like to have her hands on him.

Stephen!

“What,” he asked, his voice strained as if he was holding onto his patience by its very last thread, “is that?”

“Victoria and I found him on the road a few months back, the poor dear! He was shivering, the sweetest thing. And he followed us home!”

“I cannot imagine why,” Stephen muttered, glaring at the beast. “Why is it still here?”

“Oh, he lives here now,” Dorothy announced, as if this was already decided.

Stephen turned sharply to his mother. “He what?”

“Well, naturally, we couldn’t leave him.”

“Yes, naturally,” Stephen repeated blankly. “I wonder whose idea that was.”

That last phrase was directed at Victoria.

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

He was wrong to relapse even for a moment, to show remorse for the way he had treated her. This woman was a menace. She had to go.

CHAPTER5

Croquet

The next few days passed in relative peace. ‘Peace’ perhaps was too much because Victoria was still living under the same roof as Stephen, and on the rare occasions he left his study, they would clash. They never skipped an opportunity to take a jab at each other, making sure that each barb hit its mark.

The only rule that Victoria imposed on herself was not to wander in the house after dark. She had to make sure that there was no repeat of the dressing room ‘incident’ and the library ‘episode.’ She had no intention of exhausting both the dictionary’s synonyms for various situations and parts of the house.

Other than that, the house was following Stephen’s rules, and though Victoria and Dorothy found ways to enjoy themselves, something was shifting, and a new reality was settling in.

“You are late for dinner, Miss Victoria.”

“No running in the house, Miss Victoria.”

“No dogs allowed in the residence, Miss Victoria.”

Everything followed a rigid schedule that was set by him: mealtimes, tea time, bedtime. Bedtime! As if they were children and needed to be reminded of what time to retire.

Plus, there were no more gatherings in the parlor. No more laughter and whispers. Dorothy and Victoria had friends, and somehow the house had become the hub of their meetings—an unofficial ladies' club, filled with preposterous gossip and loud laughter. But the master of the house forbade such gatherings. The great estate, once brimming with life and warmth, had settled into something closer to order.

Stephen seemed satisfied with this. Victoria was not. And she made sure that she showed him at any chance she got. Breakfasts became a battlefield, and no one was backing down. It somehow made Dorothy's day to see them banter every morning.

That day was no different. Victoria was watching him drink his tea and talk to his mother about estate matters with rigor. There was something in the way he talked, his deep timbre, his smooth movements, that for some reason irritated her. And when he concluded the morning report, he proceeded to butter a scone with such surgical precision.

"Your Grace, may I ask for an exception to the rules? You see, I was thinking?—"

"No," he said with the sharpness of an executioner's axe.

Victoria's jaw dropped at his rude manner. He didn't even hear her out. She longed to see his impeccable façade cracked. She would crack it.

"Are you always this cheerful in the mornings, Your Grace?" she asked, cutting into the eggs on her plate.

"I don't recall asking for conversation, Miss Victoria." Stephen didn't even look up

from his paper.

“Oh, but you see, I am doing you a service.”

She took a bite, smiling sweetly. His gaze flickered up, just for a second. A warning.

She ignored it.

“It must be terribly exhausting, carrying all that brooding around so early in the day. I merely wish to lighten the mood.”

“I do not brood,” Stephen muttered, turning a page.

Dorothy, mid-sip, made a small sound that might have been a snort. Stephen’s cold blue eyes flicked to his mother, then back to Victoria.

“You do not brood, you say.” Victoria tilted her head. “Then what do you call that charming scowl you wear right now?”

“Concentration. And an infinite study in patience.”

“My patience, obviously,” Victoria pushed.

Stephen scowled warningly at her, but she took his warning as a challenge.

“And how about that constant scowl?”

Stephen slowly folded his newspaper and placed it beside his plate with measured precision, giving up on finishing reading it. He met her gaze with that unreadable expression of his, the one that made the air between them thicken.

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

“Yes, precisely.” Victoria pointed with her fork. “That scowl.”

“Frustration,” he growled.

“With me?”

“Unquestionably.”

Dorothy snickered but wisely kept her eyes on her plate.

Victoria stifled a laugh. She was providing quality comedy to her friend while irritating the great Duke of Colborne. What a productive morning!

“I am so sorry, Your Grace, to be the cause of your frustration,” she said with a fake, sugary smile.

“Miss Victoria, some people have real responsibilities and matters to attend to.”

“But a man of your intellect must realize that for every action, there is a reaction. Your rules have deprived me of my fun, so I must channel all that energy somehow.”

Stephen ignored his mother’s barely contained amusement and leaned back in his chair, stretching one long leg out beneath the table. He looked entirely at ease, the very picture of refined control, but Victoria knew better.

“You mistake order for rigidity,” he said, his voice smooth as polished oak. “But I don’t expect you to understand that.”

“And you mistake fun for recklessness. But I don’t expect you to understand that.”

They were locked in a staring match. In this chess game they were playing, one wrong word could be all the ammunition the other needed.

Victoria was ready to fire back when Euclid trod in, and she smiled because she was aware of how Stephen got irritated when the dog was allowed in the house. Only, the little treacherous mutt went straight to Stephen and demanded to be petted.

For some bizarre reason, Euclid had taken a liking to Stephen, and that was something Victoria could not swallow that easily.

“See, even Euclid knows you are in a sour mood, and he is trying to cheer you up.”

“That is not it.” Stephen looked at her coldly. “The dog recognizes who the master of this house is. He seems to be wiser than you.”

His gaze was so dominant and powerful that Victoria cleared her throat, determined not to acknowledge the ridiculous effect that one single look from him had on her. She focused on her plate, cutting her eggs with unnecessary force. No man had the right to look like that by simply sitting on a chair. Least of all, a man like him.

He had sharp, sculpted features, as if he were carved from marble. Strong jaw, high cheekbones, decisive chin, piercing blue eyes that could freeze a room with a single look. He was impossibly handsome, a fact Victoria loathed to acknowledge. But more than that, he was controlled. Rigid. Unshakable. And that made her want to shake him.

Stephen had spent his life commanding rooms with a glance, bending the world to his will, and yet here she was, utterly unimpressed.

But now that he had the last word—a rare opportunity—he rose from his seat, kissed his mother on the cheek, and left the room, Euclid hot on his heels.

“Euclid!” Victoria was not ready to let him have the dog as well.

* * *

After that disastrous breakfast, Dorothy and Victoria had settled in the drawing room, where the late morning sunlight filtered through the tall windows, making the polished wooden floors gleam.

It was Victoria’s favorite room in the whole house. It was so light and inviting, warm and cozy.

She lounged on the settee, flipping idly through a book she had no interest in, while Dorothy busied herself with a bit of embroidery. It was too darn quiet. The day was splendid, and yet both of them were occupying themselves with idle things, not talking that much.

Just as Victoria opened her mouth to suggest something scandalous, perhaps sneaking into the kitchens for an early treat, the butler entered, carrying a small stack of letters.

Dorothy immediately brightened. “Ah! A letter from my Annabelle.”

She reached for the letter eagerly, her fingers already breaking the wax seal.

Victoria set her book aside and scooted closer. “How is she? Tell me everything.”

Page 19

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

Dorothy's face softened as she read. "Oh, my sweet, sweet girl."

Victoria tilted her head, watching as Dorothy's expression turned wistful.

"She is well," Dorothy murmured. "Her pregnancy is going smoothly, and Frederick dotes on her as he should. She says she is happy—truly happy."

"Then all is right with the world." Victoria smiled.

Dorothy nodded, but her eyes grew distant. She traced the edge of the paper with gentle fingers, lost in thought.

"It feels like only yesterday when she was a child in my arms. And now..." She let out a small laugh. "Now, she will be a mother herself."

Victoria squeezed her hand. Dorothy squeezed back.

"And she will be a wonderful mother."

Dorothy sighed, shaking her head fondly. "She is so lucky that she met a man like Frederick. Love matches are so rare." There was something in her voice.

Victoria hesitated. She knew that Dorothy's marriage had been one of duty, not love. Still, Dorothy rarely spoke about it.

"My husband was not a bad man," Dorothy continued. "He was just a man of duty and valued propriety."

“Reminds of someone.” Victoria rolled her eyes.

“Stephen was raised to be the heir, and when his father got sick, he had to take on the mantle of Duke at such a young age.”

Victoria nodded. She, too, was an orphan, having lost both parents. Imagine having to manage an estate and a seat in the House of Lords.

“Well,” she said lightly, “that doesn’t mean he must be so... insufferably stiff.”

“He does take his duties seriously.” Dorothy grinned.

“Well, Annabelle is happy, and soon her happiness will be complete. I can’t wait to spoil her child the same way I spoil my niece and nephew. And the baby is lucky to have the sweetest grandmother.”

Dorothy smiled and took Victoria’s hands in her own. They looked at each other with so much warmth.

Funny how life works sometimes. How it brings together people who need each other, even if they are not really family.

Both women had been so lonely, but they had bonded as soon as they had met.

“Thank you so much, Victoria.”

“Do not thank me for telling the truth. You will truly be the best grandmother ever.”

“No, not about that. About being here, being my friend and a true companion.”

Victoria squeezed her hands. “I need to thank you for being my friend when I was

lost and lonely. I was lucky to find the only other mischievous woman in the ton.” She laughed.

“You remind me so much of my younger self. Will you allow me to give you a piece of advice?”

“Of course.”

“Never change. Not for the ton, not for a man, not for anyone. You are amazing exactly how you are. Do not dim your light for anyone.”

Victoria almost cried. In her short life, many things had changed for her. From being the daughter of a prominent rich family to having that wealth lost to being an orphan, then the sister of a duke and member of the ton.

Everything had happened so fast, without her having any agency, any control. But she was not going to complain. She was comfortable and secure. Some nobles were reluctant to accept both her lowly origin and her outspoken, rebellious nature, but she had found good friends who loved her exactly like she was.

“You don’t have to worry,” she said, her eyes brimming with tears. “I wouldn’t even dream of changing for anyone.”

The two women hugged.

Victoria was then reminded of the deadline Stephen placed on her stay in Colborne House. One month. Maybe a little less, maybe a little more. She hadn't told Dorothy about it. Didn't have the heart to tell her.

"Dorothy, what if I have to leave? What if our time is coming to an end?"

"Don't tell me that my son is driving you away?"

"No, I am not letting him do that," Victoria lied.

Dorothy smiled at that.

"But I just wanted to know."

"If our time is coming to an end, that will mean my last chance to feel alive."

"Dorothy, you've got so many reasons to feel alive. Your daughter, your grandchild. And I am sure at some point, a poor girl will marry the Duke, and perhaps she will decide to continue his line."

"Victoria!" Dorothy gasped.

They both broke out laughing till their cheeks ached, their hands on their aching bellies, almost exhausted.

“This,” Dorothy sighed. “This is what I mean. Harmless wickedness, living life to the fullest without thinking of propriety but fun.”

Victoria studied her friend. She wanted to reveal that she would have to part ways with her after a month because of Stephen’s stupid rules. But she was not leaving just now. She still had a month left. A month that she would make memorable. Starting from now.

“The weather is amazing.” She got up.

“It is. Garden walk?”

“I have something better in my mind.”

Dorothy’s eyes lit up with mischief. “And what about the rules?”

Victoria smiled a very devious smile.

CHAPTER6

Bending Rules

Stephen fled the dining room. Yes, he fled. He finally had the upper hand, and he was not going to let her have the last word. Plus, if she kept smiling that mocking, sardonic smile, she might actually shatter his patience, and not even he could tell what he would do. He was quite sure that he wouldn’t last a month without committing some kind of crime.

Victoria Crawford had to go!

He tried to concentrate on the ledgers, on reports and solving the thousand problems

that came with managing a large fortune. And on top of that, he had to read legislation upon legislation for the House of Lords. And yet he couldn't.

His thoughts drifted to her face when he proposed—or rather demanded—that she go back to her brother the moment he was back from India. Granted, he had been focusing more on the way her full lips moved, but he caught it. The flash of pure unhappiness at the idea of going back to her brother. He didn't ask. He pretended he didn't care.

Why should he care about things that made her feel bad? If anything, he should be congratulating her brother for getting under her skin.

“Damn it!” He leaned back in his chair.

The problem was that he did care. Whether they asked him or not, Victoria was under his care. But if she didn't want to go back to her brother—and since there was no chance he would ever allow her to stay here—then the only other option for her was to marry.

His jaw clenched. The idea settled uncomfortably in his chest, though it was a solution that was both rational and intolerable. It was what Society would expect. So why did the very thought make something in his chest tighten?

Then again, finding a suitable, agreeable gentleman who would agree to marry a feral creature like her was very unlikely.

And how is any of this my problem?

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

He felt the headache coming on.

Then, a sharp burst of laughter echoed from outside, breaking through his thoughts.

What was all that racket? Who was making all that noise? He had made his rules clear, didn't he?

He got up from his chair, went straight to the window, and looked out onto the gardens, drawn by the sound despite himself. Outside, on the lush green lawn, his mother and Victoria were playing croquet! The sight was unexpected.

His mother and Victoria had set up the hoops wrongly, and they were wielding the mallets incorrectly, pretending they were playing a game that barely held any resemblance to croquet. It was pure pandemonium—balls flying, hoops falling, and screeching laughter.

"I did not cheat!" his mother yelled.

Stephen watched her. The Dowager Duchess of Colborne, so often composed, measured, and burdened by the past, was smiling. Not that polite, reserved smile she offered guests or the stiff, practiced smile she offered the ton. It was a real, wide, genuine smile. A smile that made her face light up, look younger—healthier.

Stephen could not remember the last time he had seen her like that. Perhaps when he and his sister were kids and she ran after them with her eyes closed, her hands searching for them while they squealed with joy. Till his father would come out and say that it was improper for a duchess to play such games.

His jaw tightened at the memory.

“Your Grace, you did cheat! What a disgrace!” Victoria’s voice rang out, and he shifted his gaze to her.

Victoria. She was laughing, carefree, alive in a way that made something shift in his chest. The wind caught her hair, strands of it tumbling free from her bun, caressing her long, fair neck. Her chest was heaving from exertion, and he followed the movement.

She was barely even playing properly, waving her mallet around as though it were some grand weapon, pointing it accusingly at Dorothy, who was clearly cheating.

Stephen was rooted to the spot, his logic telling him that it was so indecent for two ladies to play a game this passionately. But their good humor and their joy were contagious. His face even melted into a faint smile.

“It is my turn,” Victoria announced, determined.

She swung her mallet dangerously and hit the ball with a remarkable force that sent it flying over the garden, rolling downhill.

“Hey!” she screeched.

She let out a sharp gasp as her ball went rogue, rolling down the gentle slope of the lawn, bouncing over tufts of grass. With an impatient huff, she tossed her mallet aside and ran after it.

Her skirt was getting in the way, but Victoria, being Victoria, didn’t slow down, didn’t ask for a servant to get the ball for her, and didn’t stroll in a ladylike way. No. She lifted her skirt and ran. The fabric slid up higher than it should have, revealing

the lean lines of her calves, then higher.

His breath left him in one sharp exhale.

The wind around her lifted her skirt and made her thighs shine under the golden sun. Long unblemished limbs bare to the world and his hungry eyes. Curvy and toned, they made his heart race.

His mind—his wicked, undisciplined mind—betrayed him. One single thought dispelled all rational sense. How would those thighs feel under his touch?

His fingers flexed involuntarily, as if already mapping the smooth expanse of her skin, the heat of her.

The fantasy gripped him tight, caught him by the throat, and didn't allow him to breathe, flooding him with images of his hands stroking her calves and then exploring higher. Images of Victoria, that untamed woman that turned his life upside down, unable to talk, her head thrown back, only soft whimpers escaping her insolent mouth.

“No, no, no, stop this!” he hissed.

He pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead, willing the thoughts away, but they had already taken root. How her breath would hitch if he were to breathe over her exposed neck as he slid his hands higher, spreading her beneath him, his name falling from her lips in that husky, breathless voice she used when she was particularly exasperated with him.

“Damn it,” Stephen cursed.

His body was responding in ways he refused to acknowledge. This was madness,

inappropriate, wrong. This was not how a gentleman thought about a lady. A gentleman would look away. A gentleman would not let his gaze linger on the curves of her thighs or the expanse of pale skin beneath the lifted hem of her dress. But he was not feeling particularly gentlemanly at that moment.

His mind had already betrayed him, already dragged him into dangerous, wicked waters. He could feel the heat rising in his blood, pooling low and tight, his body reacting before he could gather the strength to fight it.

“Got it!” Victoria screamed in triumph.

He saw her bend to catch the vagrant ball—the only inanimate object that Stephen hated as if it were a mortal enemy—but his mind refused to see anything other than her beneath him. Her head tipped back, her lips parted on a breathless moan. Those endless, long legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him deeper.

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

A muscle ticked in his jaw. He exhaled slowly, trying to regain control, but the tension refused to leave his body. He was hard. For her. For the woman who had spent the last days driving him to the brink of his sanity.

Stephen let out a low, humorless laugh, running a hand through his hair. This could not continue. He could not afford to look at her this way. To want her this way. Because if he started down that path, there would be no stopping.

He was the Duke of Colborne, and these base instincts would not get the better of him. It was her. If she wasn't so vexatious, so impossible, if she didn't act so indecorously, if she didn't disregard his rules...

His irritation needed an outlet, and conveniently, the source of it was still outside, prancing about his lawn like a heathen. He leaned out of the window, anger overtaking him.

"This nonsense stops immediately!"

All laughter ceased immediately, and both women turned to the window. They used their hands to shade their eyes from the bright sun. Dorothy seemed startled, but Victoria regarded him with amusement.

"Your Grace," that insolent woman said in that infuriating tone of hers, "we are playing a civilized game of croquet."

"That," Stephen ground out, pointing at the overturned hoops and the mallets lying haphazardly across the lawn, "is neither civilized nor croquet."

Dorothy muffled a laugh behind her gloved hand. Victoria, however, dared to smile at him, all wide-eyed innocence and false contrition.

“I demand”—His expression turned so cold that the sun momentarily hid behind a cloud—“that you abide by the rules. My rules!”

“The rules?” Victoria gasped in mock horror.

“Yes, Miss Victoria,” he said, voice dripping with authority. “The rules, which, might I remind you, prohibit disorderly conduct.”

“Ah. I see the problem now.”

Stephen crossed his arms and pinned her with a warning look.

For a fleeting, precious moment, he saw Victoria lose that haughty look on her face and glance away, avoiding the intensity of his gaze. He was correct to expect it to last long.

“Enlighten me,” he grunted.

“The problem, Your Grace,” she said, “is that your rules apply to when we are inside the house.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“And we”—she gestured around the lawn—“are outside the house.”

“Miss Victoria?—”

“That means,” she spoke over him, her tone all saccharine mischief, “that your

tyrannical rule does not apply.”

Stephen’s eyes flashed with suppressed frustration,

“Miss Victoria,” he said, his voice low and dangerous, “let me be abundantly clear: my authority extends to every last inch of this estate.”

Something akin to shock flashed in her eyes. Her mouth fell open, but Stephen was not going to let her utter one more witty remark because he was barely containing himself as it was.

“Get. In. The. House,” he ordered.

She gulped as their eyes met over the rose bushes. “Fine,” she relented.

Stephen was not a fool. He refused to be fooled by her retreat. And he was right to expect the worst from her. She lowered her eyes and eyed him with open defiance.

“But Your Grace, I should warn you. If I go inside, I shall be forced to find another way to entertain myself.”

Stephen shut the window so forcefully that he was amazed the glass didn’t shatter and the windowsill didn’t fall off. He was ready to let loose a string of curses when he heard a very familiar noise—the click of paws on the wooden floor.

Euclid trotted toward him, wagging his tail.

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

“You at least had the sense to stay inside.” Stephen leaned down, and the dog leaned into his hand.

Stephen glanced out the window, where Victoria was picking up the croquet gear. He absentmindedly petted Euclid, scratching behind his ears. He glanced down, only to find the mongrel looking up at him with utter adoration.

“I’ll tell you this, mutt,” he said, his voice softer than he had expected. “You’ll stay. But Victoria Crawford has to go!”

* * *

As lunchtime drew near, Stephen was contemplating whether he should request to eat at his study. He hardly had done any real work, to begin with, and things had deteriorated after watching that wretched croquet game that ruined the sport for him. But he knew that any retreat would be perceived as weakness, and he needed to assert his dominance in his own house.

“Let’s go, Euclid,” he ordered, waking the dog that had slept at his feet.

He made sure to make an entrance, coming down when both his mother and Victoria took their seats at the table, perhaps wishing that he hadn’t joined them. Arriving just a second later, he ensured both ladies were seated, lulled into the belief that they might enjoy a peaceful meal without his presence. He let them have that fleeting illusion, let them begin to conspire. And then he strode in, Euclid trotting dutifully at his side.

Victoria's head snapped up first, her fork pausing at her lips, her blue eyes flashing with distinct displeasure. Yet he caught it. That fleeting, near-imperceptible flicker in her gaze. Not the usual irritation, nor the pointed defiance. For the barest of moments, she had regarded him with something else entirely. Too sharp to be amusement, too assessing to be indifference.

"Stephen, dear, we were wondering if you'd join us." His mother sounded genuinely happy to see him.

He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Where else would I take my meal?"

He took his seat at the head of the table, adjusting his cuffs with practiced ease.

Victoria gave him a long, assessing look, her eyes narrowing.

"The study," she mused. "Your room. Perhaps a dark, empty corridor where you might better contemplate your ever-growing list of grievances."

"Tempting, but I thought I'd grace you with my presence instead. The lack of discipline in this household is growing alarming."

They spent the next blissful minutes eating in silence. He didn't want to break this rare occasion, but he had plans for the evening.

"I am visiting Lord Prevost after tea," he announced.

The women looked at each other. His mother seemed sad, Victoria angry, and they seemed to be having some sort of silent conversation. It was Victoria who turned to him first.

"I am sure you will have a riveting time while Lord Prevost lists all the misconduct he

observed.”

“I intend to take notes.”

“Should I be worried?” Victoria seemed anything but worried. “Or will my transgressions be neatly categorized? A full report, perhaps?”

“I wouldn’t dream of being so disorganized,” Stephen replied dryly. “Your misdeeds require a ledger of their own. I was actually late adding ‘ruining croquet’ with a full account of this morning’s foolishness.”

Victoria opened her mouth, her eyes darkening, ready to fight back. But Stephen was a fast fencer.

“Speaking of which,” he continued, “in my absence, I would advise that whatever brilliant ideas you have about ruining additional sports should be discarded at once.”

“How unfortunate. I was about to suggest a game of battledore and shuttlecock right after lunch.”

Stephen gave her a look that could only convey his annoyance. For a few moments, they were locked into a battle of wills no one seemed to be ready to back out of.

He raised his chin and blinked slowly, lowering his voice warningly. “Might I suggest more suitable activities for the afternoon? Perhaps some embroidery? Watercolors?”

“Oh yes, that sounds fascinating.”

“One does not need to be fascinated, Miss Victoria,” he said blandly. “One merely needs to be civilized.”

“Civilized, not bored to death.”

Stephen leaned forward in his seat, almost looming over the table menacingly. “You might want to practice behaving as a true lady ought. For once.”

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

Victoria inhaled sharply, and her lips tightened. Then, she smiled. With slow, deliberate wickedness.

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Stephen narrowed his eyes at her. Something about that tone, the way she had surrendered so easily, made him suspect that he had just made a grave miscalculation.

CHAPTER7

Disillusions

Stephen was never going to admit it, but this visit to Lord Prevost was indeed as excruciating as Victoria suggested it would be. But it was inevitable. And Stephen was capable of enduring any displeasure with dignity. Hell, he had stomached days with Victoria Crawford, and miraculously she was still alive.

But Lord Prevost was too much, even for Stephen. He was too proper, too stiff, too prim, and rigid to the extent that Stephen felt like a progressive reformist in his company.

The drawing room was suffocatingly still, as if time itself had been forced to mind its manners. The clock on the mantel ticked with oppressive precision, marking each painful moment Stephen had to endure in the old man's company. Even the tea sat untouched, as if drinking at the wrong temperature was a punishable offense.

“I am sure you see why I had to write to you, Your Grace.” Lord Prevost's even voice

cut through the stifling atmosphere.

Stephen only nodded.

“The presence of the likes of Miss Victoria Crawford in Colborne House is a scandal. That house was respectable and proper. If your father?—”

Stephen would not tolerate being treated as a child. He was now the Duke of Colborne, outranking the frail, old man daring to drag his father’s name into this. He set his teacup down with deliberate precision, the faintest click against the saucer the only sound in the room. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, his gaze locking onto Lord Prevost’s with the full weight of his authority.

“If my father were here,” he said, his voice smooth as cut glass, “he would be sitting precisely where I am, as the master of Colborne House, as the Duke of Colborne.”

Lord Prevost stiffened, then nodded.

Stephen, satisfied with that sign of submission, adjusted his cufflinks and then resumed drinking his tea, motioning for the older man to continue.

“What I meant was that a... lady like hers should be looking for a husband, not plotting mischief.”

Stephen’s jaw ticked. The tone Lord Prevost had used in referring to Victoria irked him. Did he sound the same when he addressed her? With such contempt and derision? Perhaps he, too, was lucky to have survived those few days under the same roof as her.

As the older man droned on about the importance of discipline, propriety, and the moral decay of modern society, Stephen studied him. And frowned.

Was this what lay ahead for him? Was this his future? Living alone in a deafeningly silent room where nothing was out of place, where the only form of entertainment was spying on neighbors and sending out complaints?

His mind went back to that very morning. The way the entire estate echoed with pure joy. His mother's face came to mind, the way she was positively elated. And then he saw Victoria. How alive and vibrant she looked, brimming with vitality, her smile lighting up any room she entered. She was not wasting her life worrying about stupid rules. She grabbed life by the horns and forced it into a game of ridiculous croquet.

And him? What did he do? Did he go out? Did he roll up his sleeves and join them, teaching them how to play properly? No. He yelled at them from the window like an old, gruff man, snuffing out all the fun and joy.

"And those gatherings—scandalous, I am sure." Lord Prevost's tone brought him back to the mausoleum that was his drawing room.

"Gatherings?" Stephen pretended to be interested.

"Yes, ladies' gatherings. All the nearby ladies meeting at Colborne House for God knows what."

Stephen almost scoffed at the older man.

Lord Prevost was so prudish that he seemed to be protesting over some ladies gathering for tea and gossip. His mother had dutifully taken care of his father, basically alone in the house. She had every right to have some friends over.

"I will see into the matter," Stephen said curtly.

"I am telling you, your mother was always a proper lady, the very picture of decorum.

The moment that...woman came in, everything fell apart. But of course, vulgar nouveau riche, mingling with dignified ladies of the ton. Sign of the times.”

Stephen fixed him with a look that, if withstood a second more, would have given him a heart attack. And so he looked around the drawing room in a bid to suppress the rage rising inside him.

“As I said, I will look into the matter,” he offered. Before the man had the chance to protest, he added, “I see that you arrange your books by color, not by alphabetical order.”

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

Lord Prevost looked over his shoulder at the bookshelves taking up one wall of the room.

“Quite rebellious of you, My Lord.”

Lord Prevost blinked, visibly thrown off course. He turned stiffly to regard his meticulously organized bookshelves, pressing his lips together as if questioning his own system.

Stephen suppressed a smirk.

* * *

Covering the small distance from Lord's Prevost residence to his house, Stephen was adjusting his gloves with annoyance. Spending a good portion of his evening listening to the man's preposterous accusations, his musings on failing morals, and his conspiracy theories about the debaucheries taking place in the house under the guise of tea parties and baked good competitions had been a complete waste of time.

He had decided to partially lift the third rule he had imposed on his household and allow some small, decent gatherings just to vex Lord Prevost.

He had spare time before dinner that he intended to spend reading up on next week's legislative session.

Stephen was still in the gardens when he heard the noise. Chatter and music. He looked out at the house across the street. Empty and closed, as always. No, this was

coming from inside his house.

He went up the stairs with alarming speed and flung the door open, following the commotion to the big drawing room. The sight he was greeted with made him double-check that he was, in fact, in his own house.

He stopped at the threshold, one gloved hand resting against the doorframe, surveying the chaos within, not knowing where to focus.

At a round table sat his mother with a brilliant smile on her face, along with Lady Hardwick, her ever-silent sister, and his housekeeper, Mrs. Charlotte, all engrossed in a game of cards, the former smirking as she slid a few coins across the table.

They were gambling! In his house!

The music came from the pianoforte, which was currently manned by Lady Weatherby, a widow of three husbands and not a shred of shame if he were to judge by the lively tunes she was hammering and the scandalous lyrics that went with it, making the ladies gathered around the instrument cackle.

And in the middle of it all was Victoria Crawford.

Of course, it was Victoria. Always Victoria.

She sat with two other ladies on the sofa, deep in a wicked conversation, a glass of something he sincerely hoped was only tea dangling carelessly between her fingers. And there was a satisfied look on her face.

It took approximately three seconds for the women to register his presence. Three long, deafening seconds in which Stephen felt a headache begin to bloom behind his temples.

“Oh,” Victoria murmured, tilting her head, eyes gleaming with unholy delight. “You’re back.”

“It seems that I should never have left,” he growled. “From what I see, in my absence, this place was transformed into an unruly den of vice.”

Lady Weatherby had the decency to stop playing but not enough to stop puffing smoke in his drawing room.

“Den of vice!” Victoria had the audacity to smile. “How very dramatic. This is merely a small gathering. You did suggest we partake in ladylike activities, after all.”

Stephen leveled her with a glare so severe it could have frozen a lesser woman on the spot.

Unfortunately, Victoria Crawford was no lesser woman. If anything, the heat of his glare only made her amusement burn brighter.

“I also recall suggesting embroidery and watercolors.”

“Oh yes, we tried those.”

Victoria pointed at some discarded canvases with the hand that still held the glass, which he was increasingly certain did not contain tea. Then, she looked back at him with mock seriousness—a look that said that he challenged her, and she responded.

“We decided that it was boring. So, we decided to try other ladylike activities.”

“I did not realize ‘ladylike activities’ now included gambling and tobacco consumption.” He took a menacing step toward her, just to intimidate her with his height.

“You really must keep up with the times.” Victoria tsked.

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

Stephen was going to murder her. His eyes must have conveyed as much because for a brief moment, her confident facade cracked. As if she just realized she was playing with fire.

She swallowed and wetted her lips with a quick flick of her tongue. For some reason, that made his gut clench, fueling the fury that was commanding his body.

“This,” he said, his voice icy and deadly, “ends now!”

He had used the same tone in the House of Lords, its force bringing men—greatmen—to their knees, shaking. In the room filled with ladies, it had a devastating effect. With his eyes still locked onto Victoria’s, he could hear the ladies scurry away.

Lady Weatherby finally stubbed out her cheroot, mumbling that it was getting late, and the other ladies around her agreed hastily. The gamblers gathered their winnings and their belongings and left, giving him a wide berth. Mrs. Charlotte, looking appropriately ashamed for a woman who had just been caught gambling with her employer’s mother, scurried out of the room without a backward glance.

The room was empty except for his mother, Victoria, and him. And absolute disdain from all sides.

Stephen let the silence stretch, the sound of retreating footsteps echoing in the hallway. Then, slowly, deliberately, he turned to his mother.

“Mother, I think it’s best you retire for the evening.”

Dorothy gave him a look that held fury, sadness, and a touch of disappointment.
“Stephen, you are being?—”

“I am being the Duke and lord of this house,” he asserted, softening his voice for her sake.

His mother was not to blame. She was always so mindful of her ways. No. There was only one person to blame here.

“Very well,” Dorothy sighed. “Let us go, Victoria.”

“Miss Victoria will stay,” he said, eyeing her narrowly.

“I think there is no need to—” Dorothy tried.

“I happen to see every need,” Stephen bit out.

Victoria turned to his mother and took both her hands. Something unspoken passed between them, and she responded with a smile to whatever plea Dorothy was conveying. Then, with just a nod, Dorothy left the room.

“Well,” Victoria drawled, “that was rather theatrical.”

“What are you doing?”

“I did warn you, Your Grace,” she said brazenly. “I would find other ways to amuse myself.”

“I ask again, what the hell do you think you are doing?”

“Well, we were simply playing cards and enjoying some lovely refreshments. But

then you burst in, in your usual charming fashion, and now”—she gestured vaguely to the door—“everyone’s gone, and you’ve ruined the fun.”

“This is not a game!”

“I beg to differ. It was quite entertaining.”

He took another step, forcing her to arch her neck if she wanted to keep pinning him with that bold look of hers.

“The rules clearly state no social gatherings. No visits from unwanted company. No unnecessary disturbances to the order of this house.”

“For the love of God!” She laughed. “We were drinking tea and lemonade and playing whist. We were not gorging on alcohol and running an illegal gambling hall.”

“You were gambling in my house.”

“Penny wagers,” she shot back. “Hardly the downfall of civilization.”

He dragged a hand through his hair, clearly trying to maintain his composure, but his voice was clipped when he spoke again.

“Smoking!”

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

“Only Lady Weatherby.” She shrugged. “But she’s buried three husbands. I think she’s earned a vice or two.”

“That is not the point!”

“Then what is the point, Stephen?”

The use of his name, the way she breathlessly uttered it—stripped of his title, of decorum—made something dark coil low in his stomach. The way she demanded an answer from him, not the Duke of Colborne. His jaw tightened.

“The point, Victoria,” he bit out, returning the favor, “is that this is my home. And I will not have you turning it into a?—”

“A place of joy?” She dropped all fake mockery, raising her voice. “A place where your own mother can laugh and live instead of being trapped in this suffocating mausoleum you call a home?”

Mausoleum, the same thing he called that dreadfully sad room at Lord Prevost’s house. Something inside him shattered a little.

“It is not a mausoleum,” he said, with less conviction in his voice.

“Please. This house is colder than you are, which is truly saying something.”

That stirred something that Stephen had never known was there. He decided to focus on his rage—it was simpler, cleaner. They were locked in a death stare match, with

no one backing down.

For the millionth time ever since he had first laid eyes on her, Stephen decided that he had to get Victoria out of his house and out of his head.

Easier said than done.

CHAPTER8

Consequences

Victoria was ready to murder someone. Not just anyone, but him. How dare he stroll in and just kick Dorothy's friends out?

Stephen had ruined a perfectly lovely evening, one where Dorothy had truly laughed, truly enjoyed herself. And for what? Because he was incapable of letting anyone have fun under his rigid, joyless rule?

"Victoria," he rasped, "I do not appreciate this tone in my house."

"I am starting to think that there are very few things you appreciate."

"Victoria!"

"Stephen!"

She could barely see straight through her fury. When she arranged for the ladies to come, it wasn't just to vex him, to break his rules. It was for Dorothy. Victoria would be gone in less than a month, and it pained her to think that Dorothy would be again left with no one.

“You will apologize, and you will not repeat this,” Stephen ordered.

“I am not ready to make such a promise. Dorothy, your mother, has been locked away in mourning, alone and miserable, and you’re determined to keep her there! And for what? Some misguided sense of duty? Because Lord Prevost would disapprove?”

He straightened his back and looked away. At least he was listening. She knew that he was considering, really considering, the truth of her words.

“This is not proper behavior,” Stephen said, looking over her shoulder. “Not for my mother, and certainly not for you. Even chaperoned, if word got out that you were indulging in?—”

“So, now you are worried about my reputation?” Victoria let out a sardonic laugh. “Why would you care? I am known to be brazen and improper and a thousand other names that I am sure you have called me behind my back. Not are allady.”

She expected a silent confirmation of her words. He was too much of a stickler for propriety to insult her so blatantly without provocation. Still, she saw a hint of regret. Before he wore that air of authority again.

“You are under my roof, under my—” He broke off. “My family’s protection.”

“Being protected from actually living or having fun, that is correct. Still, why do you even care about my conduct? You’re sending me away in a month. What does it matter to you what I do in the meantime?”

Stephen ran his hand through his hair, frustrated that he was troubling himself with her. Victoria followed that gesture with an unwelcome intensity. There was something alluring about seeing him run his long fingers through his luscious hair, his impossibly blue eyes fixed on her, the way his clothes hugged his muscles, the

way?—

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

Stop, Victoria. What are you doing?

“Now, about that,” he said determinedly. “About you leaving in a month. I know you don’t want to go back to your brother.”

Victoria was taken aback. Her stomach twisted. It was bad that it was true, even worse that he noticed, and the worst of it all was that he was talking about it. She had nothing to say to that.

“I am not going to ask you why,” he continued. “But I can’t, in good conscience, send you away like that. I have thought of a solution.”

Victoria struggled to process what she was hearing and feeling. Relief that he was not asking for her reasons to avoid Maxwell. Surprise to see him almost considerate of her feelings. But she also dreaded to think that he had a plan.

The first two threw her into uncharted territory, waters she didn’t want to navigate, for it was too dangerous. But the latter... that was familiar territory, easier to tackle.

“A solution?” She crossed her arms. “For some reason, I am sure I am not going to like it.”

“I am starting to think that there are very few things you like,” he retorted, using her words against her.

“How can you say that?” she said in that sweet voice that knew got under his skin. “Annoying you beyond reason brings me immense joy.”

“Always a pleasure to provide entertainment for you.” He mimicked her tone.

That...

It was easier to hate his stupidly perfect face when he was a cold, rule-popping machine. But to add dry, witty humor and the hint that he had common decency? That did not bode well for her. So, she kept her walls up.

“And what is your brilliant plan, oh, grandmaster?”

Stephen pressed his full lips together and tilted his head as he slowly studied her face.

“I will help you secure a husband,” he offered smoothly.

Victoria blinked. Once. Twice. For a second, she was sure she had misheard him. Then... She laughed. A full-bodied, incredulous laugh.

“I am sorry...” She was struggling to contain her amusement. “It must be the word help coming out of your mouth that got me. You, helping me?”

His eyebrow rose, and his jaw ticked.

“It is true. I have ulterior motives,” Stephen said darkly. “Getting you out of my house and making sure you stay away from it.”

“Your ability to snuff out all mirth is uncanny,” Victoria scoffed, all serious now.

“I do tend to do that when I am perceived as the butt of a joke.”

Victoria refrained from picking up a petty fight and focused on the plan. Men. They have a one-track mind. Though, truth be told, there were not many options for a lady.

She would either stay under a male relative's care if unmarried or be married off.

"You seem determined to undertake quite an endeavor. My own brother has failed at this miserable task. What makes you think you'll succeed where he hasn't?"

"I have my ways." Stephen's gaze sharpened, his head tilting slightly.

There was something in his tone. Something infuriatingly confident. Something dangerous.

Victoria crossed her arms tighter, schooling her features.

"Your ways?" She decided to poke holes in his plan. "Is it magic?"

"It is knowing the right people and also—and excuse me for bringing this up—knowing what a real gentleman would require from his bride."

"I didn't realize you were an expert in the art of matrimony."

"I'm an expert in how men think."

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

“How very fortunate for you,” she shot back. “Do you plan to auction me off like a prized mare?”

“If that’s what it takes,” he said smoothly, “though I imagine you’d bite the hand of any prospective buyer.”

“I am not going to deny that,” she relented.

“Did it ever cross your mind that your lack of suitors has nothing to do with your brother’s abilities or the issue of your... lineage, but simply that lovely disposition of yours?”

Victoria gasped in mock offense. Then, her eyes narrowed, her voice dripping poison. “Did it ever cross your mind that I do not wish to pretend to be lovely for anyone? I merely wish to beme.”

Once more, their eyes met. It was instant sparks each time they did from the moment Annabelle introduced them, and it kept getting worse. Because now, Victoria could almost feel that look on her skin. The same way she felt the hard planes of his body that night, his strong arms?—

No. We are not remembering that now!

“So, we are looking for a man with a healthy constitution and a strong stomach.” Stephen’s voice cut through her thoughts.

“The very recipe of a happy marriage,” she clipped.

“With you? Undoubtedly,” he said bluntly but didn’t give her the time to respond. “Do we have a deal, Victoria?”

“Sure, give it a chance,” she said, waving her hand dismissively.

“No. Tell me that we have a deal,” he insisted.

It was not a request. It was a command.

Victoria’s arms tightened around her chest, her fingers digging into her sleeves. Not in anger, but something she couldn’t recognize as that rough voice of his caressed her ears.

“A deal, you say? It sounds more like an order. As usual.”

“I am simply ensuring your cooperation.”

“Don’t you mean compliance?” She let out a sharp laugh, tilting her chin up. “You want control.”

The moment she uttered that word, the air between them crackled, an invisible force pulling them taut like a rope ready to snap.

Stephen let out a low growl, barely audible. Then, he pinned her with a cold look. She pretended that none of it affected her. But it did. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, her pulse quickened, and her nails dug into her palms.

“You think I’m doing this for my own benefit?” His voice was low, rough. “You think I want to waste my time managing your future?”

“Then don’t.”

“You are not taking this seriously.”

“You do enough for both of us.”

“Someone has to!” he snarled. “What are you planning to do? If you don’t want to go back to your brother, then you have to marry. Unless you expect me to tolerate your presence in my house indefinitely.”

“I wouldn’t even dream of soiling your impeccable house with my presence.”

“I never said?—”

“But you didn’t have to.” Victoria was shaking with fury. “You think that you are better than me, better than everyone. Even your own mother. So untouchable, so impervious, so proper. As if a set of rules can control everyone’s lives.”

Stephen took a step closer, his movements precise, controlled. Barely restrained.

“I am certainly better than a petulant child who throws tantrums all the time.” His voice was low but harsh.

Her pulse jumped, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing it.

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

“What you call tantrums is my refusal to be governed by some righteous control freak who?—”

Suddenly, he was there, in her private space. Towering over her. Close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from him, could see his throat bobbing as he swallowed down something violent.

“You sure lack discipline, Victoria.”

“You intend on disciplining me, Stephen? Because let me tell you?—”

“You got so much fire in you.”

Victoria was stunned. His voice carried the weight of an approaching storm, deep and ominous, rumbling in his chest before it even reached his lips. Victoria didn’t even bother to take cover as the air shifted around them.

One glance. Just a brief, fleeting glance at his lips. That was all it took. His hand caught her chin, his thumb dragging across the line of her jaw, a touch too firm to be tender, too light to be rough. He studied her eyes, then her lips, his eyes hooded, his breathing too controlled. She, on the other hand, forgot to breathe, the air trapped in her lungs.

His other hand moved lower and settled on her hip. Not resting. Claiming. Fingers pressing, pulling her against him. Her treacherous body didn’t pull away; it swayed closer, melting into him. As she did, the world faded around them.

His grip tightened on her hip just enough to hold her still. He was now breathing hard. So was she, her chest heaving. For a moment, neither of them moved. Her eyes flicked to his, heat clashing with heat.

He was everywhere—his touch, his breath, the weight of his gaze dragging across her lips. His fingers flexed against her jaw, his other hand squeezing her hip, pulling her in until her skirts brushed against his thighs.

“Yes,” he purred, “so much fire.”

She barely had a second to breathe before his mouth crashed down onto hers, hot, demanding, merciless in its intent. Everything she had accused him of being—controlling, arrogant, insufferable—was now zeroed in on her. He pressed his lips to her lips, swallowing her protests, robbing her of air, stealing every coherent thought she had left.

Her hands, clenched into fists, found the lapels of his coat, gripping the fine fabric, twisting it, and yanking him closer.

“Victoria,” Stephen groaned, the deep, low sound reverberating in his chest, in her bones.

He moved, and her back hit the wall, neither of them breaking the kiss. His lips moved against hers with a maddening mixture of control and recklessness, as though he were both calculated and consumed.

He kissed like he did everything else—deliberate, intense, commanding. His lips were so soft, so full that Victoria couldn’t stop tasting them, trapping them with hers, taken by instinct. And when he bit her lower lip softly, she felt as if she were on fire, as if she were burning from the inside out.

“Oh!” she gasped.

His tongue slipped into her mouth, touching hers, exploring. Heat erupted in her chest, wild and unbidden, spreading through her limbs like wildfire, leaving nothing but him in its destructive wake.

She felt his hand on her face move, his fingers lightly wrapping around her neck, tipping her head back, giving him more access to her mouth. His body pressed against hers harder, impossibly close.

Victoria lost herself in the moment as she shoved her fingers in his hair. She arched into him, a silent plea for more. His response was to devour her. His tongue swept over hers in deep, languid strokes that made her entire body quiver. Again. Again. More. Deeper.

Then, his mouth left hers, but before she could even catch her breath, his breath was on her neck. His lips claimed it, pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses that made her whole body tense and then melt.

“Stephen!” she moaned.

He pulled back just slightly and looked into her eyes, still tangled in her skirts, his hand still wrapped around her neck. Victoria’s breath came in ragged, shallow gasps, her mind hazy, confused, still catching up. Stephen loomed over her, his shoulders heaving, his lips parted. His fingers still pressed lightly against the column of her throat, his thumb grazing her pulse.

Suddenly, he released her, and her body mourned the loss. He stood there for a moment, his azure eyes roaming over her face, his lids heavy. Then, he leaned in, just enough that she felt his breath ghost over her mouth, a cruel reminder of what they had just done.

“Do not ever”—his voice was a devastating growl—“push me like that again, girl.”

CHAPTER9

Invitations

The next morning, Victoria was getting ready for breakfast. Slowly, reluctantly, not prepared to go downstairs. Well, she was ready and quite hungry, but she wasn't prepared to face him. If she just stayed in her room, she would prevent more... things from happening in the rooms of this house.

They seemed to be collecting those with alarming frequency. The dressing room 'incident,' the library 'episode,' and now the drawing room... 'affair.' She had counted. There were forty-five rooms in the house.

Victoria slammed her brush onto the vanity table, scowling at her reflection. She studied her face, finding her lips swollen. She touched them softly with her fingertips, dragging them over the sensitive skin. Her eyes fluttered as the memory of his lips on hers flooded her mind.

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

She yanked her hand away from her lips as if burned. Her breath hitched, her pulse skittering, and for one awful moment, she could still feel him. How warm his breath was, how possessive his grip, the way his body pressed against hers, the way hers melted into his.

“Victoria! For the love of God!”

She got up and paced the room, shaking her head as if that would be enough to dispel the effect last night had on her. It was fruitless. His touch was searing. He had branded her, made sure that she woke up and walked around with his fingers, his lips, and his breath imprinted on her.

“Victoria, listen to me.” She went back to the mirror, fixing her reflection with a glare. “This is Stephen Elkins, the most infuriating, arrogant, insufferable man in existence.”

Her reflection didn’t seem so convinced, flushed and bothered as she was.

“No,” she hissed. “I hate him.”

More like, I hate the way he makes me feel.

Because no matter how much she wanted to deny it, he did make her feel too much, too fast. As much as it would be convenient for her to assume that it was just her body reacting to his touch, to that rich, deep voice murmuring sinful things, to his enormous body caging her in, she knew the truth.

It was not just her body—though it very much was. It was more. He was meeting her challenges, matching her rhythm. He was right. Her ‘lovely’ disposition scared most proper gentlemen of the ton, her outspoken manners too much to handle. But not for Stephen. He could handle her just fine. He could handle her body, and he could handle her wit.

I need to handle myself right now!

Victoria took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to get hold of her rampant mind. It was a moment of weakness. That was all it was. Nothing more. He was angry and wanted to prove a point. And she was foolish enough to allow him to. It was done. Over.

With renewed determination, Victoria went downstairs for breakfast. She was not going to starve herself for something like that.

“I am happy that you resolved the whole thing in a civilized way.” Dorothy’s voice drifted from the dining room.

Victoria scoffed before she entered the room. What a blatant lie had he told his mother? She inhaled, steeled her heart, schooled her features, and entered.

“Good morning.” She smiled, keeping her eyes on Dorothy.

“My dear!” Dorothy was extremely happy.

In fact, Victoria knew that Dorothy was too happy. What exactly did Stephen tell her to make her so giddy this early in the morning?

She dared a glance at him. He had the newspaper in his hands but was looking at her. A scorching, intense look. The moment their eyes met, he looked down, suddenly too

interested in whatever was written in the paper.

“I am so happy that you are getting along,” Dorothy gushed, patting Victoria’s hand.

Are we now?

Victoria threw him a side glance, but he was still engrossed in his paper—or at least pretending to be.

“How nice of Stephen to help you secure a husband, right?”

Victoria clenched the napkin she was adjusting in her lap. All she could do was smile at Dorothy, blinking far too many times to keep her cheeks from flushing. So, she decided to concentrate on other things, small details if only to save her sanity this morning. The sunlight streaming through the tall windows, the way it glinted off the silver teapot, the feel of the hot tea in her mouth, yet not as hot as his tongue?—

Oh, for God’s sake.

She stole another glance at him to see if he too was miserable. He seemed fixated on the same page, his knuckles white while gripping the paper too hard, and a muscle was ticking in his jaw.

Good. I am not the only one suffering here.

So, to sum it up, if she were to make one of her beloved lists, this was what was happening at the breakfast table:

- Stephen was certainly not reading that newspaper
- Victoria’s cheeks were not overheated by the tea

- No one was listening to what Dorothy was saying.

- Last night definitely happened.

Victoria decided that the best course of action was to attack the eggs on her plate. If she survived breakfast, she would be safe till dinner at least. He would go and lock himself up in his study for the whole day, or so she hoped.

“This is great news.” Dorothy was practically vibrating with excitement.

“Yes, how very kind of His Grace,” Victoria said, her voice sickly sweet.

Stephen finally decided to turn a page, making an exaggerated rustling sound as if the financial reports were fascinating. Victoria had the urge to feed him that newspaper instead of the apple pie on his plate.

“I have a great idea!” Dorothy clapped her hands suddenly.

Victoria seriously doubted that, and by the look Stephen gave his mother over his newspaper, he had the same thought as well.

“A house party!”

It is tiresome to be correct all the time.

“A house party?” Victoria managed to muster another fake smile.

“But it is an excellent opportunity. Annabelle won’t be able to travel once she gets heavier, and if Frederick invites a few of his friends, then you might meet some

suitable gentlemen.”

For some reason, Victoria and Stephen exchanged an undecipherable glance before focusing on Dorothy.

“Mother, I do not think the house is ready to receive guests,” Stephen said in a clipped tone.

“Nonsense.” Dorothy waved a dismissive hand. “I have faith in our staff, and we will be ready in time. Right, Victoria?”

Victoria dared another glance at Stephen, who was giving her a look that said, Do not even dare. The newspaper in his hands had gone utterly still, his fingers rigid around the edges. The muscle in his jaw ticked again, a telltale sign of his fraying patience.

“Dorothy,” Victoria responded with a saccharine smile, “what a wonderful idea!”

Stephen’s nostrils flared. A sharp inhale of what could only be interpreted as exasperation.

This is just delicious.

“Perfect!” Dorothy was beside herself with joy. “Let’s start preparing the invitations.”

Victoria took a slow sip of her tea, looking at him over her cup. His jaw clenched so hard that she half-expected to hear his teeth crack. His eyes darkened in an open threat. She shivered.

He had warned her not to test him, and here she was, testing him. Pushing his limits. Deliberately.

The realization drizzled on her like dark honey.

What was this? Was she doing this just to vex him? Or did she want him to make good on his threat?

The question coiled low in her stomach, tightening her fingers around the cup.

“Come on, let’s write to Annabelle.” Dorothy got up to head for the drawing room.

* * *

The scratching of Victoria’s quill filled the drawing room. Sunlight shone on the writing desk, illuminating the cream-colored stationery with its embossed Colborne crest.

“Dearest Annabelle,” Victoria read aloud as she wrote.

“She is the Duchess of Heartwick,” Stephen commented. “That is not the proper way to address her.”

“You do not expect me to address her as Your Grace in private correspondence, do you?” Victoria bit out. “She also happens to be Dorothy’s daughter, your sister, and my best friend.”

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

“I am painfully reminded of the latter daily.”

“All the more reason for me to love your sister, then. She has impeccable taste,” Victoria jibed.

“In general, yes,” Stephen hissed. “In people, not so much.”

Victoria decided to ignore him and keep on writing.

“Dearest Annabelle,” she emphasized. “Your mother has devised the most delightful scheme.”

“I did exactly that,” Dorothy commented, raising her head over linen fabric samples.

“You will not write that, of course!” Stephen protested.

“I am sure there is a ton of work to be done in your study, Your Grace,” Victoria huffed. “You do not need to bother yourself with such menial tasks.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“I am trying to save myself from a bludgeoning headache by simply writing a letter to my best friend. A feat I have successfully achieved before, whether you believe it or not.”

“That’s my crest you’re defacing with your childish scrawl.”

“I am inviting your sister to your house! How is that defacing?”

“Gold or blue?” Dorothy asked amid the chaos, holding up ribbons.

“Gold!” both said.

“See, you can agree on something,” Dorothy mused.

* * *

The next few days were a whirlwind of preparations, and in the middle of it all stood Victoria. The house had been closed for years and hadn’t received guests, so there was a lot to be done and many unforeseeable problems that arose constantly. Yet, she handled them all with grace. And not only that but also with a smile on her face.

Dorothy, who had spent years moving through the house like a ghost, now glowed with excitement. And that was all Victoria needed to get more energy to make her friend happy. As happy as she deserved.

“Mrs. Charlotte, make sure there is a fire burning in the rooms two days before the guests arrive. The rooms had been closed for so long—they need to be warmed up and not humid.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“Daniel,” Victoria called to a footman, “make the rounds with the oil can. Door hinges and check the windows, please. Let’s make sure no one wakes up to squeaky noises in the middle of the night.”

Daniel smiled and went to do as she asked.

“My Lady, the roses won’t be here in time,” the old gardener said, ready to faint.

“Certainly, a reason to call the whole thing off!” she joked. “Don’t you worry, John. The wildflowers look so much better anyway.”

Then, she went to check the pantry and supplies with a notebook in hand, making calculations offhand, remembering every little detail effortlessly. She moved with natural grace, directing footmen, smoothing feathers, and solving problems before they’d arisen. The staff, initially wary of the sharp-tongued woman taking the lead on this endeavor, now watched her with something akin to awe.

“Victoria.” Dorothy patted her hand as they debated over menus. “Did I ever thank you?”

“Daily. I am thinking of adding it to the program, actually.”

The two of them laughed, enjoying what could have been a very taxing, boring, and stressful process. Victoria was overjoyed. She can give her good friend this—make her some amazing memories and bring back the woman she was.

And throughout it all, over every little thing, Victoria could sense him.

He was watching. Not in an obvious way, but he was there, standing in the room as she gave instructions, glancing at the notebook as she made budget calculations. For sure, he was monitoring her, making sure all was done ‘properly.’ It annoyed her.

Page 34

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

Victoria finally decided to confront him. She was in the butler's pantry, her trusted notebook on the table, when a shadow fell over the pages.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked firmly.

"You've transposed these figures," Stephen said, pointing to a line near the bottom.

"I did not do?—"

Her eyes followed the numbers, and she caught the mistake. Great, now he would make fun of her, and he was going to make some comment about how she would bring ruin to his respectable house, that she'd better?—

"That's the only mistake you made."

Wait. That tone...

Victoria could have sworn that she detected a hint of admiration in his simple—but very true—comment.

"You are good with numbers," he said, looking shocked himself.

"I am," she affirmed.

"And you've managed the cook exceptionally well." Stephen took a little step closer.

"He is known to be... difficult."

“I wonder who chose him to be part of the staff.”

Victoria knew very well that the cook was Stephen’s personal choice. Dorothy had told her that Stephen was a very picky eater.

He scoffed and smirked, his chin dropping as he kept his eyes on hers.

Oh, that look is dangerous.

“Anyway...” Victoria swallowed. “I gave him full control of the desserts. The rest was easy.”

“Managed a man with something sweet,” he mused.

His tone, that low purr, did things to her that she couldn’t understand. Her breath caught mid-inhalation, freezing her for one treacherous moment.

“My Lady, which china for breakfast?” Mrs. Charlotte suddenly called from the china cabinet.

“Excuse me.” Victoria left the pantry as fast as she could.

CHAPTER10

Luncheon

Stephen had been watching Victoria for the past few days, and he pretended it was to make sure that everything was done properly. He could have figured out that everything was from observing her the first day. But he couldn’t stop.

Victoria was taking care of literally everything regarding the preparations for the

house party. With the elegance and the efficiency of—and it pained him to admit it—a gently bred lady. No, even that was unfair to her. She was doing a much better job.

She talked to the servants with authority but with respect as well. She managed, not ordered, and she spared some witty comments to dispel their anxiety over making things right or on time. She also was annoyingly efficient in managing numbers, from budget to inventory to foreseeable expenses.

“Ah, our Victoria is doing an amazing job, don’t you think, Stephen?” his mother commented at the breakfast table.

“Miss Victoria is... adequate,” he answered.

He wanted to smirk at seeing Victoria so angry at him, but he held back. He was lying, of course, but he would never admit out loud that Victoria’s help was indispensable.

“Dorothy,” Victoria said softly. “Will you come with me to pick the new drapes for Annabelle’s room?”

“Ah, the old ones were ruined by mold, right?”

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

“Yes. Plus, I wouldn’t want Annabelle to suffer that dreadful color. Will you join me?”

“I have asked the mason to come today to talk about repaving the path to the small lake, and he is so hard to pin down.”

Victoria was ready to ask Mrs. Charlotte to get ready to tag along as her chaperone.

“I have to go to London,” Stephen said over his tea, without looking at them. “I’ve got some papers to sign at my solicitor’s.”

Which was a half-truth. Or rather, a blatant lie. He had received zero notices that he needed to be there, but he was sure he could come up with an issue.

Why am I doing this?

He did not linger on that, only on the way Victoria’s mouth fell open. She seemed to be panicking at his suggestion. He smirked at her, and she narrowed her eyes. It should look unladylike. It was unladylike, but he didn’t care.

The only thing that mattered was that this woman, who commanded his household with unshakable poise, could be so visibly shaken by the prospect of sharing a carriage with him.

“Your Grace is too kind,” Victoria said through gritted teeth, “but I couldn’t possibly impose?—”

“I insist, My Lady.”

“Of course, you do.”

Victoria’s fingers whitened around her napkin. Stephen chuckled lowly with perverse satisfaction at how her pulse fluttered at the base of her throat. That delicate, vulnerable spot he’d?—

No. Don’t think about that.

Yet it was all he could think about these days. He tried to convince himself that what had happened that night was a result of his unchecked anger. That he merely wanted to teach her a lesson. That he set his boundaries.

But the truth was that he wanted it. He craved it. He gave in to his desire, consequences be damned. He had thoroughly enjoyed learning how her skin tasted, how his name sounded on her kiss-swollen lips, how she would catch his lip with hers and he would almost snap.

Now, he was plagued with those sensations, and instead of locking himself in the study or leaving the house altogether as if it were on fire, he was lingering where her perfume could reach him.

“Get ready, Miss Victoria.” He got up. “We are leaving in exactly ten minutes.”

And then he left the room.

* * *

The carriage ride was excruciatingly silent. Victoria was looking out the window with purpose, intentionally avoiding his gaze. And looking at her was all he did as they

rode toward the center of the bustling city.

“Tell me, My Lady?—”

“I’d rather not,” she deadpanned.

“I wonder what could have spoiled your mood this morning.”

At that, Victoria gave him a sideways glance that he supposed was meant to be irritating. He found it adorably unconvincing.

“Why didn’t you allow Mrs. Charlotte to come too?” She turned to him fully. “Being with you unchaperoned is not proper, Your Grace.”

Stephen smirked at the way she fought for his housekeeper to come. She even stomped her foot. It was obvious she didn’t want to be in here, alone with him.

“Mrs. Charlotte has her job cut out for her. You are perfectly capable of completing the task on your own. As for propriety, I have been your guardian since I returned to the house. Plus, why would any speculation start? I am devoted to finding you a husband.”

“So, this is whatthisis?” She clenched her jaw. “Not some twisted ploy to disrupt my peace.”

“I have no intention of doing that.”

Stephen leaned back, stretching his legs slightly until his knee brushed hers. It was deliberate. She jerked her leg away as if scorched.

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

What are you doing?

Stephen pulled himself into a more gentlemanly stance, his limbs tucked away from hers. How easy it was to discard all rules when she was so close, her perfume wafting in the air, her voice so deliciously passionate.

“I am devoted to the task, since it will bring to fruition my desire to see you gone from my house.”

“Great.”

“Now, pray tell, what kind of man would you accept, My Lady? Surely, there is someone out there who can bear your sharp tongue and sharper wit.”

She was not amused. She looked out the window thoughtfully. Stephen noticed that this woman had layers upon layers, and he found himself eager to peel them. He gritted his teeth as he awaited her answer.

“Your Grace, are you familiar with the legend of Lady Ragnell?”

“From Camelot?” He faintly remembered it.

“A foul-looking woman who offered King Arthur the answer to a riddle that would save his life. What is it that women most desire?” she said, meeting his eyes. “The answer was simple—to rule our lives as we see fit.”

Stephen said nothing. The carriage clattered over the cobblestones.

“I don’t need a man to save me. I want a man who would let me be exactly who I am. Who wouldn’t just bear my mind, my ambition, and my temper, but love me because of them. A man who wouldn’t try to shape me into something more palatable, more proper, more... small.”

A beat passed. Stephen was no longer smirking. His gaze lingered on her, unreadable now.

For a long moment, he stared, the hum of carriage wheels the only sound between them. Then, he shifted subtly, as if resisting the urge to reach for her, or perhaps to steady himself. But he didn’t touch her. And he didn’t look away either.

* * *

Stephen pretended to run his—rather quick—meeting with his solicitor and then escorted her to her chores, much to her dismay. When she was done, he checked his watch.

“It will take us some time to reach Colborne House,” he noted. “We should have lunch while in London.”

“Together?” She seemed shocked.

“I am sure we will manage to eat some pie without it being too unpleasant.”

“I admire your confidence.”

They had just stepped off the curb into a busy crossing, and Victoria was ready to go the other side. Stephen’s head snapped to the right. A carriage turned the corner too fast, too recklessly, and she hadn’t even noticed.

“Victoria!”

He lunged forward and yanked her back with such force that she was crushed to his chest, the world spinning around them. The carriage thundered past, mere inches from where she just stood.

Victoria didn't breathe. Neither did he. Her fists clung to the lapels of his coat, her face buried in his chest. His arms had wrapped around her without thought, tight and possessive, one hand splayed on the small of her back. He could feel the wild thrum of her heart.

Or is it mine?

She looked up, and though she was safe from danger, he couldn't let go. He searched her body and face for any sign of pain or injury.

“Are you hurt?”

He examined her face with urgency, but she only looked up at him with a perplexed expression.

“Answer me, Victoria,” he pressed. “Are you hurt?”

He was still shaking from fear of something happening to her. If that carriage hit her...

Victoria was stunned, her big eyes holding his. Her breath came in shallow bursts, and it wasn't just the fear of nearly being run over. Stephen was reluctant to release her, though the danger had passed.

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

“It seems that I owe you my life,” she said, still not pushing him away.

Her light, teasing tone made his limbs relax. She was fine, her usual insufferable self.

He breathed deeply and scoffed. “I will be collecting on that.”

They were still locked in an embrace, and only then did they notice that people were staring.

He pulled away and straightened his back. “Let’s go have lunch, Victoria.”

“Oh, one lifesaving move and you drop the honorifics in public,” she joked.

He leaned in mischievously. “I recall that we dropped the honorifics before.”

She refused to respond to that and followed him to a pub.

Stephen was almost giddy as he guided them to Piccadilly. He led them to The White Horse Cellar, through the private entrance, the one where a liveried attendant bowed deeply at the sight of him. Swiftly and discreetly, they were led to a private room.

“Don’t you think this is a bit much?” Victoria asked the moment they entered.

“We are merely eating,” Stephen pointed out.

“Exactly. Just eating.”

“Like I said, Miss Victoria, I am committed to finding you a husband. It’s better to avoid whispers.”

“I am too hungry to argue,” she deadpanned.

“That was the plan,” he said dryly.

The room was quiet, but not uncomfortably so. The low murmur of the city beneath their feet felt like a distant hum, and they just tucked into their food, not out of animosity but because they were famished and the food was so good. It was surprisingly nice.

Of course, she had to ruin it.

“I have been checking the clock,” she commented. “It has to be some record time. You haven’t thrown a subtle—or what at least you think subtle—sharp comment at me.”

“I am on a much-needed break,” Stephen said, feigning nonchalance. “Do not get used to it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. In fact, if Your Grace goes more than two days without making some snarky comment, I would be forced to notify the physician.”

“I do not make snarky comments, My Lady. Only painfully accurate observations.”

“Since we are in London, we should visit top doctors to address that incurable case of delusion you have.”

Stephen tried to smother it, but he chuckled. Not cruelly, not paving the way to a cruel comment, but in genuine mirth. He didn’t know when it happened exactly, but

some part of him had started to unwind. The weight he had carried since his father's death, since the responsibilities of title and duty had taken over his life, that weight had shifted. She lightened it somehow.

Was Victoria always this luminous? Was her voice always this warm? Were her gestures always so decisive and yet elegant? Were her cheeks always tinted pink? And was her smile always this devastating, too blinding, so heart-stopping?

"I am sure that the clerk at Mortimer's is still stunned," she suddenly added, shaking her head.

"I am sure he is. You were fighting me for the French cambric."

"You were fighting me over the lilac tablecloths!"

"Was I supposed to allow that offensive shade in my home?" he retorted without heat.

"You are impossible."

"I am correct. There is a difference."

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

She let out a breathy laugh that made his hand pause midair, and she sipped on her wine. A single red drop lingered on her lip, and her tongue darted out to catch it. His gaze dropped briefly to her mouth, the way her tongue flicked lightly across the corner. He had to look away.

“This... this is not terrible.”

“I am sure, if we give it time, we will have found reasons to kill each other by teatime.”

“I was talking about the food,” she lied.

“No, you were not.”

Stephen leaned over the table and pinned her with a look. Now it was Victoria’s turn to leave the roast hanging from her fork as she struggled to string two coherent thoughts together.

They were close, too close. He heard her breath hitch, her knuckles white from gripping the fork hard, not to use it as a defense but to hold onto something solid and tangible as reality slipped away from her.

They were alone. The room was private, and no one would have any reason to enter unless called upon. And at that moment, Stephen had no intention to bring anyone in. Instead, he intended to keep the world out. His duties and his doubts, his grief and his uncertainty. He wanted to keep only her in here. Her light and her warmth.

The world outside the thick walls of The White Horse Cellar had faded into irrelevance. All that remained was the air between them, charged, thin, heavy. It would be so easy to reach over and pull her in like he did on the street. Feel her land on his chest, on his body. So easy to kiss her, to ruin everything, to make everything right.

But he didn't, barely holding back. He looked away and focused on his plate, but his mouth spoke before he could rein in the words.

"You are right, My Lady. This is not terrible."

CHAPTER 11

Bold Claims

The rest of the lunch was quick and procedural, both eager to leave the pub as fast as possible. Only to realize that they now had to share the carriage on the way back to the house.

Victoria curled her fingers into her skirt, hoping that this gesture would add merit to the prayers she sent for the ride to be quick, safe, and uneventful. And somehow her prayers were answered. At first, both remained silent and watched the scenery change from the bustling streets of London to the green countryside.

Perhaps it was the splendid view of rolling green hills, perhaps it was the exceptionally sunny day, or perhaps it was the fact that they had left London behind that made things brighter. And with it, the way he pulled her in his arms when she got almost run over by the carriage and the way looked at her in that private room.

"I never did thank you for lunch, Your Grace," Victoria said demurely. "It was lovely and, to be honest, prudent. I do not think I would have survived the ride back without

something substantial to sustain me. So, thank you.”

“No need. I do not think I have properly thanked you for everything you’ve done in the house either.”

“I am doing my duty as your mother’s companion and, above all, her friend.”

“Still, it would be impolite and ill-mannered to deny you the recognition of your invaluable help.”

“Always dutiful, Your Grace. Your mother is already doing enough thanking for both of you.”

“I am not in the habit of letting others shoulder my responsibilities.”

“I have noticed.” She chuckled. “So, lunch was your way of expressing your gratitude?”

“It seemed appropriate. You’ve gone above what was expected and beyond what was asked.”

Victoria blinked, barely believing what she was hearing. She struggled to detect dishonesty, but there was none. Stephen was a lot of things, but he was not a liar. If he didn’t want to talk about something, he simply wouldn’t answer.

“If that is the case, I regret not dragging you to Fortnum’s for dessert. It seems I undervalued my services.”

“My Lady, everyone knows that if you want a good slice of apple pie, you need to go to Piazza Café.”

“Your Grace! How would you even mention such a vulgar, raucous establishment!”

“The question is, how does a lady like you know about that place?”

“As you so painfully remind me almost daily, I am not of noble birth,” she said lightly, with not an inkling of offense. “I have visited the place with my brother.”

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

Stephen seemed thoughtful. She was, too. He had noticed she favored apple pie over all the other desserts. And he seemed ashamed to be reminded of how he had brought up her lineage before.

“The way you put it, it seems that we should have stopped by Piazza Café, after all. I have both gratitude to express and regrets to atone for.”

“Excessively melodramatic over a slice of apple pie,” Victoria snorted.

“Excuse me, but it happens to be a very good apple pie.”

Victoria liked him like this—lighter, livelier, kinder. His huge body relaxed, his broad shoulders comfortable, his moves less strained, his laughter easier. He was good-looking, she had noticed as much the moment Annabelle had introduced him to her.

Yet there was something icy cold about his beauty. Once, she had heard ladies talking about “melting the icy Duke.” But they should have reconsidered, seeing how the thawed Duke could prove ten times more dangerous.

“Miss Victoria.” He seemed determined to make this ride a confession booth. “It was unfair of me to judge your proximity with my mother.”

“Unfair? I could think of more accurate words, but I am taking my winnings and leaving.” She smiled, shaking her head.

“Perhaps I should scrap the rest of the speech I was going to give, since you seem to

be easily satisfied.”

He was teasing her, she knew from his tone, but somehow his words registered differently, affecting her body in ways that shouldn’t be part of the conversation. She fumbled for a retort that would steer the conversation back in the safest direction.

He was going to say something nice, wasn’t he?

“It would be a shame to waste all the time you spent crafting that speech, Your Grace,” she said finally.

She tucked a curl behind her ear in an attempt to look composed. He followed that gesture and then pinned her with his azure eyes. He leaned forward and let his elbows rest on his knees.

“My mother...” He hesitated, his jaw tightening slightly before he pushed on. “She was fading. Grief does that. It makes ghosts of the living.”

Victoria swallowed.

“And then you came. With your endless chatter, your ridiculous ideas for a tea party, your new rules for croquet, and your refusal to take orders from anyone.” A hint of a smile flickered across his face, then faded. “You were kind to her. Not because it was your duty, but because you cared. And somehow, without ever asking for anything in return, you brought her back to herself.”

The way he looked at her, so steady, almost broke her.

“She eats properly now, she laughs, and she complains about silly, little things. Lord Prevost can protest in that shrill voice of his all he wants, but you made sure I didn’t lose my mother, too.”

Victoria blinked, her heart thudding in her ears. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Stephen, sensing her surprise, leaned back into the carriage seat with a smirk. “Though I reserve the right to rescind that statement if lilac makes its way into my drawing room.”

Victoria laughed, startled and charmed. “If that’s the price for your mother’s laughter, I daresay even you could learn to live with a little lilac.”

“I should have toned the speech down to avoid insurrection.”

“Now that I know I am indispensable?—”

“From undervaluing to overpricing. Interesting.”

“You said that I made Dorothy happy, Your Grace.” She smirked. “You can keep her indefinitely happy, you know.”

“Is that so?”

“By keeping me around.”

Victoria saw his expression harden. Gone was the playful light in his eyes, gone was the light smirk. His countenance turned glacial, and his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Miss Victoria.” His voice was laced with a warning. “Do not ever presume what a duke wants.”

“I never made such a bold claim,” Victoria said in a sweet, biting lilt. “I do not know what a duke might want. But”—her eyebrow rose—“I do know what you want.”

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

A muscle feathered in his jaw, the only betrayal of the control he was barely clinging to. His lips—those infuriatingly perfect lips—parted slightly, not in invitation but in a silent warning.

“I have told you before, Victoria.” His voice dropped. “Do not push me.”

To prove his point, he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his chin tucked so that his look was that of a wolf, ready to devour its prey.

Is this supposed to be intimidating?

Victoria wondered at that while her brain cataloged that look as the most scorching thing after the sun. Instead of leaning back and away from the very real possibility of getting burned, she too leaned forward, slowly, as if defying him was as natural as breathing.

“And I told you,” she returned, her voice steady, “that I know what you want. Even if you won’t admit it.”

“Do tell me,” he dared. “What is it that I want?”

Every little ounce of common sense evaporated when his molten voice filled the carriage.

Victoria tilted her head and blinked slowly as her eyes flashed. “Me.”

Stephen surged forward, the predator within him finally giving in to instinct. He was

on his knees on the carriage floor and tangled in her skirts, his strong shoulders nudging her knees apart so he could nestle between them. And she let him.

No. She pulled him in.

His hand wrapped softly around her neck, guiding her mouth to his with such purpose that it stole her breath.

He took her mouth with raw, undeniable hunger. His lips were demanding, his kiss a battle and a surrender all at once. This kiss was all lips and teeth and the faint smell of the wine they had. He bit her lower lip, almost crazed by need.

“Stephen...” His name tumbled from her lips in a reverent whisper.

His response was to deepen the kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth, leaving her breathless and clinging to him. His other arm banded around her waist, dragging her across the carriage seat into him, into his length, into his desire.

She surrendered.

Her fingers found the lapels of his coat, and she pulled him impossibly closer, the space between them disappearing with the inevitability of a tide. And she didn't care if she was going to be swept away or even drowned.

Her hand moved to explore his chest. Under the wrinkled fine linen, she could trace his hard muscles and measure time through the beat of his heart. Her fingers went for that one piece of clothing she loved to hate—his cravat. She undid the knot and threw his cravat away. The moment her fingers touched his collarbone, he snapped.

His fingers tangled in her curls, pulling at her pins like a crazed man, his mouth moving from her lips to her jaw, kissing and nipping.

“You dared to provoke me, Victoria,” he growled into her ear, the words vibrating on her skin. “Now, face the consequences.”

I am so glad I did.

She knew both of them wanted this.

Stephen pulled on her hair so tenderly yet firmly that she let her head fall on the velvet cushions of the seat as she surrendered herself to his mouth. And he chose devastation for dessert.

His tongue darted out just so that it teased her skin, making her aware of every little inch. Those open-mouthed kisses, right where her heart was pounding, would be something to be written on her tombstone.

Something hot coiled in her stomach, molten, undeniable. Her fingers went into his hair, desperate to keep him there, where he wreaked havoc on her skin. But he was not done.

“Look at me!”

Victoria did as he asked. Her eyes flicked to his, and she was floored by what she found in them. Gone was the refined, proper Duke. He was probably consumed by the feral animal looking down at her with those dark eyes. It was not sated, and she was its next meal.

To see the great Duke of Colborne so disheveled, so overcome with passion, did something to her that she didn’t dare to acknowledge. A whimper left her mouth—a deep, breathy sound that she didn’t recognize as the expression of her need.

“Is this what you wanted, Victoria?” he demanded, his mouth on her collarbone. “To

see how far I would fall?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

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

With a curse that sounded more like the snarl of a wild beast, Stephen captured her lips again, his hands mapping her body with urgency. He rolled his hips against hers, and she begged for sanity. He ground into her again, the barriers of their clothing irrelevant when it came to the heat they were feeling.

Victoria arched into him, finding purchase on his shoulders. The hand that gripped her waist moved with intent up her side. Not slow, not tender, but decisive, overwhelming. Stephen was determined to ruin her, and she didn't even mind.

His hand cupped the back of her neck, steady, guiding, keeping her where he wanted her, not restrictive, but dominant nonetheless.

Fresh heat pooled low in her stomach. The other hand slowly trailed up her body, the heat of his palm searing through the layers of silk, making her acutely aware of every inch between them. His thumb brushed the underside of her breast, and she gasped into his mouth.

"Tell me to stop," he murmured.

Never!

She took control of the kiss, pulling him in with her hands and her body, her fingers grazing his scalp. Her tongue flicked over his slowly, their breaths mingling, their bodies pressed together. Her prize was a deep moan, rumbling in his chest like the warning of a tempest.

His hands moved boldly, one fisting in her hair and angling her head exactly how he

needed to take over and devour her mouth. But his other hand... it explored more, demanded more. Even through layers of fabric, he found her. The gentle mound of her breast yielded to his palm, and her body quivered deliciously at the contact.

“Oh God!” she panted.

As she broke the kiss, he dropped his mouth to her neck, savoring her skin, leaving soft bites that he soothed with his tongue.

“So responsive,” he murmured against her skin.

Victoria’s breath hitched as he stroked slowly, deliberately, over the fabric, circling a delicate peak with maddening precision. The friction of silk against her sensitized bare skin sent a wave of need through her. Her core was wet and pulsing with want. She arched into him instinctively, and his lips curved against her collarbone.

“Yes, Victoria.” His voice was thick with lust. “Do you know what you do to me?”

She tried to answer, but he chose that moment to press the pad of his thumb on her nipple. It was as if she was struck by lightning, a thrilling sensation taking over her body.

He leaned back just enough to gaze upon her face, his blue eyes dark and hooded. He dragged his teeth across his lower lip as if considering things he shouldn’t. And then he licked that same lip, throwing all caution to the passing meadows.

Slowly, with the precision of a man entirely in control and entirely undone, he brought his mouth to her nipple, now tight and aching.

“Stephen!” Victoria gripped his shoulders to keep from floating away.

He took her wanton cry as encouragement. And it was.

Victoria shivered, her thighs tightening around him, her hands clawing at him. His fingers skittered over her shoulders, pulling her dress down and exposing more of her skin, baring her to him.

His warm breath fanned her breast as it spilled over the fabric. His mouth closed around her nipple, hot and aching and slow, and she cried out. She truly cried out, not caring if anyone heard. Her hand flew to his hair, her fingers tangling in his curls, keeping him there.

He drew her into a rhythm of sucking, licking, gentle brushes and deep pulls. Every flick of his tongue made her body shake, her core rippling, looking for friction, for something she couldn't even name. His hand moved, cupping her other breast, and his thumb grazed her nipple again and again. His mouth was hungry, his hands insatiable.

This double attack made her breath come in shallow bursts, if at all. Her legs drew up on either side of his body, cradling him, anchoring him to her as much as she was anchored to him. He rolled his hips into her once, and a new sensation rushed through her body. She arched into him, just to feel it again.

Not enough. More.

And then he went still. Her whole being protested, a shameless moan escaping her lips.

“We are almost there. We must...” He swallowed hard.

Victoria could see how tightly his jaw clenched, how his body still trembled. She glanced out the window and noted that they would soon turn onto the road to

Colborne House and pass through the gate.

“Victoria,” Stephen whispered reverently, inching close enough to rest his forehead against hers, his eyes closed, his breathing heavy. And then he tore himself away, gently but firmly pulling her bodice back up with trembling fingers.

Victoria lowered her feet onto the carriage floor once more. They looked at each other, words unspoken floating between them. What was there to be said when their bodies spoke louder?

He reached down and plucked a hairpin from the floor. He gave it to her with a look that consumed her whole, that teased how delicious it would be to throw caution to the wind. But his restraint won.

He sat back on his seat and struggled to adjust his cravat. By the time they reached Colborne House, her hair was neat, his cravat almost perfect, her bodice in place, their composure restored.

Still, Victoria knew that nothing would ever be the same.

CHAPTER12

Hairpin

Stephen was looking out the window in his study, scowling at a perfect day, sunshine pouring on his perfectly curated gardens, tended and renovated to classy perfection. The exact opposite of what he was feeling. The light caught metal, and it shone on his face, blinding him for a moment.

It was the hairpin he was twirling between his fingers. A simply ornated hairpin. The one that fell off when he took his clothes off last night. The moment that mere piece of metal hit the wooden floor was deafening. To the point that Stephen knew that he was not going to find the relief of sleep. He should have tossed it into the fire, should have discarded it and what it meant.

But here he was, holding onto it like a lovesick boy, refusing to part with it and the memories it evoked. How fervently he ran his fingers through her hair while he took out the hairpins one by one, eager to see her wavy hair cascade down her back. How her coiled braids had trembled, then spilled loose like silk over his hands. How he fisted them to guide her deeper in their kiss. How she?—

“Damn it, Victoria,” he cursed, closing his eyes.

It did him no good. Every time he did, all he could see was her. Her underneath him, gasping, luring him in. Her hands undoing his cravat, venturing forth to touch his

skin. Her look, that damn look that undid him as much as it made him feel alive for perhaps ever.

If she were some blushing debutante who just passively accepted his advances, he would have stopped the moment he got close. He wouldn't have let it get this far. He wouldn't have let madness overtake him. He had always prided himself on control. On restraint. On the ability to bury grief, passion, and desire beneath the surface of duty and legacy and name. But with Victoria...

"Me."

One word from her. That was all it took. The shackles of propriety were broken the moment she uttered that word. The boundaries became a distant line that he crossed as he ground into her. It took a single word from her and he was undone, unraveled, years of control snapped like twigs she stepped on.

No, Victoria was not coy or blushful, and she wasn't wanton either. He knew as he felt her pulse jump, her skin prickle, her body tremble. She had never been touched like that before. All that spark was her, purely her—her stubbornness, her fire—and he willingly burned up for her.

"Your Grace." Alfred's voice brought him back to this reality. "The guests have started to arrive."

"I will be right there."

Stephen looked at the hairpin still in his palm. He ran his thumb over it, inhaling deeply. Above all, there was an inescapable truth that he could run from all he wanted and it wouldn't do him any good—he desired Victoria. And if he were being honest, he desired her the moment he saw her, that vibrant girl next to his sister.

It was a hunger of the most dangerous kind, the kind that eclipsed reason, unseated judgment, and threatened ruin. Every time he got closer, it became harder to pull away. Each time, he wanted more, claimed more. Each time, he got perilously close to casting it all to the wind—his composure, his good name, caution, and common sense.

“No! You fool.”

He ran his hand through his hair, cursing under his breath. He was not going to allow his base instincts to take over. He was not going to be governed by desire no matter how good it made him. How alive, how free.

There was one solution, and that was the plan he had already devised: Victoria Crawford had to find a husband. A proper match with a respectable, dull gentleman who would keep her safe, comfortable, and—most importantly—away from him. By the time this ridiculous house party was over, Victoria must secure a proposal. He would make sure of that.

His mind tested him, bringing forth a clear image of her late at night, touched by a faceless lord, a fool that for sure would never understand nor handle her fire. His jaw tightened, and so did his fingers around the hairpin, the metal digging into his flesh.

“Your Grace, your sister is here.”

Stephen tucked away all his thoughts, his feelings, his desires, his fears. He composed himself, slipped on his mask, and exited the room.

* * *

“Stephen, did I tell you how happy I am?” his mother asked for the millionth time, and it wasn’t even tea time.

“You don’t have to,” Stephen said curtly. Then, in a softer voice, he added, “I can see it on your face.”

Dorothy looked up and gazed upon him, studying him, her eyes soft with affection and something far more perceptive. She shook her head and then smiled in that way mothers did when they knew far too much.

“You hate this,” she observed.

“Vehemently,” he admitted.

“All the more reason to thank you, then.”

Dorothy looped her hand through his, beaming as they stepped beneath the tree-lined avenue, where long tables had been laid with linen cloths, glinting silver, and carefully curated arrangements of wildflowers. Euclid was happily trotting at his side, finally allowed to eat with them.

Page 43

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

Stephen was not happy at all. This was neither indoors nor properly outdoors. It was, in his opinion, some cursed hybrid between a gardenfêteand a dining room rebellion.

“I do not understand what this is,” he muttered. “It’s not a picnic. It’s not a proper meal. You don’t expect me to eat like this every day.”

Then, a rustle of a dress, a measured step, an aura. He knew before he turned that Victoria was here.

“Only you would attempt to scrutinize the sitting arrangement, Your Grace.”

“Arrangementis a strong word,” he commented.

He turned to see Victoria’s arm looped through his sister’s.

Annabelle’s eyes shone as she looked upon her brother. Stephen couldn’t resist returning that look. He looked at her swollen belly, and his smile widened. His quiet sister, the Duchess of Heartwick, now got what she wished for and was truly happy.

He was happy for her.

“Anna!” Frederick came up behind her, frantic. “Perhaps it’s best you sit down.”

The Duke of Heartwick hovered not far behind, his eyes sharp as ever but wholly devoted to his wife’s comfort. He gave her a refreshment and checked her from head to toe before turning to Stephen.

“Colborne,” he greeted.

“Frederick.”

“Thank you for having us,” he added. “It would be good to spend some time with the family before the baby comes. Good for Annabelle to be with you.”

Frederick was the closest thing that Stephen had to a friend. He had never expected to see him as a brother-in-law, given his rakish ways. And now look at him, a husband and soon-to-be-father, and doing an amazing job at it.

“Oh, he is so adorable!” Annabelle petted Euclid.

“He’s mine,” Victoria and Stephen said at the same time.

They looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

“I found him,” Victoria pointed out.

“He likes me,” Stephen countered.

“You give him sweets!”

“I do no such thing. It would be bad for him. He simply has taste.”

“That is correct. The taste of the ham you have been feeding him.”

“He merely realizes where his best interests lie.”

Dorothy, Annabelle, and Frederick watched as if all this was some impromptu play. Euclid was wagging his tail between the two, nudging Stephen for a pat and licking

Victoria's hand.

Stephen decided to end this childish game and leveled Victoria with a warning look. He regretted it instantly. He should have known by now not to challenge her. Her jaw ticked, exactly like his did when she tried his patience. She was about to say something when Dorothy intervened.

"Enough," she said. "The food is getting cold, and we did not spend all morning planning this amazing outdoor luncheon just for you two to bicker over Euclid. He is clearly mine. Here, boy."

The adorable mutt followed her eagerly and sat at her feet when she took her seat. Annabelle dragged Victoria to sit beside her. Frederick stayed behind with Stephen, who waited for everyone to take a seat.

"You hate dogs," Frederick reminded him.

"Not this one."

"Right."

Page 44

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

Stephen turned to look at his friend and decipher that weirdly intoned word, only to find Frederick studying him with a knowing smirk.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just good to have you back,” Frederick said earnestly and patted him on the shoulder.

Stephen took his seat at the head of the table and looked upon the lively company. He wouldn't admit it even under duress, but this was tastefully done. The shade from the ancient oaks made shadows dance across the long table. Draped in linens that shimmered in the soft breeze, the surface was adorned with polished silver, delicate china, and wildflower arrangements that looked as if they had been plucked straight from a sunlit meadow.

She was right. The wildflowers do look better.

His eyes drifted to Victoria. Seated between Annabelle and Penelope, the other member of their unbreakable trio, she looked radiant. There was grace in the way she sat, but not that poised, reserved one that most gently bred ladies had. No. She was fire even in this idyllic setting, her laughter too bright, her gestures too unrestrained. Too real.

And at the slightest breeze, one stray curl bounced on her neck. Stephen stiffened, his hand going to the hairpin in the pocket of his waistcoat.

Stop this!

He decided to stay focused on his mission. Once Victoria was married, those unwelcome thoughts would be gone along with her. So, he decided to focus on the pool of possible suitors among his guests.

The Duke and Duchess of Huntington, Victoria's invites brought two of their family members that Stephen didn't know. His mother had invited her neighborhood friends, the same ones who had turned his house into an illegal gambling hall, and in turn, they had brought their unmarried sons.

Lady Weatherby, the smoking pianist, had brought both of her unmarried sons. Reginald was famously good-looking and, with his military bearing and proper demeanor, was perhaps on the top of Stephen's list. But his conversation skills were limited to hunting and horses, and Victoria would yawn within minutes.

Theodore was the scholar, his nose always buried in books. Seeing how Victoria practically lives in the library, he might have a chance. Though Stephen was almost guilty of even thinking of unleashing Victoria on the timid man. As for Edward, Lady Hardwick's son, he was dull as dishwater but financially secure.

"You can't possibly mean that, Miss Victoria," a voice said over the clutter and chatter.

And then there's that damned Blackwell.

Stephen's fingers tightened around his knife, which he was seriously thinking of using for more malicious intent than cutting his meat. Of all the gentlemen of the ton, Edwin Murden, the Duke of Blackwell, was the last one he would invite. But he was Frederick's friend, and good manners dictated that he treated him as an esteemed guest. Bad manners were taking a very different approach.

"I never say things I do not mean, Your Grace," Victoria said.

“How refreshing, Miss Victoria,” Blackwell purred.

Stephen’s good manners were to be tested, especially if Blackwell kept looking at Victoria with that wolfish smile and practiced charm.

The infamous Duke of Blackwell was everything Stephen despised in a titled man. Extravagant where he should be restrained, reckless where he should be measured, and worst of all, irresistible where he should be forgettable.

“Mathematics!” Blackwell exclaimed. “Surely, a lady of your spirit must pursue more... stimulating pursuits.”

Stephen’s jaw tightened so much that he was sure his teeth would crack.

“Perhaps you should try immersing yourself.” Victoria smiled that fake smile of hers. “It might help you lose less in faro.”

Blackwell’s polished smirk widened as he swirled his wine. His look was predatory, the same one a wolf might have while assessing its prey. Stephen didn’t need to have deduction skills to read what was going through the man’s mind. He was doing a lousy job of veiling it.

“Are you offering to tutor me, Miss Victoria?”

Oh, hell no.

Stephen set down his knife with deliberate care, the clinking of silver against china cutting through the conversation.

“I commend your self-awareness, Blackwell.” His voice was a blade wrapped in silk. “Recognizing one’s deficiencies is the first step toward improvement.”

A beat of silence. The two men looked at each other.

“You must try the syllabub.” Dorothy’s voice cut through the heavy silence. “Our cook insists that his is the best in London.”

The guests got up to go to the dessert tent, which was set near the dining table. Blackwell nodded with a polite, mocking smile at Stephen and got up to accompany Dorothy to the tent. Stephen answered with a cold nod.

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

He was about to get up, too, when he noticed that Victoria was still seated, looking at him as if he were an equation she was trying to solve. He decided to ignore her look. Nothing good would come of it.

CHAPTER13

Pic Nic

It's been a couple of days, and it was the most fun Victoria had for a while. She loved that the house was filled with people, the halls bustling with babble and laughter. She had prepared so many games and fun activities, and she was elated to see every guest participate with enthusiasm. From charades to bowling, from card games to improvised plays, she had thought of entertainment for all her guests, and they were so amused that their smiles never left their faces.

Dorothy was beside herself with joy, and Victoria was empowered by her smile. Having Annabelle here was making the Dowager Duchess's heart burst with joy. The fact that the usually silent and empty house was filled with laughter and merriment was healing old wounds. And all was worth it to see Dorothy alive and happy.

"Everything is ready for the picnic." Dorothy was early in the morning room, going over the details.

"I just checked the pantry, and we need nothing else for now." Victoria flopped down on an armchair.

"You are doing an amazing job. But you need to rest too."

“I am having so much fun that I feel no tiredness.”

“It is so fun!” Dorothy gushed, and then her eyes strayed to the end of the hallway.

“Do you think he will join us today?”

Because there was, of course, someone who was not enjoying himself. When it came to a certain host, he was the very picture of misery. Nothing was to his liking, and he criticized every activity for being too loud, too improper, too indecorous.

Stephen had been glum these past days, to say the least.

He never expressed those sentiments loudly except to Dorothy and Victoria, though his deep scowl, which resembled a man smelling something foul, said it all. He participated in only one activity—archery. And Victoria regretted having included it in the program.

She tried—and failed—to forget the way Stephen had looked during the archery contest. When provoked to show his sportsmanship, he deliberately removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves, revealing strong, veiny forearms. Then his stance. Effortlessly powerful.

She was still embarrassed by her sharp intake of breath when his movements pulled his shirt taut across his shoulders, the way his jaw had tightened just before release. It was indecent, really, how a man could make precision look so sinful.

“It is a pity,” Dorothy said, startling her out of her daydream. “I wish he would enjoy himself too.”

When Victoria saw the sad look on her face, she knew that Stephen had to come to the picnic no matter what. So, she made her way to his sanctuary—his study. That is where he was cooped up most of the day, rarely seen at any other time other than

meals.

“Your Grace.” She knocked on the door.

“I am busy,” he growled.

Not today.

Victoria squared her shoulders. “I am coming in.”

“Miss Victoria, I?—”

She opened the door and went inside. He was sitting on the sofa by the window, buried in paperwork, Euclid at his feet. He had thrown his coat on a chair, and he had once more rolled up his sleeves.

Victoria was momentarily stunned by how casual and domesticated he looked.

The dog was at least happy to see her, and he got up to meet her halfway. She bent to pet him.

“I told you I am busy,” Stephen barked.

“And I told you that we are having a picnic today.”

“I am aware. You have developed the bad habit of informing me of the daily activities. I thought you were smart enough to get the hint that I am not interested every time I ignore your bulletins.”

“Your guests are waiting.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. Of all the activities she had organized, irritating him remained the best one.

Page 46

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

“They’ve survived my absence for three days. I’m sure they’ll manage an afternoon.”

“Ah, so you have been keeping count.” She smirked. “How very attentive of you.”

He finally looked up from his papers and pinned her with a cold look.

As Victoria was lost in the deep blue of his eyes, she realized with dread that there was a deeper reason she was insistent. She wanted him to join.

“Is there a point to this interruption, or do you simply enjoy the sound of your own voice?” He went back to his usual infuriating self.

“The point,” she said, stepping closer to him, “is that it’s rude for a host to abandon his guests. Even you must know that.”

“You were the one who told me that I was being rude the last time I came.”

“You were glowering at the guests.”

“Lies. I remember I smiled.”

“To Annabelle!”

“So?”

“She is your sister! Your very pregnant sister.”

He set his papers aside with deliberate slowness, watching her with that vexingly unreadable expression.

“Your Grace.” She softened her voice. “Your mother misses you.”

“She has her guests.”

“You are her son.”

Stephen let out a long breath.

Victoria hid her smile. He might wish to come across as hard and emotionless, but he was truly trying when it came to his family.

“If I agree to this picnic,” he said, his voice low and measured, “will you cease your relentless campaign to drag me into every foolishness under the sun?”

Victoria tilted her head, considering. Euclid nudged her hand for more petting.

“For today.”

She caught it. Almost a smile. Almost.

He got up, unfolding his strong body and rolling down his sleeves. Victoria involuntarily mourned to see those arms covered, but she decided to focus on Euclid.

“Let’s go,” Stephen grunted.

She looked up. He was offering her his arm. She took it. The gesture was proper, expected, but the heat of him through the fabric, the way his muscles tensed under her fingers, sent a traitorous thrill through her.

“Try to smile,” she whispered as they stepped out into the gardens. “The fresh air won’t kill you.”

“One can never be sure,” he said dryly.

But she caught it. The faint shadow of a smirk. A smile, even.

They walked on the soft grass to the paved path to the lake. Through the canopy, the sun cast playful shadows on his profile.

“Your mood seems improved, Your Grace.”

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

“I am merely devising a plan. You were right to remind me that I have made a promise to secure you a husband.”

Victoria’s heart sank for a moment. Was she still just a nuisance he wanted to get rid of? Was he even thinking of the ‘incident,’ the ‘episode,’ or the ‘affair?’ Was he haunted like she was by the carriage ‘ruin?’

She looked up at him, and he returned the gaze. Indecipherable, dark despite the warm sun. She saw him absentmindedly put his fingers in the little pocket of his waistcoat and look away.

“Efficiency is key,” he continued. “Let’s assess your potential suitors.”

“I didn’t bring my ledger.”

“We can do preliminary research,” he half-joked. “So, Reginald is?—”

“Nope.”

“Miss Victoria,” he protested. “Surely, you must?—”

“Nope.”

Stephen scowled.

“Don’t scowl just because I rejected your top choice.”

“He wasn’t?—”

“Please. He is practically you if all you talked about was the breed of your horses.”

“They are majestic animals.”

“He should be marrying one of them, then.”

“Miss Victoria!” Stephen pretended to be shocked.

“What? Someone should tell the man that if it’s marriage he is after, he should just stand in a corner looking good. But, for the love of God, he needs to keep his mouth shut.”

Stephen shook his head in fake reprimand. “Fine. Theodore then.”

“Please. Theodore knows four dead languages and zero living ones.”

“Marital bliss at its finest. Arguments in ancient Sumerian tend to be resolved rather quickly.”

Victoria laughed with her whole body. She would never admit it, but she missed him the past few days. Yes, it was fun and great, but there was something missing.

“The list keeps getting smaller,” Stephen noted.

“It is not the size that is the problem here. It’s the quality.”

Stephen side-eyed her. “How about Edward?”

“Who?” Victoria raised an eyebrow.

“Edward Hardwick.”

“Again. Who?”

Stephen chuckled. “I know. The man has the personality of a wallpaper, but?—”

“There can’t be any redeeming quality after that comment, Your Grace.”

“Imagine that?—”

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

“Hard to imagine being married to a wallpaper,” Victoria interrupted again.

“You won’t have to suffer his opinions at dinner.”

“Suffer is the correct word to use regarding being married to Edward.”

“I am afraid that we are running out of suitable prospects.”

“What about the Duke of Blackwell?”

Stephen stopped abruptly. Victoria, still holding onto his arm, almost tripped. He pinned her with that sharp look of his that should have been intimidating.

“I said suitable prospects.”

Victoria blinked up at him with exaggerated innocence. “Oh? And what makes the Duke of Blackwell unsuitable, Your Grace? His excellent taste in waistcoats? His ability to discuss topics beyond horseflesh and crop rotation?”

The muscle in Stephen’s jaw twitched violently. “I do not approve of him.”

“How dramatic. I’m merely saying that your vigorous disapproval might hint at hidden virtues.”

Stephen’s gaze dropped to her mouth, then lower, to where her pulse fluttered at her throat. When he spoke, his voice was a dark caress.

“Tell me, do you truly find him attractive?”

She did not. Victoria barely found the Duke of Blackwell interesting. But coaxing a reaction out of Stephen was too delicious a game to skip. Now, under his scrutiny, she had nothing to say.

The silence stretched between them like a bowstring. She simply followed him as he led the way to the picnic.

They finally reached the perfectly sublime spot she and Dorothy had prepared with such care. And their efforts seemed to have paid off, for the scenery was out of a fairytale.

The guests were sitting on luscious cushions by the wooden platform at the edge of the water. Their laughter skipped across the lake's mirror-like surface, pastel skirts skittering and linen shirts rustling. Low tables sat between them, laden with fruit, refreshments, and colorful china.

Victoria looked up at Stephen, and he seemed taken by the scenery, too. That was praise more than words could ever convey.

“See? Not that bad,” Victoria said, squeezing his arm.

“Adequate.”

Victoria laughed as Dorothy came toward them with the brightest smile on her face.

“Stephen! I am so glad you joined us.”

Stephen leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. And accept her embrace without recoiling.

“I was led to believe that attendance was compulsory,” he said, smirking. “Plus, Euclid needed a walk.”

Victoria scoffed and followed Dorothy to her spot. She watched as Stephen sat in the farthest spot that wasn't quite in the lake but close enough to the edge. He looked so uncomfortable in the serene environment. Soon, Annabelle and Frederick joined him, and he managed to relax. Still no smile, but Victoria knew well to choose her battles wisely when it came to Stephen.

“Your Grace,” a saccharine voice cut through the air.

It was Adelaide, Lady Weatherby's daughter—the thrice times dowager made it a point to have one child with each husband—and the youngest of the brood. She was the epitome of a proper lady—willowy, golden-haired, and possessed of the kind of calculated charm that was expected from a lady.

“It is good to see you joining us.”

Victoria clenched the fork she used to spear strawberries. There was no mistaking her tone or the sensual way she moved. She boldly sat on the cushion next to Stephen, and a strawberry paid for it. She arranged her skirts with practiced elegance, the pale blue silk whispering across the cushions.

“Your estate is breathtaking in summer, Your Grace. The gardens are exquisite.”

“Thank you, though my mother takes care of the estate if you want to properly congratulate someone.”

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

Victoria smiled at the way Adelaide was taken aback.

Stephen's demeanor was hard to get used to, but Adelaide seemed determined. She let out a delicate, tinkling laugh.

"Still, Your Grace." She leaned closer, a strategic maneuver perfected by all the ladies of the ton. "I believe that a house always reflects the character of its owner."

"An interesting observation. Though I find houses, like people, are best appreciated at a proper distance."

Victoria coughed to mask her chuckle.

Adelaide went pale. It took a lot to keep up with Stephen's brutal speech. Yes, he was rich and capable, he was devastatingly tall and handsome, but to break through to him, it would take more than batting eyelashes and random touching.

Adelaide recovered, and true to her goal, she leaned even closer and was ready to say something when Stephen got up and turned to his sister.

"Annabelle, let's go see your favorite swans."

Adelaide was taken aback by the swift way he got up. This was artfully done if Victoria were ever to admit that she had been watching the whole scene intently. He simply avoided the lady's advances by accompanying his pregnant sister.

Annabelle was blindsided by this, but her love for swans was too strong, so she gave

him her hand, and they left together. But not before he threw a heated glance at Victoria.

A suspicious warmth bloomed in Victoria's chest as Adelaide finally retreated, her charms meeting the immovable wall of Stephen's indifference.

She shouldn't care. She didn't care. But it did make her feel better that all he gave to such an eligible lady was glacial politeness. Because Victoria knew very well that Stephen, under that icy exterior, hid fire. She had felt it. He had shown her. Perhaps only her.

CHAPTER 14

Bitter Sting

It was the next night, after dinner, and Stephen realized with dread that the group secretly, or even instinctively, decided that this night would be one to remember. There was no preventing it from happening—more specifically, there was no preventing it from happening to him.

The group had retreated to the big drawing room, and it was obvious that no one was going to bed anytime soon. Candlelight flickered in the gilded mirrors, and the air was fragrant with beeswax, along with the crisp scent of night-blooming jasmine that drifted through the cracked windows.

The room was humming with energy, the last days drawing the guests closer, making them more relaxed and familiar with one another. Lady Weatherby, that menace, was manning the pianoforte shamelessly. Stephen started believing that the deaths of her three husbands were not accidental. She was not of the faint of heart, that was for sure.

“You might want to give that scowl a day off,” Victoria remarked mockingly.

“And you might want to give meddling a rest tonight,” he deadpanned.

“But, Your Grace, you’ll get lines on your forehead.”

“Perfect. I will be showing my displeasure without trying.”

Stephen looked down at Victoria and her reprimanding look. She was wearing a beautiful dress in that blue shade that looked so good on her. But nothing looked better on her than her aura, her energy. She opened her mouth to say something, but she didn’t get the chance.

“Miss Victoria, you must end this stupid debate we are having with Frederick.” The Duke of Blackwell came up to her with a wide smile on his lips.

Stephen’s back went rigid the moment he drew near, all charm and smiles. All the warmth of his banter with Victoria evaporated.

“I am sorry, Your Grace.” Victoria smiled at Blackwell. “But I do not waste my time on anything less than life or death situations.”

“If Frederick keeps insisting, it might escalate to that.”

“I thought I made it clear in the program that violence is to be displayed on Tuesdays only.”

“I think this requires an exception.”

Stephen started to think that, indeed, the situation might require some violent resolution, especially if Blackwell kept looking at Victoria likethat. Perhaps a nightly

demonstration of archery was in order.

“Blackwell.” Frederick came up to them, his arm wrapped around Annabelle. “Tell me you are not here complaining to Miss Victoria.”

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

Stephen watched as the conversation unfolded. Frederick argued for something unfitting with that rake Blackwell. And instead of rolling her eyes in disdain, Victoria bantered with both of them, becoming the center of attention in her usual effortless way. She was not trying. It was just who she was—magnetic and fascinating.

“Now you are going to tell me you dunk biscuits!” Frederick huffed.

“A proper biscuit must be dunked to soften,” Blackwell countered.

“Dunking is for schoolboys and invalids! A gentleman eats them crisp!”

Victoria grabbed both their biscuits and fed them to Euclid.

“This was for Anna!” Frederick protested and walked away.

Blackwell leaned into Victoria a little bit too close for Stephen’s liking.

Stephen would have preferred that Blackwell kept his distance. Far enough for him to be out of the country, ideally.

“I, on the other hand, believe that was the deserved punishment, Miss Victoria,” Blackwell said.

He tried to pat Euclid, but the dog growled lowly.

Good dog.

“Join me for a round to discuss the merits of coffee over tea,” Blackwell offered.

“Scandalous, Your Grace!” Victoria pretended to be scandalized.

“You don’t know the half of it, Miss Victoria.”

Blackwell offered her his arm with a flourish, and Stephen watched with a clenched jaw as she allowed herself to be led away. Their heads bent close together as they strolled around the perimeter of the room, Blackwell murmuring something that made Victoria laugh, the sound bright and unrestrained. It scraped against Stephen’s nerves like a poorly tuned violin.

He can’t be that amusing.

Stephen followed them with a rigid look.

With the impeccable timing of someone born to wreak havoc, Lady Weatherby started a sensual tune—a waltz. He was ready to protest when Dorothy jumped up from her seat and clapped her hands.

“A dance! Excellent choice, Lady Weatherby.”

Debatable.

His mother’s eyes gleamed as they landed on Victoria and Blackwell.

“Victoria, you simply must dance. You and the Duke make such a striking pair.”

Stephen’s glass paused mid-way to his lips. He looked up at his mother, who was glowing with the excellent idea she just had, and couldn’t believe the betrayal.

“Miss Victoria.” Blackwell, the blackguard, smiled. “I would be honored to have this dance.”

Victoria glanced at Stephen. He couldn’t see his face in the mirror. He couldn’t see how he looked back at her, his fingers clenching around his glass. But he was sure that his look was a dark, warning glare.

Do not dare dance with him!

Victoria tilted her head and, with a wide smile, gave her hand to Blackwell, who pulled her to the center of the room as other couples gathered around them. Stephen fixed his eyes on them.

He was afraid that he wasn’t being too discreet about it, but he needed to focus on one problem at a time, and right at that moment, Blackwell was the problem.

Turned out that Blackwell—damn him—was an excellent dancer. His steps were smooth, his turns precise, and worst of all, he had the audacity to make it look effortless. He swirled Victoria with flowing moves, his hand resting on her waist, a fact that made darkness twist in Stephen’s chest.

“They do make such a lovely couple.”

Page 51

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

Dorothy was suddenly at his side, looking at Blackwell and Victoria like a proud mother. Stephen would have liked to unravel the full extent of his thoughts, but he showed superhuman restraint.

Across the room, Blackwell dipped Victoria into a scandalously deep turn, her skirts flaring out around them. She laughed, breathless, her cheeks flushed with amusement.

Stephen put his glass on the nearest surface with a sharp clink.

“It seems that your venture will bear fruit,” Dorothy noted. She leaned in and wrapped her arm around her son’s, smiling.

“Venture?”

“My, yes. You sought to help Victoria secure a husband.”

“You are not implying that Blackwell—” Stephen couldn’t finish the sentence in a civilized way.

“Why not? I can’t see a better choice for my lovely Victoria. Blackwell is an excellent choice. Wealthy, titled, and clearly smitten.”

He will soon be smitten, that is for sure.

And Stephen was determined to do exactly that if the rake’s hand moved too low on Victoria’s back one more time. He was not even trying to tame his jealousy at this point.

“I happen to disagree,” he said in a clipped tone.

“Well, I think they suit each other perfectly,” Dorothy insisted.

“Stop it,” he hissed.

Dorothy simply smiled and went to request another song from Lady Weatherby to keep the dance going. The final strains of the waltz drifted through the room. But before the applause could fully erupt, Stephen was moving, a dark streak across the polished floor.

Victoria was curtsying to Blackwell when Stephen stopped before her. He heard her exhale as she looked up to find his glacial gaze pinned on her.

“My dance.” His tone left no room for negotiation.

Victoria gave him her hand, and he stepped closer. His hand rested on her waist, and he was painfully aware that this was where it belonged. His other hand clasped hers, their fingers intertwining with deliberate precision. He pulled her closer, discarding all propriety, all the rules he had abided by all his life.

Her eyes flicked to his, holding that fire they always did. Her unyielding spark was always there on the surface. The one thing that made him lose his composure again and again. There was no way to be close to her and be himself. He was lost, and he was found, and all the things in between. It was vexing and intoxicating. He would have to either claim her or hide her away from him.

But for now, he was here, with her in his arms. His hand closed around hers, gloved fingers tightening possessively. He let his thumb stroke her wrist exactly where her pulse was fluttering. He spun her, his palm slid up her spine, and he saw the little hairs on her neck stand on end, felt the tremor wracking her body.

He was not suffering alone.

Their eyes met. Her big sapphire-blue eyes looked at him with defiance but also a plea. A plea for him to stop, for him to hold her tighter. For days they pretended nothing had happened. But everything had happened.

He looked down at her with a look that said one thing. The one thing that he would never utter out loud.

Mine.

“Stephen, perhaps take a step back?” Victoria whispered, trembling.

The plea hung between them, fragile and raw. Stephen’s gaze darkened as he pulled her closer still. His knee brushed her skirts with every turn, a taunt and a promise. Need. Need that drove him mad, making his pulse drum in his ears, drowning out the whole world around them.

“Why would I do that, Victoria?”

“I... Just, please.”

“It’s the first time we dance,” he said, drinking her in.

The words were simple. The meaning was not.

First. Last. Only.

Page 52

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

Victoria's breath caught. She heard what he didn't say, what the low gravel of his voice conveyed—that this moment was as fragile as it was inevitable. Her fingers tightened around his. The music ended.

Stephen held her a moment more, her body and her gaze and her soul. Just one moment more. Then, his arms dropped, feeling empty already.

He bowed slightly and left the drawing room.

* * *

The party had ended hours ago, and the manor quieted. And yet he was sitting on the armchair in his study, before the fireplace. In his hand, the silver hairpin glinted in the firelight as he turned it between his fingers. Its weight was negligible, a mere slip of metal, yet it felt as heavy as sin in his palm.

Euclid placed his head on his thigh, silently asking to be petted. Stephen scratched the dog behind his ear.

“You, too, are a traitor. You like her best,” he said.

Euclid licked his hand.

“I do not blame you.” Stephen chuckled bitterly.

The mutt shook his body and made himself

Stephen's eyes strayed to the half-opened door to the dressing room. His body stiffened at the memory of that first night back home. The feel of her skin against his, her curves against his body, the way she melted into him in the drawing room during their first kiss, how good he felt wrapped in her arms in the carriage.

"Damn it."

She was everywhere, even here in his wretched room. The dog was hers, for crying out loud.

He knew he was not going to get any sleep in this state. So he put on his boots, and in just his shirt, he went out and ventured alone in the gardens.

It was so quiet, now that everyone was asleep. The night was pleasant, but still, the cold night air bit through his thin shirt. He welcomed it all—the sharp sting in his skin, the way his breath fogged in the dark. Anything to distract from the fever in his blood.

He took the gravel path away from the house. He didn't want anyone to see him from the windows looking like a forlorn gothic hero. He'd rather do that in private.

He took the path to the neglected greenhouse.

Growing up, this had been his favorite place in the estate. He would hide here from his tutors and his father's stern looks, from the weight of the title that he would inherit one day, from his strict upbringing, from the constant reminder of rules and propriety.

Once more, he was hiding, only this time it was from things far more complex.

He saw his reflection in the glass of the greenhouse. Disheveled, his hair a mess from

the hundred times he had run his fingers through it, his shirt unbuttoned, his eyes sad and frantic.

“Hell, Victoria.”

CHAPTER 15

Lemon Tree

Not that she had been sleeping soundly ever since the Duke of Colborne decided to come back to his ancestral home and uproot her logic. But that night, Victoria felt like she couldn't breathe. She tried to drink something warm and read as she did every night. She even sat on the small desk and solved the most complex of mathematical equations. Nothing worked.

Numbers could do a lot of things; they explained the way the world worked, but they were useless in explaining the way she felt. Everywhere Stephen had touched her during their dance thrummed like live wires. She could still feel the possessive grip at her waist, the searing brush of his thigh.

She pressed trembling hands to her flushed cheeks.

“This is insanity!” she whispered to herself.

The bedchamber walls seemed to shrink with every breath. The open window did nothing to ease the heat pooling low in her belly. A heat that had nothing to do with the summer night and everything to do with the memory of hard muscles beneath her palms as she'd steadied herself against him during a turn in the dance.

“Listen, Victoria,” she muttered to herself. “Just forget about him, for all that is sacred.”

She had danced with the Duke of Blackwell, too. He, too, was a striking man who moved with the effortless grace of a natural rake. His wit was sharp enough to make her laugh—truly laugh. There'd been a boyish twinkle in his eyes that promised mischief, a charm that set other ladies' fans fluttering like startled butterflies.

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

And yet she had felt no wildfire in her veins. No troublesome heat pooling low in her belly. No mad urge to throw something at his head just to see his perfect composure shatter.

All she had felt was pleasant amusement. Like watching an exceptionally clever, entertaining puppet show. And though she could see the Duke as a good friend, she couldn't even imagine dancing with him the way she did with Stephen, let alone anything more.

Stephen.

“Argh!”

She screamed into her pillow, played with her hair, and fanned herself. Nothing worked. If she were to stay in this room one more minute, she would scream, and the whole household would descend upon her. And she would have to explain why she was having a nervous meltdown.

Victoria left her room and made her way to the gardens. The cool night air and the walk might exhaust her enough to surrender her tired mind to oblivion.

She made her way away out of the house. She didn't want to make anyone who might be looking out the windows think that he saw a ghost that haunted the manor. Because in truth, she felt as if she were the one being haunted. She walked down the gravel path to the lake and looked upon the serene water.

But soon, the air shifted and turned colder, and her chemise and dressing gown were

not enough to protect her. The house was still a bit far off, and she felt her limbs turning icy.

“The greenhouse!”

The idea popped into her head, and she was reassured that she wasn’t going to freeze to death. She could get warm and then hurry back to the house. Stay till she could feel her legs again.

She found the door to the old greenhouse open.

Victoria stepped in, the humid air wrapping around her like a warm shawl. Moonlight filtered through the grimy glass, casting silver streaks across the overgrown lemon tree in the center. She rubbed her arms to keep from shaking.

“Hell, Victoria.”

The moment she heard that voice, she knew. Hewas here, cursing her name.

She could leave. From the low and desperate way he said her name, he didn’t know she was right there. She could just walk away and avoid him. But she knew very well that she wouldn’t. So, she ventured forth, trembling, only this time it wasn’t from the cold.

Why was he calling to her? Why was he calling her name as if it were a torment? It wasn’t her imagination, then? The way he danced with her, the tension. He couldn’t be jealous of Blackwell, could he?

Her heart slammed against her ribs, her breath caught, and instantly, heat burned her icy skin. The probability of this happening, of them being here this very night, was astronomical.

Stephen stood beside the twisted lemon tree, his silhouette sharp against the tangled greenery.

Oh God!

His shirt was half-open, his sleeves carelessly rolled up, revealing the corded strength of his forearms. His dark hair was tousled, as though he, too, had been wrestling with sleeplessness.

He turned, and his eyes locked onto hers, shadowed and intense. For a breathless moment, neither moved.

“Victoria?” He exhaled sharply, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. “Of all the places you could have gone tonight.”

Victoria crossed her arms, though whether to shield herself from the chill or the intensity of his gaze, she wasn’t sure.

“I could say the same to you.”

“I’ve always hidden here. Even as a boy.”

“My point exactly. This is a perfect hiding spot.”

Stephen’s gaze darkened as he took in her trembling form. He seemed to drink in the way her thin chemise and dressing gown clung to her curves, the flush of cold still lingering on her skin. His jaw tightened, and for a heartbeat, Victoria thought—hoped—he would stride forward and pull her to him.

Instead, he took a deliberate stepback, gesturing toward an ornate iron bench nestled beneath the greenhouse’s warmest glass pane.

“Sit,” he urged, his voice rough. “Before you catch a cold.”

Victoria hesitated only for a moment before making her way to the bench. The air was warmer there, and the sun-drenched bench had retained some of its heat, which immediately seeped into her bones. Stephen sat on a short potting bench across from her and, with one decisive move, grabbed her hands to warm them.

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

Oxygen whooshed out of her. She was certain that the last breath she would ever draw was the one just before Stephen took her hands in his and blew his hot breath on them.

“You are reckless, Victoria.” He sounded genuinely concerned. “Venturing out in...this.”

“Says the man who ventured out with his shirt.”

“Touché.” He smirked and looked up at her.

Too close, so close, not close enough.

Stephen snapped out of it first, dropped her hands, and straightened his back. He leaned against the lemon tree, putting even more distance between them. As he let his head fall back, Victoria followed the silver moonlight shading his cheekbones, his sharp jawline, his bobbing Adam’s apple.

“Uhm, the house party is a success,” she commented to dispel her thoughts.

“It is,” he admitted, still looking up at the moon through the glass. “You have officially restored my name as a gracious host.”

“I did not do?—”

He looked down at her, and she forgot what she was going to complain about.

“You did. Can we not argue about that, too?”

Victoria simply nodded, accepting the compliment gracefully.

“Have you decided on your dance card tomorrow?” he asked.

Victoria’s heart stuttered. She sensed the sudden shift in the air, and her head was spinning from the sudden changes. She was not mad, somehow. It was not deliberate, not some game. Stephen was too straightforward for this. He, too, was trying to find his footing.

“You sound like a general planning a campaign.” She smirked, their banter a familiar ground.

“Isn’t it?” His mouth quirked. “Strategy, alliances, calculated retreats...”

“You are merely trying to find me a husband.”

Stephen studied her. “You always refer to our plan, as if it were something I desire. You truly are not interested in marriage?”

Victoria looked away and out at the night spreading across the immaculate grass. She could say half the truth. She valued her independence, and no man could ever understand her intellectual pursuits. Everyone in the ton knew her as the bluestocking lady. But for some reason, she couldn’t lie to him. Not tonight.

“No, Stephen. I do not wish to marry. I fear almost nothing in the world?—”

“The way you screamed for me when you thought a spider was attacking you is evidence to the contrary.”

She chuckled. Perhaps this was why she didn't want to lie to him. Somehow, even by insulting her—but not really—he made everything easier.

“I did say almost nothing, Your Grace,” she said with a cocked eyebrow.

“Spoken like a true barrister writing a contract,” he allowed. “You were saying?”

“I fear marriage,” she stated flatly.

Stephen looked at her seriously. He didn't wear that dismissive look men had when they talked about marriage with women.

“I understand,” he said. “For ladies, it can be... permanent.”

“It is more than that.” Victoria looked down at her hands. “You see, my father...”

Stephen didn't move a muscle, said nothing, and didn't push. Victoria looked up and saw him waiting for her to take her time to answer. For an obnoxious man, he could be so considerate. Somehow, that was worse.

“Let's just say that my mother withered away in a cruel, loveless marriage. I do not wish this on anyone. And I do not want this for myself.”

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

Stephen inhaled. He looked down, his shoulders sagging. Then, he nodded as if to himself. "I understand."

Those were the words she had wished to hear all her life. Nothing more than that. That someone understood her. That this social norm that all the ladies wanted was to secure a husband was not true. Not for everyone.

"And your brother?"

"Let's just say that he is not as understanding." Victoria looked away in pain.

"Well, I can't blame the man. I mean, he grew up with you," Stephen teased.

Victoria glared at him, but he chuckled.

"But I do understand, Victoria. Or I think I am starting to. You see, my father..."

His voice was low with something like regret.

"He was a good duke," he continued. "A proper one. But he..." A muscle twitched in his jaw. "He thought affection was indulgence. That duty came before love. My mother. She also suffered."

The admission hung between them, fragile and unexpected. Victoria had always assumed that Stephen idolized his father, the stern, unshakable Duke of Colborne. But now she saw the truth: he'd learned distance from a man who prized it.

“I only realized it these past few days. Seeing my mother, the way she was when Annabelle and I were young. And even so, you thought that my mother was at her worst when my father died. You’d be shocked to see her when he was alive.”

They looked at each other. The silence was charged. Not in a bad, uncomfortable way. But it was too deep, too raw and real. They showed their wounds, their bare fears, in a way that they hadn’t done for anyone else. Victoria had to lighten the mood before she lost all good sense.

“That is why I prefer mathematics. Safer.”

“Safer is good, but even your mathematics are open to the possibility.”

“The possibility?”

“Of a good marriage? Like Annabelle and Frederick have. Like your brother and Penelope. Against all odds if I might add.”

“A statistical error, for sure.”

“A margin for success.”

Her breath caught. The true meanings of his words shimmered between them, dangerous and sweet. He felt it too, and it was his turn to raise that frail wall between them.

“You understand that this is the way Society works, Victoria? Unfair, poor, and few—those are the choices you have.”

“I understand. My brother is too much, I can’t be myself around him, and somehow, it hurts more than having to pretend for a stranger. A husband.”

Stephen nodded. Then, he gave her a weak smile.

“So, let’s approach it mathematically, then. What do your calculations say? Who has the most chance to be an ideal husband for you?”

Something inside her stung. That question... it reminded her that no matter what they have shared, for him, she was always an obligation he would like to get rid of.

She narrowed her eyes, lifted her chin, and gave her verdict. “The Duke of Blackwell.”

The hot, humid air in the greenhouse cooled rapidly. His look turned glacial, his smile vanished, wiped clean as though she’d struck him.

“You are not serious,” he said, the words clipped.

Her suspicions from when she heard him call her name came back. Stephen pretended for days that nothing had happened between them. He had insisted that all he wanted was to marry her off. And now he was losing his composure at the mention of the Duke of Blackwell?

Oh, this is going to be good.

“Why not?” Victoria arched an eyebrow, folding her arms, all mockery and daring. “He’s a good prospect—titled, wealthy, and charming.”

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

“Charming,” Stephen repeated, as if the word offended him personally.

“Yes. And he laughs at my jokes,” she added nonchalantly.

Stephen got up, the threat clear in his eyes. One wrong word and she would have to face the consequences.

Victoria once more picked up the gauntlet and looked up at him. “If he were to propose, I might?—”

The reaction was feral, deprived of all pretenses of civility. He crossed the space between them in an instant. One hand rested on the back of the bench just behind her shoulder, making him loom over her. His scent filled her, all spice and something more than all the aromas in the greenhouse. His look pinned her in place, and she whimpered at the sight.

She knew. Tonight, he would ruin her. And she would let him.

His other hand went into her hair, his fingers tugging, making her arch her neck to meet him. His blue eyes dropped to her lips, and then he descended upon her. He claimed her mouth, his lips tasting her before he demanded entry. His hand slid from her hair to cup her jaw, his thumb grazing her cheek.

Her hands followed their own path up his waist, his torso, caressing the skin his half-opened shirt revealed. Heat erupted under her fingers, and a roar rumbled in his chest. The kiss became sloppy, unrefined, deeper, all tongues and teeth.

Victoria thought she would pass out when he broke the kiss. He still held her, still so close, his lips just grazing hers as he breathed heavily.

“You will not marry him.”

She smirked, victorious and unrepentant. Satisfaction surged through her. Hewasjealous.

“I don’t see why not,” she challenged.

“Do not test me, Victoria.”

“I am not.” She tilted her head in his hand. “You asked me who I find agreeable. Well, I find Edwin?—”

She never finished that sentence. Whatever thread of restraint he had been clinging to snapped at that moment. He bit her, he tasted her, his mouth slanted over hers, raw precision, lips firm, claiming. He licked her upper lip, trapping it between his. His hand curled around her throat, gentle yet firm. A reminder that he was in control. Victoria’s toes curled, and she arched even more against him.

He broke the kiss and looked at her, flushed and her lips swollen. With his eyes still pinned on hers, he nipped her lower lip, then soothed it with his tongue. That familiar, overwhelming heat rose inside her, making her core throb.

He licked her lips gently, while his hand slipped from her throat down her shoulder, pushing her dressing gown off, her chemise next. The treacherous fabrics obeyed him until her upper half was bare to him.

He looked down, licking his lips now. One more glance at her bewildered eyes, blinking slowly, his teeth raking his lower lip. His knuckles grazed her nipple.

“Ah!” Her back arched.

“Tell me, Victoria,” he growled near her ear. “Tell me you will do as I say.”

Victoria let her head fall back, her lips parting. But no sound came out. He bit her earlobe while his finger rolled her sensitive peak. Every stroke, every nip was a claim, a punishment for daring to consider another man.

“You will not marry him. Say it!”

Still, she refused to promise him what he demanded. Was it because he demanded? Or was it because every time she refused to concede, he dared to do more?

A warning roar tore from his throat, and he went down on his knees before her. His eyes leveled with hers, and Victoria felt a shiver run down her spine.

His fingers curled into the hem of her skirt. Slowly, always studying her, he pulled her skirt up, till he could nestle between her thighs. She felt so shamelessly exposed, his hardness so evident that her body came alight. He released her eyes, and his head dipped lower. His hot breath on her sensitive nipple burned through the seams that were barely keeping it together.

“Don’t make me make you regret it, Victoria.”

There was no world in which she could ever regret this. She was so mistaken.

CHAPTER 16

The Edge of the Garden

“Say it, Victoria!”

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

He was so close, his enormous body keeping her exposed, ready for ruin. And yet no words slipped from her lips. This was war, and the spoils were pleasure. The pleasure his mouth gave her as the tip of his tongue circled her one nipple. Then the other. Again. Devastatingly slow, barely there.

Not enough!

Her hand went in his hair to guide him where she wanted more, needed more. He caught her wrists mid-air, pulling them behind her back in one fluid motion, trapping them. She gasped in desperation, arching into him, hunting the pleasure he was denying her. He nipped her collarbone.

“Want more?” His voice was almost unrecognizable with gravel. “Beg me. Give me what I want.”

An electric jolt went through her at his debauched words. She shook from head to toe, her core leaking brazenly. This time, the answer refused to form because her body had forgotten its basic functions. Like drawing breath.

“So stubborn,” he accused.

His fingers were next, going up her ankles, grazing the skin behind her knee. Victoria writhed without control over her body, her mind, her very soul. A ripple of desire lanced through her every cell.

“Stephen!”

“Yes!” he hissed.

He dared more, his fingers marking her thighs as they dug into her skin. His mouth found the sensitive skin behind her ear, and he kissed and licked till she was boneless, unable to control her body.

His fingers became even more daring. He ventured higher, higher, closer to where she was aching, where her whole being was wound up. He nipped her neck as he touched her there.

“Oh God!”

Victoria almost catapulted out of the bench, out of reality itself. She dug her nails into the hand that was holding hers and drew desperate breaths. She had never been touched there, never thought about how it would feel to be touched there.

“That’s it, Victoria.” He coaxed more sighs out of her.

He found her slick heat, and she trembled. One slow, lazy stroke, then another, not much, just enough to make her whimper with want. Then, he pulled away.

“No!” she protested.

She fought to free her hands, she arched her back, she tightened her thighs—anything to keep him there, where she needed him the most.

“You like this. You want this,” he purred.

He came closer, his breath fanning her face, his hips gently rocking against her. He was seducing her in the most devastating way possible. She leaned up for a kiss at least, but he pulled back a little, fire burning in his eyes.

“I want to kiss you, Victoria,” he said softly. “I want to touch you.”

He leaned in, just barely, just one light stroke over her lips. It set her on fire. She chased after him, but he wouldn't allow it.

“I want to show you pleasure. I will show you pleasure,” he hummed. “Just tell me what I want to hear, Victoria. You won't ever let him touch you, never even think that you will be his.”

Victoria nearly sobbed in frustration. He caught her earlobe between his teeth. His fingers returned, firmer now, touching her with agonizing precision. She parted even more for him, no shame at all in her need. He found a spot there, a bundle of nerves, and he circled it softly.

Her soul left her body. This was the best she had ever felt in her life. There was nothing else in the world, nothing mattered. If the whole of the ton descended upon them, she wouldn't stop. There was only him, his heat, his torturing words, his exploring hand, his wicked mouth. He planted open-mouthed kisses on her neck, licked her collarbone, bit her nipple. And his fingers...

God!

She squirmed and tensed and sighed and said his name again and again, out of her mind. Pleasure coiled tight in her belly, her body a bow ready to snap.

Then, he stopped.

Her cry of protest echoed through the greenhouse. He muffled it with his kiss, deep and possessive.

“You will not marry him, Victoria,” he demanded against her lips. “Say it. He won't

ever touch you like this.”

She moaned. The hand holding hers tightened, and the other grabbed her decisively by the jaw, bringing her closer to him, and forcing her to look into his eyes. She was floored by the need she saw in those tempestuous eyes. She licked her lips.

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

He smirked in triumph. “Come on,” he purred. “Let me hear it, and I will make you feel so good.”

She hated him. Hated how easily he unraveled her, how he knew how to control her. Hated that she needed this, needed him—all of him. Still, her eyes holding his, she refused to give him that one thing he wanted.

“There is the fire.” He kissed her deeply. “There is the passion.”

His kiss became a tempest, a storm, a whirlwind. She was utterly at his mercy, tangled around him, his hand firmly keeping her in place, every nerve ending his to tease. She had only to say that one thing, and he would make good on his promise. He would make her feel it all, take it all.

No.

She held onto that last semblance of control, the only shred of power she had over him. She rejoiced at seeing him undone by jealousy. He was going mad, thinking that someone else would touch her.

His fingers were on her once more, her slick wetting them as he slid them again and again from her entrance to that peak. Each time, the feather-light touch became more insistent. She pulled him closer, her thighs trapping him in.

“Say it, Victoria!”

His thumb kept swiping over her bundle of nerves, one finger teasing her entrance

dangerously, sweetly.

“Stephen. God! Stephen! Just... I want...”

“That’s it,” he roared. “Say it, Victoria. Say it, and I will give you everything you want.”

He went still. He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t move a muscle. And he pinned her down so that she wouldn’t either.

Victoria let out a soft cry. If he were to stop now, she might as well die. Tears of frustration pricked her eyes. She needed him more than pride, more than logic. She wanted him more than her next breath.

“I won’t,” she choked out. “I won’t marry him.”

Stephen exhaled. For a heartbeat, the only sound was their ragged breathing. They were locked in a heated gaze, the weight of what was happening heavy between them, but no one was stopping. He leaned closer, his mouth curving against her skin.

“Good,” he whispered.

His fingers moved again—finally—but this time with devastating purpose. One elegant, strong finger dared more, sliding against her entrance, still not fully entering. But he didn’t need to. His thumb circled that aching peak that had become the center of her existence.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

Victoria’s eyes flew open, locking onto his. His gaze was dark with need, his lips parted, his breathing labored. He, too, was wrecked, ruined. Every stroke of his

fingers mirrored the possessive hunger in his voice. When he pulled closer, she felt his need, hard against her thigh, and the shock sent a shiver from her head to her toes.

“This is so...” She barely recognized her own voice.

“You were good for me, Victoria.”

Her mind shuttered. His words were so wicked, so deliciously depraved, but they made her pant, made her wetter than she already was.

“So good.”

His voice curled around her like mesmerizing smoke, clouding her, and she inhaled him with each breath he stole. His touch became more insistent, rougher, faster. He released her hands, and she wrapped them around him, dug her nails into his shoulders, tugged on his hair, and searched the hot skin under his open shirt.

Pleasure twisted tighter, her thighs trembling around his wrist. His thumb pressed harder, his fingers slid against her entrance, and the world narrowed to that single point of contact.

“Stephen, I—oh God—please. I just want...”

“Yes, yes, yes,” he growled, lost, his body tense.

“Ah!” She was gone.

“Let go,” he urged, his mouth crashing onto hers. “I want to see you.”

A cry tore from her throat as pleasure detonated through her, white-hot and relentless. Her back arched off the bench, her thighs clamped around his wrist as waves of

ecstasy rolled through her in dizzying succession.

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

Stephen swallowed her moans, his kiss turning filthy, his tongue licking into her mouth as if he could taste the very moment she came undone. His fingers never stopped circling, thrusting shallowly, wringing every last bit of pleasure from her until she was gasping, oversensitive, trembling.

“Very good,” he murmured against her lips, his voice thick with satisfaction.

His voice sent another pulse of heat through her, even as the aftershocks still rippled through her limbs. Her hands, tangled in his hair, dragged him closer, her nails scoring his scalp as she clung to him, dazed and desperate. Stephen’s breathing was ragged as he watched her with a look of raw hunger. His fingers, still slick with her, traced idle, possessive patterns along her inner thigh.

For a long moment, they stayed like that, their foreheads pressed together, their breaths mingling. Then, Stephen withdrew his hand, bringing his glistening fingers to his mouth with a dark smirk.

“So sweet.”

Victoria blushed. But she was not ashamed. If anything, she wanted more, her body vibrating with want, with need. If she could, she would never leave this greenhouse. She would stay in here with him forever. Doing this, doing more.

He tucked a stray strand behind her ear, the look in his eyes a mix of surprise and desolation. She saw the war raging inside him, the same war that—she realized—had raged between them since the beginning.

“We need to go back,” he said.

No, we don’t.

“Wait here, I will bring you an overcoat.” He got up

“No, it’s...” Victoria was at a loss for words.

“It’s cold outside,” he said in a tone that was colder than the night air.

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming at the whiplash of emotions. He let one side win—the same he always let win. He looked down at her, fixing her with a hot look.

“I’d hate for you to get sick,” he added softly and then left her there.

The moment he left, Victoria was alone in the greenhouse.

Her first thought was that she had miscalculated the number of rooms in the house. She had forgotten to count the greenhouse. She chuckled in the silence. And how would she name this one? If the carriage incident was ‘ruin,’ then what was this? Greenhouse ‘devastation?’ The smile withered on her lips.

She didn’t want to name it. She didn’t want to file it away. She didn’t want the night to end and morning to come. Didn’t want to go down for breakfast and pretend, again, that nothing had happened.

She leaned back and looked up at the moon through the glass ceiling. Her skin still hummed where he had touched her. The warmth of his body slowly faded, leaving only the humid embrace of the greenhouse. She lamented the loss. Not only of his body so close to hers—though she missed the way he made her feel—but of

something more.

The way he listened to her, the way he gave her time to open up. He had listened when she spoke of her fears, and understood her in a way no one else ever had. He had seen her, not just the rebellious bluestocking odd-one-out, not just his sister's best stubborn friend. And she had seen him, too. The man beneath the title, the propriety.

Yes, they had shared a moment so hot, so intimate. He was so close, touched her most intimate parts, tasted her whole. He controlled her body in a way that made her tremble still. But what they had shared before that was deeper and harder to discard. Their bodies followed instinct. Their minds followed a different path that led them to each other. Her heart...

The realization struck her like lightning, sudden and undeniable.

I love him.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up her throat. Of course, she would fall in love with the most impossible man in England. The one who had just given her pleasure so intense it had shattered her, then walked away because he thought it was the proper thing to do. The one who matched her wit for wit. The one who was not intimidated by her, and instead allowed her to be herself in his own infuriating way.

Why does it have to be this way?

She was fighting to grasp at the revelation, rationalize it, deny it, shake it away when the door cracked again. First, Euclid ran to her and rested his head on her lap. Of all the things she needed to grip onto reality, this mutt was the best one. It was as if Stephen knew what she needed before she did.

"He insisted on following me," Stephen explained. "And I thought it might make a

good excuse if anyone saw us.”

He drew close, but she focused on Euclid’s stupidly happy face, holding back her tears. He wrapped a warm cardigan around her shoulders. His. She knew from the smell immediately.

“We can always claim that he ran away and got lost, and we were looking for him.”

She chuckled cruelly.

He sat across from her, watching her. She didn’t have to look up to feel his gaze drilling into her.

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

“Victoria?” His voice was laced with concern, a real one. “Tell me you are fine. Did I...?”

Victoria shook her head. He did nothing wrong and did all of it wrongly. She was the fool to allow this to happen, to fall for him, to feel more than she should for him.

“Victoria?”

She swallowed.

“It’s that I just realized,” she lied, “that when I leave, I’ll have to leave Euclid behind.”

Victoria lifted her eyes to his. The air cracked between them. It always will, no matter what happened. This inevitable truth was something that she would have to live with for the rest of her life.

His eyes shuttered, heavy with something that resembled sadness more than anything else. He opened his mouth to say something but then shook his head.

“Let’s go back, Victoria. It’s late.”

Yes, it is.

CHAPTER17

Rematch

Stephen was hiding in his study. Again. For the same reason. Again.

No. This time, it was worse. This time, he had crossed a line. Crossed? He took that line and annihilated it one touch at a time, one demand at a time.

What did I do?

The question was a mockery. He remembered with excruciating clarity. He knew exactly what he did. He remembered everything. He couldn't forget even if he tried. He didn't want to forget.

He could still feel her in his arms, could feel himself trapped by her. Her sighs, her pleas, his name rolling off her tongue rang in his ears. The feel of her skin beneath his lips, of her wet core beneath his fingers, still lingered. The taste of her lips, her flavor, still sustained him.

How did he allow himself to go that far? Oh, he knew the answer to that, too. The moment she uttered his name, the instant she suggested she would accept Blackwell's proposal, he snapped. Logic was thrown out the window, rules were obliterated. He had never been like this in his life. Not this demanding, not this dominant, not this controlling. And the more she wouldn't submit to him, the more he lost all sense of judgment.

"Lunch is served!"

"Be right there, Alfred."

And now he had to face her again. In a house full of people who were blissfully sleeping while he had his hand between her thighs, urging her to climax for him. While his mother and baby sister were sleeping, for crying out loud.

And underneath it all, another kind of guilt washed over him. He could rationalize all he wanted, perhaps even weave a perverted version of him doing this to protect her from a dangerous rake like Blackwell.

But the bottom line was that he was improper, downright wrong. He, the pillar of propriety, had compromised a lady. And that didn't sit well with him. This wasn't who he was.

He put on his coat and went downstairs for lunch. The dining room was filled with people—his guests. But now, more than ever, he wanted everyone to be gone.

There was one person in particular who wasn't there. Her. He frowned. He still remembered the look in her eyes as he guided her back home, back to her room.

The pang of guilt dug deeper into his side. Of course, she would hate all of this. He talked about finding her a husband, and yet he forbade her the one man she found agreeable. He kept pestering her about respectability the moment he set foot in Colborne House, yet he went ahead and behaved like a brute.

“Stephen!” His mother must have missed him this morning.

He leaned in for a quick peck, the same one he gave Annabelle, then sat rigidly at the head of the table, his fingers clenched around his cutlery. The dining room buzzed with idle chatter, forks clinking against china, laughter ringing too loud in his ears. He couldn't touch his food.

Then, the door opened. Victoria stood there, slightly breathless, her cheeks flushed as if she'd raced downstairs. Their eyes locked. A jolt of heat speared through him, sharp as a blade. She looked flustered. Not angry. Not disgusted. Flushed and uncertain, her fingers twisting in the fabric of her skirts before she forced them still.

“Victoria!” Annabelle exclaimed. “Come sit with me.”

She patted the chair next to her, which meant Victoria would be seated close to him, in front of his family.

Page 61

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

“Miss Victoria,” Blackwell protested. “I thought I would have the honor of your company today.”

Stephen’s fingers tightened around his fork. Victoria’s eyes darted to him for one endless second. She could accept, provoke him, openly defy him. His blood boiled at the thought, and he was afraid he would make a scene, appearances be damned.

“You’re too kind, Your Grace,” she said, her voice carefully light. “But I’ve already promised Annabelle.”

A lie. A beautiful, calculated lie.

Stephen’s pulse roared in his ears as she moved toward them, her steps measured, her posture flawless. But he knew. And, God help him, the sheer perversity of it all sent a rush of dark satisfaction through him. Victoria did as he asked her to.

She made her way to his side of the table, just Annabelle between them. She took her seat, all polite smiles and clever retorts about her tardiness, but Stephen could see the tightness of her movements. And he knew the real reason. She couldn’t sleep either.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she greeted in a slightly hoarse voice.

Did she catch a cold, after all?

Stephen panicked.

“Good morning, Miss Victoria. I hope you are in good health.”

“My health is good.”

She gave him a clear answer.

It was not her health. It was everything that was in disarray. Stephen was equal parts intrigued and guilty. He made her feel this way with his actions, his decisions. He was a gentleman. He shouldn't have behaved like that. Did she lay awake, thinking of her situation and how her reputation would be ruined?

Or was she thinking of what they did in the greenhouse, reminiscing about the way he made her feel? Did she chase after the same heights of pleasure on her own, alone in her bed?

He coughed to mask the moan that rose from deep within him. Now, that image would be etched into his brain forever.

He dared a look her way while she talked with his mother. He was shameless to have such thoughts of an unmarried lady under his protection. His mother and sister were on either side. But there was no stopping the emotions, raw and naked as they formed.

His hands twitched. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to reach for her and feel more of her, have her finally bare to him, open, pliant under his body.

Stephen!

He wanted more than that, and that was scary. Desire and lust were the basest of instincts, but those he could understand. He was a man, she was a pulsing woman. But he needed to hold her, smooth the lines of worry on her forehead, and promise her that nothing would ever harm her.

Stop!

This was most improper. And it stopped now. He was a man of honor, and he allowed himself to soil that honor. He permitted too much smear on his integrity. And hers. This stopped now. Only one solution remained.

“So, today’s program!” Dorothy touched his hand to draw his attention. “Croquet!”

She was vibrating with mischief, reminding him of that fateful day he yelled at them from the window.

“Then, Miss Victoria.” Blackwell smiled. “You can make up for leaving me desolate during breakfast by being on my team.”

Stephen would bludgeon him with the mallet.

“Miss Victoria will join me,” he declared, eyeing Blackwell over the rim of his cup.

“Most unfair.” The rake had the audacity to question him. “You can enjoy Miss Victoria’s company anytime you want, since she lives under your roof.”

“Trust me, it’s more for your safety. Miss Victoria can be lethal with the mallet.”

Dorothy snorted at that. Victoria gave him a look that said she couldn’t believe what was happening.

“I think,” Blackwell said in a voice that dripped with fake sweetness, “I can handle Miss Victoria just fine.”

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

Duels were so outdated and illegal, but Stephen was willing to be called unfashionable and a criminal just to have this outrageous man at gunpoint. He took a deep breath, his eyes flicking to Victoria.

“It was presumptuous of us to talk about Miss Victoria as if she has no opinions of her own,” he said sincerely. “She is totally capable of making her own decisions.”

Victoria was shocked to hear him say those words. Shaken by the fact that he had remembered what she truly desired—to be the one dictating her life. He was openly giving her this choice. No coercion, no corrupting power games.

Her lower lip trembled as she swallowed.

“Well...” She struggled to maintain her light-hearted composure as all eyes turned to her. “I must help His Grace defend the honor of Colborne House. From what I have seen, he is the one hopeless with the mallet.”

The table erupted in joyful laughter at the banter.

Victoria looked up at him, her gaze clear but loaded. She chose him. Again.

“Then I must insist, Miss Victoria.” Blackwell was determined to ruin the moment. “That I have your first dance tonight.”

Victoria looked at him with a polite smile. “This is the tradition we started at this house party, is it not?”

Stephen knew that she had to give the rake something. To deny him a third time just to take Stephen's side would raise suspicion. It didn't mean that it stung less.

Stephen leveled Blackwell with an ice-cold look that spoke volumes. The rake just smiled, satisfied.

* * *

The morning sun shone brightly on the lawns of Colborne House. A tent was set up at one side to provide shade and refreshments while chaos ensued. The idea of a competitive game had lifted the spirits of everyone, and soon mallets were swinging too hard, balls were ricocheting off tree roots, and laughter was ringing across the lawn.

Stephen was suffering all this racket, but he drew great pleasure from outmatching Blackwell. The rake had teamed up with Adelaide, who had sought after what she thought would be easier prey. However, Victoria was doing everything in her power to make them lose this game. Not on purpose. No one could ever play that bad on purpose.

"Miss Victoria, if you—" Stephen tried to instruct her.

She seemed determined to let out all of her frustration by hammering the balls, and she didn't heed his directions. He didn't really mind. He just watched her play with unbridled joy, with wild bliss.

So, he was not surprised when she hit the ball so hard that it vanished behind the thicket of trees at the edge of the lawn. Victoria shaded her eyes and looked into the distance with a huff. Thank the Lord she didn't hike up her skirts and run like she did last time.

“Wait here,” Stephen said and made his way to retrieve the ball.

“It was my shot,” she argued, “and I shall bring it back.”

Victoria didn’t wait for his permission. She was already marching toward the copse, her spine rigid, her skirts snapping with each furious step. Stephen followed, his pulse a dull, heavy drum in his ears.

The moment they crossed the first line of trees, the chaos of the game dissolved into nothing. It was as if they were the only people in the world. Stephen didn’t even pretend that he was looking for the ball. He just realized that this was the perfect opportunity to do what he had decided to do. What his honor dictated he did.

“Victoria,” he said firmly.

“It has to be somewhere here.”

She actively searched for the ball in the overgrown grass, oblivious to his disquietude.

“Can you forget about the ball, Victoria?”

Her back stiffened. She didn’t move. She didn’t turn to look upon him. He drew closer but still kept a decent distance.

Stephen didn’t trust himself to come any closer. He needed to do this right, not ruin it the way he had every time they found themselves alone.

“Look at me, please,” he added softly.

Victoria turned to him, her hands resting on her mallet. A warning? Stephen smirked

before the gravity of the situation dawned on him once more.

“We need to talk, Victoria.”

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

She shivered but found it in her to lift her chin. Still, she said nothing, waiting for him to elaborate.

Easier said than done.

Stephen was dizzy from the whirring of his thoughts. What he wanted to say, what he needed to say, what he was supposed to say, all was spun by a tornado of emotions. He had to pick up something. He picked the safest one—the familiar mantle he wrapped himself with all his life.

He straightened his coat and adjusted his cufflinks, yearning to look like his old self—the Duke of Colborne, the gentleman who valued propriety and decorum, respected and feared by most. A man who would never cross the line with a lady and walk away from his obligations.

“Miss Victoria Crawford,” he started.

“Oh, my full name,” she joked rather weakly. “I did not think that a stray ball would warrant such formalities.”

Stephen chuckled. Victoria Crawford was, for sure, a force to be reckoned with.

He coughed to bring back the gravity of the situation. She frowned, sensing the shift in the air. He looked at her somberly, masking the tempest inside him, praying that the drumming of his heart didn’t reach her ears.

“Miss Victoria Crawford,” he repeated like an imbecile. “Will you marry me?”

The mallet hit the grass. Victoria stared at him. One beat. Two beats. Then, she threw her head back and roared with laughter. Stephen's jaw tightened.

"When I mentioned I would miss Euclid, I didn't mean that you needed to go to such lengths to accommodate me," she said, almost in tears.

Stephen tucked his hands behind his back and straightened to his full height in perfect ducal composure. He waited for her to read his face and realize the truth.

"You can't be serious," she said, shaking her head.

"I am."

She scoffed and bent down to retrieve the mallet before she resumed her pursuit of the lost ball.

"Victoria!"

She looked up, almost angry. "This is not a laughing matter, Stephen."

"I agree."

She searched his face intently.

He remained unmoved, letting the significance of his words get through to her. He knew the instant they did. Her eyes widened, and she drew a deep breath.

"Stephen..." Her voice trembled.

"I fail to comprehend why you are surprised." He took a step toward her. "After everything that happened, you must have known where this was going."

She shivered as she shook her head in disbelief. It was delicious to see her shaken like that, to see such a stubborn, sharp-witted lady at a loss for words. The dappled sunlight through the leaves painted intricate patterns on her elegant face.

Stephen felt his body stir again, leaning in already.

Cease this immediately!

The voice in his head sounded too much like his father's.

"You are serious. You are asking me to marry you," she said in disbelief. "But why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why?" she pressed. "Up till now, you were set on marrying me off. Don't tell me you just now heard my joke that if you want your mother happy, you should keep me here. Because I was not?—"

"This is not about Euclid and not about my mother." His tone was somber. "This is about me."

“You?”

There was something raw and unguarded in the way her gaze searched his. In the way her voice dropped to a mere whisper.

Tell me this is true, Victoria pleaded silently, her eyes full of hope.

His jaw tightened. His hands behind his back were sweating. It was merely the right thing to do. That was all this was—just the right thing to do.

“Yes, me.” He paused. “As a man of honor, I can no longer in good conscience continue our acquaintance without offering you marriage.”

His tone was so cold that Victoria took one small step back. He didn’t allow her to comment.

“It is my duty, as the Duke of Colborne, to rectify the wrongs done to your virtue.”

The light was snuffed out, and her faint smile dropped. Her wide eyes narrowed as she regarded him with doubt. His face remained carved from cold marble.

She sighed with cold mirth and shook her head. Her jaw ticked as she pursed her lips. She looked down at her feet before looking up at him.

It was his turn to be hit with an icy look.

Victoria’s expression hardened. The warmth in her eyes, the hope that had flickered

there just moments before, vanished, replaced by something colder. Sharper.

“How very noble of you, Your Grace.” Victoria wielded that honorific with the precision of a seasoned swordsman. “Rectify the wrongs done to my virtue,” she mockingly repeated. “This is the reason for extending such a generous offer?”

“It is my?—”

“Duty,” Victoria added with a raised eyebrow. “Yes, I heard you the first time. I just wanted to see if you?—”

For a moment, her hard façade cracked. She swallowed and looked over his shoulder, as if she wasn’t able to withstand looking at him without breaking down.

“How stupid of me to assume you’d value anything more than duty.”

Stephen’s chest tightened. He should say something. Anything. But the words wouldn’t come out. He remained unmoved, watching her struggle. Digging her nails into her palms, almost shaking, overwhelmed, she turned to him.

Stephen knew even before she opened her mouth.

“I am afraid I must turn down such a magnanimous offer.”

“Victoria...”

“You see, Your Grace.” Her voice was as sharp as an executioner’s axe. “I was always candid with you. I do not wish to marry.”

Her eyes darkened, and she lowered her chin to make herself look more menacing.

“And least of all a man like you. No, that is not accurate. I would never marry you.”

Stephen went utterly still. The world narrowed to the sharp planes of her face, the unflinching resolve in her eyes. She was rejecting him in the most shattering way possible. She wasn't coy, she didn't employ shyness or excuses. She made it personal and clear.

The truth of it lanced through him. He had miscalculated. Badly.

“Victoria, listen to me,” he tried. “I was just?—”

“You speak of duty, of honor, yet you think so little of me that you believe I would resign myself to a life shackled to a man who sees me as nothing more than an obligation?”

Victoria chuckled. The coldness of the sound could make summer itself hurry to hide away. Yet, her throat was working hard, and she was blinking her eyes too fast.

Is she going to cry?

Stephen took another step toward her without realizing it. His body separated from his cold logic, and it demanded he rectify the wrong he had committed. But Victoria fisted her mallet, spotted the ball, gathered it, and walked away from him. She didn't look back.

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

“We should return before they send a search party,” she uttered. “Wouldn’t want to add to my already tattered reputation.”

CHAPTER18

Letters

It was so strange for Victoria that the world kept spinning, that the sun rose and set no matter what. How could a houseful of people go on with their lives, while hers was ruined? And she didn’t have the luxury of mourning in private, wallowing and allowing herself to come to terms with what had happened.

She stood at her bedroom window, watching as the household stirred below. Maids carried fresh linens, footmen polished silver, and somewhere in the gardens, laughter floated on the morning air. Life went on. Even hers.

Stephen proposed. Victoria laughed bitterly at that. It was too bold to assume that whatever it was that Stephen made was a proposal. She hadn’t harbored any girlish fantasies about proposals growing up, but she was sure that wasn’t her ideal proposal.

“As a man of honor, I can no longer in good conscience continue our acquaintance without offering you marriage.”

So detached as if he were requesting the latest news on horse riding and was wishing that there was none. Each word was a mockery as Victoria kept replaying it again and again.

A man of honor.

What honor was there in a man who had touched her with such hunger, only to reduce it all to duty? Who had made her feel things—wild, desperate things—only to stand before her like a stranger reciting a decree? Who had pushed the boundaries again and again with his smothering looks and that demanding voice, only to pull back coldly?

And that word, acquaintance, it lodged in her chest like a shard of glass. That was all this was to him? After what they had shared together, she was merely a lady he knew? After he had kissed her until she forgot her name, she was reduced to a mere acquaintance to be managed, a social obligation to be discharged?

Good conscience.

Victoria was sure that he had slept soundly last night. That he had done his “duty” and upheld his “honor,” and that was enough. He wouldn’t care about how his words made her feel.

“I am such a fool!” She collapsed on the seat of her vanity.

She stared at her reflection. Her reflection was staring back at her, pale, hollow-eyed, ruined. That was the face of a fool. A sob threatened to break free, but she choked it back, her nails digging into her scalp. How could she?

How could she fall in love with a man like him? A man who imposed silence in his home, who would have his mother trapped in loneliness. He was so cold and calculating and distant. Unfeeling. Worse than the mechanical wonders she had seen the stupid wound toys perform again and again, without a real soul.

No.

She was not that great of a fool. There had been moments when she saw the crack in his cold mask. He had thanked her and acknowledged everything she had done. He had saved her from being run over. He had listened, truly listened, to her. And his touches...

She couldn't be such a fool. She could tell that what they shared affected him, too.

Victoria knew why it hurt so bad. Why her heart broke in pieces. If it were because he was just a heartless man, she would feel anger, rage. Not this desolate, forlorn emptiness, this desperation, this bleeding. The truth was that between whatever it was he felt for her and duty, he had chosen duty.

"Victoria?" Annabelle was knocking on her door.

Victoria gritted her teeth. She had missed breakfast, and for sure, kind-hearted Annabelle would check on her. She would never worry her.

"Coming!"

Victoria wiped the tears that she pretended she didn't shed. She checked herself in the vanity mirror. She looked respectable and believably sick, as she would claim to be.

She opened the door to her friend.

"You didn't come down for breakfast," Annabelle noted.

"I felt under the weather. You shouldn't be here, Annabelle. What if you catch?—?"

Annabelle tilted her head. She knew Victoria was lying.

Annabelle was quiet, but she was no fool. Her soft demeanor was often mistaken for

weakness, but she was anything but weak. She was observant, and she had probably noted that in all the time they had known each other, Victoria had never been ill. Denying it would raise the question as to why.

“How are you, Vicky?” Annabelle asked.

“I have been better,” Victoria answered sincerely.

She knew her friend. Annabelle would never ask directly. She would never pry. She would listen.

Victoria would never reveal to a living soul all the incidents, affairs, episodes, and ruins she had been hoarding like a crazed collector. But unloading some of her inner turmoil...

She wanted that.

“You can talk to me.” Annabelle took her hand in her own.

Victoria smiled at her sweet friend, the one who was by her side when she entered this new world she didn’t know. The sister of the man who?—

“There are so many things,” Victoria admitted. “Everyone insists that marriage is the only option we have. I am not sure I want that.”

“And there is my brother pressuring you to do that.”

Victoria gritted her teeth. She would never tell Annabelle that one different word and they would have woken up sisters today. That she could have accepted the proposal and she would have been a duchess, her sister-in-law. Kind-hearted Annabelle would have been so happy. And Dorothy...

“Yes,” Victoria scoffed. “Both our brothers have one-track minds.”

“Have you received news from Maxwell?”

“Some letters. You know how we parted.”

Annabelle nodded. “Maxwell loves you,” she said, rubbing her huge belly. “And Stephen...”

Victoria’s eyes widened. Did Annabelle know? Could she tell?

Annabelle looked deep into her eyes. She would never expose her friend like that, even if she had seen them with her own eyes.

“Stephen is not a bad man, Vicky.”

No, he is not a bad man. That much I can admit.

“But he is too strict, too much like our father. Unyielding like a metal rod.”

Victoria’s heart clenched. She needed to deflect, dispel the heavy atmosphere, and let go of any foolish thoughts.

“Exactly like a metal rod.” She smirked as best as she could. “Which he had swallowed.”

Annabelle snorted indecently and smiled at her. Victoria plastered a smile on her face and decided to let go. Her heart would surely mend. She just needed time.

* * *

At some point, mostly to keep Annabelle happy, Victoria had to get out of her room. She had steeled her face and heart and soul to face Stephen, but he did not leave his

study all morning. At least he had that much empathy to give her space.

She went through the motions. She participated in the activities she had programmed and was glad she managed to do so with enough gusto to keep her façade intact. She made small talk, took care of the details, coordinated the staff, and spared some time to check in with Mrs. Charlotte about some household matters.

She would do a thousand things more, make herself busy all day. It kept her mind off him, drowned the pain in menial tasks, and gave her a fake sense of calm. As long as he remained away. She knew well that all this elaborate illusion would crumble the moment she looked into his eyes.

“Miss Victoria.” Blackwell came closer to her. “I trust that you feel better. You were missed at breakfast. I confess it was dull without your sparkling wit.”

That was the last thing she needed. Another man making rash advances. Though he did not give her the usual flirtatious look, but a mischievous one. He could be a good distraction.

“I am sure you survived breakfast without me,” Victoria countered. “After all, you have enough wit for the both of us.”

“Yes, but just barely.”

Victoria smiled weakly. “How do you find the house party, Your Grace? I never had the chance to ask you.”

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

“It has been surprisingly pleasant. Given Colborne’s reputation for being... How do I say this without scandalizing your delicate ears?”

“You forget that I am not noble-born,” she pointed out, gauging his reaction.

“How could I forget?” Blackwell blinked slowly, taking her in. “That is your best attribute.”

Victoria remembered how her lowly lineage was the thorn in Stephen’s side.

“It is, of course,” Blackwell continued, “the reason this party is such a success. All this fun and creativity! Colborne is not known for his... sunny disposition.”

Victoria’s blood ran cold. She eyed him firmly. He had a smirk on his face, but it was not a menacing one. Just amused.

“I would like to return the favor,” he said in a low voice, “and invite you to a private dinner.”

His eyes darkened. This man was not one for duty, honor, and integrity. He was one for fun, indulgence, and freedom. And yet her skin crawled under his look.

He pulled back instantly.

“But Colborne would have my head if I even mentioned that,” he said casually, backing off to take his place for the card games on the lawn. “He seems overly protective of you.”

Victoria was stunned by his words, so nonchalantly thrown like a bomb. She fluttered her fan, needing to do something with her trembling hands.

What a position she was in. The house party was nearly over, and the month she had agreed to was coming to an end. And where would she go? She couldn't stay here, that was for sure. The plans to marry her off like a prized cow failed. She had only one option and?—

“Miss Victoria.” The butler came to her with a silver tray in hand. “A letter for you.”

Victoria took the letter and immediately recognized Maxwell's handwriting, that calculated, clear way he did most things. She retreated to a bench away from prying eyes.

My dearest Victoria,

I trust this letter finds you in good health.

I write to inform you that my business in India has concluded far sooner than anticipated. The ship docks in London soon, and I will arrive at Walden by midday.

I am aware that we parted on uncertain terms, but I hope you understand that Walden will always be your home, and I will always be your brother.

Maxwell.

Victoria read the letter again and again. A tear fell, smudging the familiar letters. She wiped her eyes and let out a deep breath.

No matter what, her brother would always be there for her. He might have done so in the wrong way, but he always had good intentions, and to him, she was family.

Not some acquaintance.

She got up and went to her room to get ready. It was time she went back home.

* * *

After lunch—which, thankfully, Stephen had in his study—Victoria looked for Dorothy. She found her in the small drawing room, going over some details for the next day, the last day of the house party.

“Ah, Victoria, just in time. I am working on the brilliant idea you had to give our guests a little bit of Colborne House to remember their time here.”

Dorothy picked up a small linen sachet. The scent engulfed Victoria. Lavender. It flooded her senses—sweet, herbal, calming. Exactly what she needed.

Victoria sat across from her at the little table. A basket of pouches filled with lavender plucked from the grounds was between them. Dorothy was writing the name of the estate and the occasion on a lilac card.

Lilac.

A memory flashed through Victoria’s mind, tightening her throat. Them arguing over a lilac tablecloth that day in London. Stephen took her to lunch to express his gratitude. He was so relaxed, smiling, teasing, and seemed sincere when he?—

Stop this.

Victoria bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out.

“Let me help you out.” She smiled at Dorothy.

She took a stack of cards and started writing, too. For a while, there was this comfortable silence between them. The one they had shared for a year, just the two of them, two women in a bad place, finding love and support in each other.

“My brother wrote to me,” Victoria revealed.

Dorothy looked up and smiled at her. “I trust he is well.”

“He is. He will be back in Walden tomorrow, actually.”

“Oh.”

“I am going too.” Victoria looked down at the card she was writing on.

“You are leaving Colborne House?” Dorothy seemed devastated.

Victoria dropped her quill and pulled her chair closer to Dorothy. She took her hands in her own.

Her heart ached. She was leaving a sanctuary, a good friend. Dorothy accepted her exactly as she was. And maybe Dorothy thought that Victoria was the one helping her

overcome her grief and sadness, but Victoria knew better. She, too, had been healed by Dorothy's presence.

"He is my brother, Dorothy. No matter what, I love him, and I know he loves me."

Dorothy nodded.

"Running away from each other won't solve anything. This time apart has done us good, but we are still family."

"You are right. Will you talk to him?"

"If I want to have a true relationship with him, there is no other option. I must try to make him understand who I truly am, that I am not the little girl he always needed to protect. That I do not need to listen to him."

"I wish you never had to go, Victoria," Dorothy said as she wiped a tear from her eye.

"But I am happy to see you go. So grown, so mature."

The two women got lost in a warm embrace, the scent of lavender engulfing them. Victoria struggled to stop the tears from falling. She didn't want to worry her friend further.

"When are you leaving?"

"After dinner. So I can be there in time and make sure the estate is prepared for them."

"You must be missing your nephew and your niece," Dorothy said in a happy tone.

Victoria finally smiled genuinely since this morning. She did miss the babies, who

must be so grown now. They were the only thing that sweetened her inner turmoil.

“We must tell the cook to prepare some of his infamous biscuits so you can take them home with you,” Dorothy added. “And I just had a big order of lemon drops delivered. You can take some and be declared the best aunt in the world.”

Victoria laughed with her whole body. Dorothy had magic inside her.

“The sure thing is that Annabelle’s baby will have the best grandmother in the world,” Victoria said earnestly.

Dorothy’s face lit up at the thought. Then, she hesitated and looked up at Victoria. “Have you told Stephen?”

Victoria dug her nails into her palms. She looked out the door of the drawing room to the end of the hallway. To his study.

* * *

“Miss Victoria, everything is ready.”

“Thank you. I will be right down.”

It was the middle of the night, and all the guests had retired. Victoria looked at the room she had called her own over the last month. She threw her cape over her shoulders and closed the door behind her.

She moved through the darkened halls of Colborne House like a ghost, her boots soundless on the polished floors. The moon cast a silvery light through the windows, painting her path as she slipped from room to room, memorizing the shape of the shadows, the way the air smelled of beeswax and lavender.

She saw his room up ahead. The room that had been hers for a whole year. His room. Her mind went to that night when their bodies collided in the dressing room. Fire erupted in her veins, but grief got hold of her heart and squeezed.

Her hand rose to the round, ornate doorknob. One push and she could step inside. One word and she could wake him. But what would she say? Goodbye?

Her fingers curled into a fist, before she let it drop.

As silently as she could, she ran out of the house. The cold night air hit her like a slap as she slipped through the servants' entrance. The carriage waited, the horses stamping impatiently. She climbed in. The door clicked shut.

The first sob tore from her throat before the wheels had even begun to turn.

It will all go away. It will go away.

And yet she knew well that this pain would be wedged between her ribs forever.

CHAPTER 19

Brandy

Stephen knew that something was wrong when Euclid started to bark in the middle of the night. He got up and took him out, thinking he needed some freedom after the stupid mutt had spent the whole day locked in the study with him.

But Euclid rushed down the stairs, all the way to the servants' entrance, and started wailing. Stephen studied the fresh tracks of a carriage. The butler came rushing after him.

"Alfred, did any of our guests leave in the middle of the night?" Stephen asked.

"Not a guest," the butler replied, unsure of himself.

Stephen's back stiffened. His fingers twitched. He knew what that meant. He knew from the way Euclid was barely holding back from launching into the night. From the way even his butler hesitated to confirm it. From the fact that he knew her too well. Yet he needed to hear it.

"Who was it?"

"Miss Victoria."

Euclid's whines cut through the silence, sharp as a blade. The dog pawed at the gravel where the carriage wheels had torn into it, his nose pressed to the ground as if he could still catch her scent.

Stephen stood frozen in the doorway, the cold night air biting through his thin shirt. Gone. The word echoed in his skull, hollow and unrelenting.

“Victoria.”

But his voice faded into the wind, too late to reach her.

* * *

The next morning was one of the worst in his life. One more sleepless night, but he had to get up, shave, wear clean clothes, and go downstairs for breakfast. Pretend that he didn't care that the seat beside Annabelle was vacant. Eat something to keep up appearances, one hand patting Euclid, who was depressed.

Then, he had to show the guests out as they left one after the other. The house party came to an end, and his mother was giving out small pouches of lavender from their garden—a small gesture Victoria had suggested.

“This is truly thoughtful.” Blackwell's voice brought him back to the present.

The rake was sniffing a sachet and looking at a card wrapped in a ribbon with interest.

“Is that Miss Victoria's handwriting?” he asked.

“Yes, she wrote almost half of those,” Dorothy replied.

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

“Pity she isn’t here so I can thank her properly,” the rake said with a wicked smile.

“Since she received word that the Duke of Walden is coming back to London,” Dorothy explained, “she was eager to return home and see him.”

“Well, at least I get to keep her words and the scent that had accompanied us these past few days,” Blackwell said. “Though, Miss Victoria smelled more like orange blossom.”

That last part was addressed to Stephen.

The two men were locked in a stare that made the others around them squirm. Stephen wanted very much to let the degenerate know exactly how he had extracted a promise from Victoria that she would never be close to him. And let him know that indeed Victoria smelled like orange blossom but tasted like the apples she loved so much.

But Stephen had no will to fight, no will to do anything other than just stand there till this was all over. And thank the Heavens that the last of the guests had left and he could finally unbutton his coat and retreat to his study.

“Stephen!” his mother called, but he didn’t answer.

He didn’t stop till he reached his hiding place—his tomb. The study door closed with a soft, final click. For a long moment, he stood in the center of the room, his breathing ragged in the silence. He let out all his frustration on his clothes. His coat was thrown over his chair, his cravat was violently yanked off.

He grabbed the brandy bottle and a glass and collapsed on the armchair, his body heavy with an exhaustion that went deeper than bone. Euclid whined at his feet, pressing close, but Stephen didn't reach for him. He couldn't. His hands hung limp at his sides, still faintly trembling.

She was gone. She ran away from him in the middle of the night as if she were chased out. And in a way, she was. He had driven her away with his stupidity, with the idiotic way he handled a simple situation—by being a coward. He had offered her duty when he should have begged for her heart.

How easy it would have been. How sincere. He should have gotten down on one knee and told her that there was no one like her for him in the whole world. That she had thawed his heart, and he wanted to keep her close to make him come alive. Like she did with everything she touched.

He drained his glass and poured himself more brandy.

Even if he wanted to behave like an imbecile, asking her to marry him with the same warmth he read out legislation in the House of Lords, he could have righted the wrong. When he saw her heart shatter at being called an acquaintance after everything they had shared, he could have simply said, "I am an idiot."

She would have erupted in that tinkling laughter of hers and would have scolded him for being so proper. And he would have taken her in his arms and shown her how improper she made him. They would have walked out of that damned thicket engaged. Yesterday could have been the best day of his life.

Another glass. Drained. One more for good measure. The brandy burned down his throat, but not nearly enough to cauterize the wound in his chest. Stephen poured himself another glass with shaking hands.

Euclid whined. That was all he had been doing. He placed his head on Stephen's thigh and fixed him with a look that said, "Do something. Fix this." Stephen petted him and scratched behind his ear, but nothing would make the poor mutt happy. They were two lost souls that she had touched and saved, and they had let her down.

"She's not coming back," he told the empty room, his voice rough as gravel.

She is not. She truly is not.

He tossed back his drink, welcoming the burn. Maybe if he drank enough, he'd forget the exact shade of her eyes when she laughed. The way her nose scrunched up when she was pretending to be irritated with him. The taste of apples on her lips

* * *

Days passed in a blur. Stephen was proud that he managed to function. Each morning, he stumbled down to his study and locked himself there, pretending to work. He would pretend that he ate more than a few bites. He would pretend that he cared if he was clean-shaven or not.

The brandy helped. Or it didn't. He wasn't sure anymore. He only knew that when he drank enough, the edges of his thoughts blurred, and for a few blessed hours, he didn't see her face. Didn't hear her laugh. Didn't remember the exact moment he had ruined everything.

But it never lasted. It was never enough.

He was drowned by the painful memories again and again. Random things came to torment him. Small things that stayed with him. Her pouring him tea, her delicate fingers on the teapot. Her licking her finger to gather the last crumbs of a dessert she particularly liked. The stupid things she used as bookmarks.

“Stephen?”

His mother. Stephen wondered when she would show up.

How long before his mother would stop pretending too?

“Busy.”

“Please, Stephen.”

“I am busy!”

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

“Come out just for lunch,” she insisted.

Her voice was subdued, and he heard the soft thump on the door where her hand landed. A silent plea.

Stephen’s fingers tightened around the empty glass. His body swayed, unsure of its axis, shaken by intoxication. He knew it would be worse to step out of his study and go have lunch with her in this state.

“Please, Stephen. Annabelle would like to see you before she leaves.”

Even more reason to stay in here. Imagine if his little, pregnant sister saw him like that.

He looked at himself in the window pane. The man reflected in the glass bore little resemblance to the Duke of Colborne. His cheeks were shadowed by days’ worth of stubble, and his eyes were bloodshot. His hair, usually ruthlessly tamed, fell in greasy waves across his forehead, strands clinging to his sweat-slick temples.

And the smell. God, the smell! Brandy and sweat and the sour tang of grief left to fester. He looked like a man unraveled. Because he was.

“Tomorrow,” he said weakly.

“Stephen.”

“Tomorrow.” His voice was hoarse. “I promise.”

Silence.

“Tomorrow then, my boy.”

* * *

Stephen woke up to the distinct sensation that someone had taken a hammer to his skull. Sunlight stabbed through the curtains like a vengeful blade, slicing straight through his eyeballs into the pulsing mess of his brain. He was sprawled on the couch. He had collapsed in there, glass in hand.

It was a good night. He finally slept.

He was met with the accusing gaze of Euclid, who had clearly been waiting for him to rejoin the land of the living.

The dog’s ears perked up, as if to say, Finally, you drunken fool. Stephen patted his faithful friend on the head. The dog had refused to leave his side. Perhaps because they shared the same grief.

Stephen squeezed his eyes shut again. His mouth was dry, and his stomach was a battlefield of brandy and regret. He pushed himself up, gripping the arm of the sofa as the room tilted dangerously. Euclid licked his hand.

Stephen grimaced. “I know. I’m pathetic.”

He made a promise to his mother, and he would feel wretched if he took it back. It was just lunch. He could hold it together for one lunch. He could plunge into his abyss after one damn lunch.

He asked Alfred to draw a bath for him. His smell alone would break his mother’s

heart and would upset Annabelle.

The bathwater steamed, scented with something—perhaps an attempt to shock him back into humanity. Stephen sank into it with a groan and felt his limbs relax. He took the washcloth and got rid of the grime and sweat. He kept rubbing as if a mere bath could take away the stench of failure, the pain, the hurt.

“Damn it!” he hissed, throwing the useless fabric away.

He reached for the glass of brandy on the side table and took a sip, then dunked his head under, letting the water swallow him whole for a moment. When he surfaced, gasping, the world felt marginally less painful.

He shaved and let his valet dress him. Then, he styled his longer hair before studying his reflection in the mirror. Outside, he looked more like himself.

He chuckled cruelly. Inside? Inside, there was nothing left of him. Whatever light was inside him was snuffed out, whatever joy pulped to nothing.

He took one last look in the mirror. All that remained was the hard, cold Duke of Colborne. The man who had kissed Victoria in the drawing room with such passion, the one who lost all control in the carriage, who had whispered against her skin, who had felt something, everything? That man was gone. She took him with her.

As he sat down at the dining table, he soon realized that this wasn't the only thing Victoria took with her. The dining room, the one she had redecorated, seemed dull and cold, its occupants solemn.

“Stephen!” His mother got up and wrapped her arms around him.

He remained stiff but raised one arm in a sad excuse of an embrace. His father was

never one for displays of affection. They were unfamiliar things in Colborne House. Even now, after his death, Stephen was shackled to his father's will.

Page 72

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

“Annabelle,” he said, trying to sound more like a human.

He leaned in for a kiss and glanced at her swollen belly fondly. For a moment, all the pain was forgotten. His little sister would soon become a mother.

“How are you feeling, Annie?”

At the nickname he called her while they were children and he was pulling her braided hair, his sister smiled, and her eyes lit up.

Even these simple acts were draining him.

He took his place at the head of the table. Silence fell over them as the first course was served. Victoria would have hated it. She would have laughed at the formality and would have commented on the dullness of the soup just to elicit a reaction from him.

His hands tightened around his spoon. How many lunches did they share? How much lighthearted, clever banter? How many more could they have shared if he wasn't such an idiot?

Perhaps then his mother wouldn't look as if she had aged in the span of mere days, her face gloomy, her eyes empty. Perhaps Annabelle wouldn't play with her food, her appetite gone as she looked between him and their mother with worry. Perhaps he would have been damn happy for once in his worthless life!

The fish was next. Exquisite. Tasted like ash in his mouth. His mother made a pathetic

attempt at small talk, and Annabelle pretended to carry it. Stephen wouldn't insult either of them by pretending he would participate. Frederick's face darkened even more.

"Oh," Dorothy breathed, looking around. "Where is Euclid?"

Stephen's fork paused mid-air. The dog always begged for scraps at meals. Always.

"Pining," Frederick muttered into his wine glass.

The silence that followed was volcanic. Dorothy's fork trembled in her hand. Annabelle's eyes glistened. Frederick glared at his plate as if it had personally offended him. Stephen followed his best friend's lead and drained his wine glass.

The rest of the lunch was pathetic and miserable. Stephen watched with painful awareness as his mother carefully steered the conversation away from anything that pertained to Victoria. The silence tightened like a noose.

Dorothy opened her mouth three times to say something but then thought better of it. Annabelle kept folding her napkin into smaller and smaller squares, and Frederick's eyes were drilling holes into Stephen's skull.

Eventually, dessert was served. It was some variation of an apple pie, and when Dorothy softly said, "Your favorite," Stephen got up, muttered some sad excuse, and ran off to his study. To loneliness. To brandy.

He had barely closed the door behind him when it flew open. He didn't have to turn around to know who it was. Frederick.

His brother-in-law had apparently reached his limit.

“What exactly are you doing, Stephen?”

“I am busy.”

“I can see that. It must be quite taxing, attempting to drink yourself to death. And you are applying yourself wonderfully to the task.”

“Exactly,” Stephen said dryly. “Now, if you would be so kind as to allow me to finish the job.”

He made to grab the bottle of brandy, but Frederick beat him to it.

“If you think,” Frederick hissed, “I am going to sit back and watch you destroy yourself while Annabelle watches helplessly in her condition, you don’t know me all that well.”

“Get out, Frederick,” Stephen said, turning away.

“No.”

A hand clamped down on his shoulder, spinning him around.

Frederick’s face was thunderous. “Christ, man. I’ve watched you mope for days. Enough. You’re coming with me.”

Stephen laughed bitterly. “To where? Hell?”

“Close. White’s.” Frederick grabbed his arm, hauling him toward the door. “If you’re determined to drink yourself into oblivion, you’ll do it where Annabelle doesn’t have to witness it.”

* * *

The familiar haze of cigar smoke and the low murmur of aristocratic voices enveloped Stephen as Frederick all but dragged him into White's.

Frederick shoved him into a secluded booth, away from prying eyes, and signaled for a bottle of whiskey. The moment it arrived, Stephen poured himself a generous measure and downed it in one burning swallow. Frederick watched him with a mix of exasperation and concern.

"You look like you went to hell and then were dragged through a desert by a horse."

"Sounds pretty accurate."

Frederick took a sip of his drink and studied him, considering how to approach the feral man sitting across from him. It seemed that head-on collision was the strategy he chose because the next word he said was devastating.

"Victoria."

The moment he uttered her name, Stephen's entire body went rigid. His fingers, which had been tracing the rim of his glass, stilled. His jaw tightened, but he didn't look up. His heart stopped and raced at the same time.

Frederick exhaled slowly, leaning forward. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" Stephen's voice was rough.

“Come on.” Frederick swirled his drink, choosing his next words carefully. “For anyone who knows you, it is obvious. The way you watched her when you thought no one was looking. The way she could make you laugh when the rest of us couldn’t.”

More whiskey. Why hadn’t Stephen thought about whiskey before? It seemed so much more efficient.

But Frederick was not done yet.

“And as if all of that wasn’t enough, the way you’ve been drowning yourself in brandy since she left is pretty telling.”

“Frederick,” Stephen warned.

“What did you do?”

Stephen exhaled, the fight draining out of him, his limbs going limp. He stared into his drink as if the answers were at the bottom of the glass. He was terrified of talking about it. It would make it more real. But the pain of bearing it alone was crippling.

“It doesn’t matter what was or wasn’t between us. She’s gone.”

They looked at each other. Frederick would never ask, and Stephen would never tell anything more. The least he could do for Victoria was to keep her dignity intact.

“I am sorry,” Frederick said sincerely.

“Sorry?” Stephen chuckled cruelly. “For what?”

“That it hurts,” Frederick sighed. “I know how that feels.”

Stephen nodded. The path to get this stupidly happy with Annabelle wasn't always paved with roses.

“And I am sorry that I can't punch whatever idiot made you like this.”

“That idiot is me.”

“Then I'll punch you. God knows I wanted to all these days that you made my Annabelle miserable.”

Stephen let out a short, tired laugh.

Silence settled between them, the noise of the club fading into the background. He was ready to cry. Talking about it out loud made it less and so much worse.

CHAPTER 20

Bedtime stories

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

It has been days since Victoria left Colborne House in the middle of the night as if chased. Yet it didn't feel like she was back home. Walden was not the home she grew up in, just something her brother inherited. But the past year with Dorothy in Colborne House...

She missed that place. It had nothing to do with the building, the gardens, or the lake. Walden was beautiful enough. But the love she had received in Colborne House, the acceptance...

Dorothy was more than a friend, and the fact that they had been through so much together made her feel closer to her than almost anyone else. Victoria was surely missing Euclid, his adorable face and his happiness.

Anyway, the fact that she missed Colborne House had certainly nothing to do with a tall, wide, insanely good-looking duke who had managed to break her heart. Her jaw tightened. She was biting down so hard, and as it happened so often these past few days, her jaw ached.

"Aunt Vicky! You didn't hide!" Camilla screamed as she launched herself at her.

Her niece was quickly followed by Anthony, who skidded across the floor and tackled them on the rug. Victoria let out a hearty laugh that brought Penelope to the drawing room.

"Please, leave your aunt be."

"No!" both children cried in unison. "We missed Auntie."

Victoria hugged them and squeezed them tightly. She placed sweet kisses on their little heads and let their clean, fresh scents calm her nerves and soothe her heart.

“I missed you too, my sweetlings,” she said softly.

“Come on, children,” Penelope urged, herding the children to their nanny. “Go get ready for bed, and I will be right there to read you a little story.”

“We want Aunt Vicky!”

The twins managed to present a united front, and they demanded something.

Victoria smiled. “I will be right there. Get ready quickly.”

If it weren't for Camilla and Anthony, she would have collapsed long ago. Even now, the moment they were out of the room, she wanted to break down and cry and scream into a pillow.

The moment the children's excited footsteps faded down the hallway, Victoria's smile slipped. She exhaled, long and slow, as if she had been holding her breath for days. She regretted it immediately.

Her friend and sister-in-law studied her, and Victoria winced, wanting to avoid the scrutiny.

“You know you can talk to me, right?” Penelope said calmly.

“Seeing how we spent this morning talking about the million spices you tried in India, I am pretty sure we talk to each other.”

“How interesting,” Penelope murmured. “The definition of talking must have changed

this past year. I thought it meant two people exchanging words. Not one talking and the other nodding absently while thinking about something else.”

“You may have underestimated my interest in the different kinds of curry out there,” Victoria tried to deflect.

Penelope gave her a pointed look, but then she softened it.

“I understand that something has happened and you don’t want to talk to me about it. It hurts that you don’t trust me enough, but like I said, I understand. I am not trying to force you to talk about something you are clearly not ready to discuss. I was merely trying to let you know that I see you and that I am here.”

Victoria’s fingers curled into the fabric of her skirt, the damask pattern blurring before her eyes. Penelope’s words, so gentle, so understanding, cut deeper than any accusation could have.

“I do trust you,” she whispered. “It’s just that it’s too many things all at once. I?—”

That was the moment when her brother came in. Maxwell took one look at the duo and knew that something was wrong.

“Ah, what a charming tableau,” he drawled. “My wife looks concerned, and my sister looks like she’s just swallowed a lemon. Do tell, what earth-shattering crisis has befallen the household now?”

Victoria’s fingers dug deeper. This was another reason she felt as if a heavy burden, as if an elephant, like the ones Penelope had described, was stepping onto her chest every waking moment.

If she thought that coming back to Walden one year later would change Maxwell’s

attitude toward her, she was mistaken. With Penelope and his children, he was a changed man—responsible, mature, and dedicated. Caring and considerate.

When it came to her, they both turned into immature youths, fighting over everything and nothing. Only the problems they had were real adult problems that they needed to address seriously.

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

“Such solemnity. It must be dire, indeed. A misplaced hair ribbon? Or—heaven forbid—did Cook run out of those little cakes you’re so fond of?”

Penelope shot him a warning look. “Maxwell.”

Victoria had had enough. She lifted her chin, meeting her brother’s mocking gaze head-on. “Even worse, dear brother. My greatest tragedy is that I’ve been forced to endure your sparkling conversation. How shall I recover?”

Maxwell opened his mouth to say something that would for sure ignite a new burst of frustration.

Deep down, Victoria was partly happy this was happening. Maxwell was her brother, and he loved her unconditionally. She could fight out her frustrations with him, be petty and loud, and somehow they would find a way to mend things.

“Miss Victoria, the twins are asking for you,” the butler announced.

“Saved by your kids,” she hissed at Maxwell and left the room.

* * *

It was much later when she went back down to the drawing room. She had fallen asleep in Camilla’s bed while reading a story.

She hadn’t slept well for days, and the sweet embrace of her niece and her nephew’s soft breathing was enough to lull her into sleep. So she asked for something quick to

be brought to the drawing room because she missed dinner.

She was surprised to find Maxwell there, a ledger balanced on his knee. He looked up at her and smirked.

Victoria shot him a cold look that said, I am not in the mood, proceed with caution, and he retreated. For now.

“Are they asleep?” he asked.

“Yes, and they managed to put me to bed too,” she joked half-heartedly.

“It’s not like you have been sleeping these past few days.”

Victoria shifted her gaze to him. He seemed genuinely worried. And that was somehow worse.

Sibling rivalry and banter, she could handle all day long. But Maxwell demanding to know why she had not been sleeping? That was a completely different story.

“It must have been hard coming back here,” he said, setting the ledger aside. “I know you did it for Penelope and the twins, but?—”

“Not only for them,” Victoria interjected sincerely.

Her brother seemed genuinely surprised. He really thought that she didn’t want to see him, and that was why she was this lost. Her heart broke for him.

“Vicky.”

“Max.”

Both spoke in unison. And chuckled.

Victoria moved to the sofa and sat beside him. They twined their pinkies, counted to three, and pulled. It was their little ritual ever since they were kids, each time they talked at the same time. Warmth filled Victoria's heart for the first time after she walked out of that thicket.

"Max, I appreciate everything you have done for me," she said and took his hand. "What happened to us was not fair nor easy. And it was less of both for you. You shouldered a guilt and a duty too heavy for your age while?—"

"You know that I gladly took care of you, Vicky. You are my sister."

"I know, Max. But you took on so much. And between our father not being one and you agonizing over our future, you were not my brother anymore. Not the boy I would pull pranks on, the one who loved fishing. You grew up so fast, so hard."

Maxwell looks down at their joined hands. Every word she spoke was true, and no one argued.

The fire crackled softly in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across Maxwell's face as he turned their joined hands over, studying them as if they held some unspoken truth.

"I didn't have a choice," he murmured, his voice rough.

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

“I know.” Victoria squeezed his fingers. “I was there too.”

“You’re right. I stopped being your brother somewhere along the way. Became something else entirely.” His thumb brushed over her knuckles—a rare, unguarded gesture. “A tyrant, I suppose.”

“A protector. Just... an overzealous one.”

“Is that your polite way of calling me an insufferable arse?”

“Would you rather I say it outright?”

They laughed, but it faded quickly.

“You were so young, Vicky. You were spared the worst of it, in a way. It was late for me—I was scarred for life. But I’d be damned if I let you suffer. I only ever wanted you to be safe. All I ever did was make sure that you were happy.”

“I know, Max. And I thank you so much for everything. No matter what, I always feel safe as long as you are in my life.”

His eyes flicked up to hers. His throat worked hard, and he exhaled, as if he had been waiting for her to say those words. He squeezed her hand affectionately.

“But circling back to the insufferable arse,” Victoria joked, holding back her tears.

Another laugh.

Her body relaxed, some weight lifting off her chest.

“Happiness isn’t something you can arrange for someone else, Max,” she said with an even voice. “You never asked what would make me happy. You just assumed.”

Max nodded guiltily.

“You say you were scarred by our upbringing. It turned you into that ruthless, cutthroat businessman everyone feared. But I was scarred, too. I was young, yes, but I still remember our mother.”

She didn’t have to say anything more—they both knew what she meant by that. A flash of painful memories came to them.

“Seeing her like that... I do not want that for myself,” Victoria confessed. “I do not wish to marry, Max.”

Maxwell opened his mouth—once, twice—before any sound came out. When he finally spoke, his voice was raw.

“Christ, Vicky. I never stopped to listen, did I?”

Victoria shook her head.

“Let’s change that. What would make you happy?”

“Truly?”

“I have been working myself to the bone all my life. All for you. I never thought I would have Penelope or the twins. What was all that if it weren’t for you to live your best life, Sister?”

“You know the thing I love most.”

“Apple pies.”

“Aaaand?”

“Maths.”

Victoria nodded. “You know I studied on my own, read books, and tracked down any place I could get any knowledge. I want to learn more, and I reached the limit of what I can do on my own.”

“So... you want to go to school.”

“Yes.”

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

Maxwell considered for a while, his hand slipping from hers.

“That is not possible.”

Victoria’s heart ached. She knew that what she was asking was out of the question. Unspeakable. She had little hope that her dream would ever become a reality. She will seek knowledge on her own and?—

“At least not in Britain.”

Victoria searched her brother’s face. He wore a very serious look, but a boyish, mischievous smile tugged at his lips.

“The talk is that Prussia has an educational system more open to women. You’ll pick up the language easily. After all, Maths is an international?—”

Maxwell didn’t get to finish his sentence, for Victoria threw her arms around his neck.

“I am guessing you are interested, then.” He chuckled.

“Is this for real?”

Maxwell pinched her cheek tenderly.

Finally, Victoria felt as if her brother saw her—truly saw her. He listened. And it seemed he had been listening for a while, since he had already looked up the

educational system in Prussia.

“If this is what you want. You are no longer my little sister, and I know that if it weren’t for the restrictions placed by our society, you would be pursuing your dreams already. All I am doing is my duty as your brother—your overzealous protector, the insufferable arse.”

Victoria felt the tears roll down her cheeks. Finally, some happy tears.

Maxwell wiped her tears and smiled at her. “Christ, you are still an ugly crybaby.”

Victoria laughed, sniffing, and hit his arm playfully. He laughed too, but then he sobered up.

“We are going to miss you, Vicky.”

She pressed her lips together to keep from breaking down for real. “I will visit often.”

“You’d better. The twins need their aunt.”

One more embrace, tighter this time, a real one, his strong arms engulfing her protectively.

“Thank you, Max! Thank you so much.”

They were still locked in that embrace when Penelope came closer. She must have heard the whole thing because her eyes were glistening with tears.

“We will miss you so much, Victoria,” she said. “How about we throw a ball—one last big gathering—before you go?”

“Here in Walden?”

“Yes. No one has to know what the ball is for, but you will have the chance to see the people who matter most to you one last time,” Penelope offered with a wide smile.

One single inevitable thought crossed Victoria’s mind: Stephen. Leaving the country was a bit extreme, but it might be exactly what she needed. Not seeing him in balls and social gatherings, visiting Annabelle. She would be gone, out of reach. Perhaps in a foreign country, studying and making her dream come true, she would finally forget the infuriating Duke who stole her heart one room at a time.

The mere thought of Stephen sent a sharp pang through her chest, as if her heart had been stabbed with a hot poker. She could still feel the ghost of his hands on her waist, the way his deep voice had whispered her name in the dark.

The memory was so that vivid it stole her breath.

Victoria realized that even Prussia was not far enough to run away from him.

CHAPTER 21

Random Encounters

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

Just to get Stephen out of the house—hell, out of his cursed study—Frederick insisted that they visit White's once more. At least there, or at least on the way, he would get some fresh air. And as much as he would like to, at White's, Stephen couldn't descend to the depths of indignity as he could in the privacy of his home.

The added benefit of this arrangement was that Dorothy and Annabelle were spared the pitiful sight of him dragging himself up to his room or collapsing in his study. Frederick could plausibly tell to the worrying women that "There he is, going out again."

In reality, Stephen poisoned his brain and body to forget all about her. He was too tired to fight Frederick, so he willingly followed him that night too. It was not too late, but he had a head start on drinking. Ever since the sun rose, to be exact.

"That's it," Frederick hissed and shoved a cup of hot, black coffee under his nose. "I am cutting you off."

"I don't?—"

"I don't give a damn what you do or don't, Colborne. Drink this, and then we are getting out of here. You will walk it off before we go back to Colborne House, you hear me?"

Stephen downed the bitter coffee and then stumbled back to his feet. Frederick took their coats and their hats, and they went out.

It seemed that Frederick's words had some merit. The cold air sobered him. Not

completely; it would take days to flush the alcohol out of his system. But the cool night air nipped his skin, the chilliness preferable to the numbness from the brandy.

Stephen inhaled the air and followed Frederick, who was taking the scenic route.

“You need to pull yourself out of this funk, Stephen. Either put this behind you or do something. Drinking yourself into an early grave is not the solution.”

Is it not?

The coffee mixed sourly with the brandy in his stomach as he walked, the cobblestones uneven beneath his boots. Frederick’s lecture faded into the background noise of London at night. He looked up at the night sky above him, and honestly, he didn’t know what to answer.

“Oh no.” Frederick skidded to a halt next to him.

Stephen looked at his friend, not understanding what the problem was, only to find him looking ahead. He slowly followed his friend’s gaze. And almost collapsed on the pavement.

Victoria.

Coming from the opposite direction was Victoria. Her hand rested on Maxwell’s arm as they exited the Royal Opera House.

The sight struck him like a physical blow, and all the air rushed out of his lungs.

“Don’t, Stephen.” Frederick’s grip tightened on his elbow.

Stephen couldn’t look away. He had dreamed of her so much, longed to see her,

prayed that he would get the chance to see her... and there she was. A vision in blue, the color that made her eyes even more devastating. Her hair was swept up in a way that left her neck bare. He knew that neck. Knew the way it tasted when he pressed his lips just below her ear?—

Stop.

Stephen was suddenly grateful for that bitter shot of coffee that ran through his veins, that kept him from rushing to her and making a scene that would ruin her. But he couldn't stop looking at her. He wouldn't. He would drink her in so that he would have more images of her to torment him.

As if sensing his gaze, Victoria turned. Time stopped. Her lips parted in shock. The color drained from her face. In that unguarded moment, he saw everything. The hurt, the longing, the same unbearable ache that had consumed him.

What have I done to you?

Stephen would give everything to double his pain so that she wouldn't feel this way. He deserved as much, and she deserved none of it. He should never have come back to London.

“Ah! Frederick.” Maxwell's voice filled the space between them.

It was inevitable. It would be bad form and scandalous to pretend they didn't see the siblings. After all, Maxwell was married to Frederick's stepsister.

That was the reason Frederick mustered his most sincere smile.

“Maxwell, Miss Victoria,” he greeted.

Frederick nudged Stephen's hand discreetly. He was staring quite openly. Victoria noticed and averted her gaze. Or perhaps it was the fact that she couldn't stand him.

"Your Grace." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Page 79

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

Then, her head turned to Stephen, but her eyes were downcast. Her hands were clasping her reticule.

She didn't want him there.

"Your Grace," she said without looking at him.

The formal address cut deeper than any blade. That was all Stephen was to her now. Not because there were others present, but because he put that between them.

"Miss Victoria." He tried her name on his tongue, and it was sweet as ever. Then, he turned to her brother. "Walden."

Silence ensued.

"Where are you going?" Frederick asked, breaking the tension.

"Not going. I just took Victoria to see her favorite opera," Maxwell said, patting her hand.

"La Cenerentola," Stephen muttered before he could stop himself.

Her head snapped up at his words, her blue eyes widening.

Yes, I remember everything.

The realization flickered across her face before she could school her features. That

small, vulnerable moment sent a bolt of satisfaction through Stephen's chest.

How could he forget? At the house party, he had expressed his inability to understand opera. Then, over tea, she had explained how Rossini's mathematical precision in composition mirrored the beauty of equations. It didn't make him appreciate opera more, but that spark in her eyes made him burn harder.

"You will receive a formal invitation, of course, but we are throwing a ball at Walden," Maxwell said, looking at her. "We would love to have you there."

Victoria went rigid. Stephen, who was watching her, caught it immediately.

But Stephen was not mad for the simple reason that this invitation finally made her look at him.

When her blue eyes met his, he felt at ease after so many days of torment. Her gaze was pleading, and the message was clear. Don't come. The unspoken request hung between them, as clear as if she'd shouted it.

"Thank you for your kind invitation," Stephen replied, neither accepting nor declining.

He threw one last glance at her as they said their goodbyes, and Victoria left as quickly as she came.

Stephen fought with himself and lost. He turned around and looked at her retreating back, at her delicate profile as she gave her brother a fragile smile.

Good night, Victoria.

* * *

The days till the ball passed by like a haze. Annabelle and Frederick went back to their estate to prepare for the birth of their baby. And the house went absolutely still. No laughter or ruckus. Silence and calm.

A mausoleum.

Stephen chuckled cruelly at the thought. He was still locked in his study every day, half-drunk, half-burying himself in work. He managed to drag himself to dinner with his mother, but he couldn't carry a conversation. He was just a hollow presence.

Till the day of the ball. He had indeed received a formal invitation, which sat on his desk now, staring back at him. He remembered the way Victoria looked at him, begging him not to spoil this for her, to stay away. And he should. That was the right thing to do—to stay away. He had done enough damage and had no right to invade her home.

“Alfred,” he called to the butler. “Have my valet prepare me a formal suit. I am attending the Walden ball.”

Sorry, Victoria. I can't stay away.

That same night, Stephen was on the way to Walden Towers. He had managed to look presentable, and he had left his brandy aside. His leg was bouncing in the carriage, his fingers clenched into fists, his eyes fixed on the seat across him.

His fingers reached into the pocket of his waistcoat, searching for that silver hairpin. He ran his fingers over it just to calm down a little. This was where?—

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

The carriage came to a halt. Stephen looked out for the first time since he left Colborne House. Walden Towers blazed with light, every window glowing against the night. Not a lot of people were invited, but still, he could hear the buzzing of chatter and the sweet music.

The grand entrance hall was a spectacle of elegance. Crystal chandeliers dripped with candlelight, and garlands of evergreen and white roses winded up the staircase. The air hummed with music and laughter, the scent of beeswax and perfume thick enough to drown in.

I shouldn't be here.

And then he saw her.

Victoria stood at the top of the stairs, stunning in ivory silk, her gown embroidered with silver thread that caught the light like frost. A delicate diadem rested in her golden-brown curls, and two simple diamond earrings adorned her ears. But nothing was more radiant than her eyes, herself, her whole being.

"I see that you're a glutton for punishment," Frederick said by his side.

Stephen was still watching Victoria as she spoke with that unpretentious elegance to a lordling. He had once been such a fool, comparing her to the ladies of the ton and finding her lacking.

"Yes, it seems that I am," he muttered.

“Let’s go.” Frederick pulled him toward their hosts.

“Frederick!” Maxwell was happy to see them. “Colborne.”

Stephen managed a small bow.

“Annabelle couldn’t come. You understand, Penelope?” Frederick asked.

The two of them launched into a conversation about pregnant women and then newborns and toddlers.

Stephen barely registered their words. His entire being was attuned to her.

She was standing right next to her brother, her body stiff, ready to attack or to be attacked. He knew that it was his fault she was so guarded. He fixated on the way her gloved fingers tightened around her fan, the slight hitch in her breath when their eyes met.

“Miss Victoria, a dance?”

It was as if the world stopped. Her eyes fell on him, and her first reaction was that defiant part of her he came to adore. Her look clearly said, You can’t be serious right now.

The moment their hands touched, Stephen knew he’d made a mistake. The best kind.

Her fingers were ice in his, her posture rigid. But her eyes—God, her eyes were blazing. The candlelight caught the sapphire in them, turning them into something fierce, something alive. And he was lost.

The waltz began. He pulled her closer than he should have, closer than propriety

allowed, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Not when the warmth of her seeped through his gloves, through the layers of fabric between them. Not when the scent of her, orange blossom and something uniquely her, wrapped around him like a vice.

After days upon days buried in his self-made mausoleum, he was alive once more.

He didn't speak. What was there to say? "I'm sorry?" Too hollow. "I miss you?" Too weak. "I can't breathe without you?" Too true.

So, he said nothing.

He let the rhythm of the music take over and led her onto the dance floor. He could feel the tension in her, the way her breath hitched when his thumb traced the curve of her hip, the way her fingers flexed against his shoulder as if she wanted to push him away and pull him closer at the same time.

Stephen wanted to ruin everything—destroy his good name and her dignity, set the world on fire. If he leaned in and kissed her, she would be bound to him, the scandal too great, and this ball would be their engagement party.

But then her words echoed like the Furies of the myths to torment him.

"I would never marry you," she had said, making sure that she had singled him out of all the men in existence and found him lacking.

He was lacking. He deserved this, the stiffness of her body when their bodies came too close, her gaze flicking away, avoiding him.

He took the punishment along with everything he could—her warmth, her scent, the way it was not all spite when she looked at him.

The last notes of the waltz rang out, and she pulled slightly away. He didn't let go of her hand, keeping her closer just for a fraction of a moment. There was nothing else around them. Not the other guests, not the rustling of silk skirts, not the sound of polished boots on wooden floors. Not even Frederick, who was looking at him worriedly across the ballroom.

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

There was only Victoria, her chest rising and falling too quickly, her lips slightly parted as if she wanted to speak but couldn't find the words. He, too, had so much to say, yet he only stared at her.

She gently pulled her hand away from his, curtsied, and turned her back. Not one single word was uttered between them, neither trusting themselves once the floodgates lifted.

Stephen offered a bitter smile to her retreating figure, nodded once, and went in search of a drink.

"Stephen, we should leave," Frederick said, stepping closer. "You're not doing her, or yourself, any favors."

"Nonsense," Stephen said, pouring himself a glass of brandy. "I am going for a cigar."

"Right. Because what you clearly need is more brandy and poor judgment."

"I am fine. Just... fine."

A lie. A blatant lie. But if he were to repeat it again and again, it might become reality.

CHAPTER22

Cigars

Victoria wanted the world to swallow her whole. She wished for the fine wooden floor to crack and for her to fall into the abyss before it closed back over her.

She didn't remember walking away. Didn't remember weaving through the crowd, past the murmurs of guests, past the blur of candlelight and silk. All she knew was that she had to get out before she shattered into a thousand irreparable pieces.

She found her reprieve in a small corner, hidden behind tall columns and thick drapes. He was not coming after her, she knew as much. Still, her lungs burned as if she'd been drowning.

Breathe. Just breathe. It was just a dance.

But her body refused to obey. Her chest rose and fell too quickly, her corset suddenly too tight, her skin too hot beneath the layers of silk. And her mind refused to consider this as 'just a dance.'

Damn him.

He shouldn't have come. He shouldn't have come and been so... him. Damn his hands, warm and sure on her waist. Damn his voice, rough with unspoken words. Damn the way he'd looked at her.

Damn how broken he looked, especially that night outside the opera house. Barely able to stand, eyes hollow, face drawn and pale. He'd looked like a man unraveling, holding himself together by sheer will and nothing else.

Damn how it made her feel. Seeing him like that, raw and disheveled, had undone something inside her. She had to face the unbearable truth that no matter how far she tried to run, she was still tethered to him by something deeper than pride or reason.

“Victoria, a word?” Maxwell approached her.

Victoria forced her breathing to slow, her fingers tightening around the folds of her skirt. “Is something wrong?”

“If having the best brother in the world is wrong.” Maxwell smirked and waved a letter. “This just came in. You have been accepted to the Elise Bürger Pensionat, the top boarding house in Prussia. Close to the lecture halls, respectable, and you will get to meet other like-minded women from all over Europe. Couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Exactly how I wanted.

The news should have filled her with elation. Instead, her lungs tightened, the air turning as thick as tar in her throat. The walls of the ballroom seemed to be shrinking, trapping her.

“That is,” she managed, her voice hollow, “wonderful. Thank you so much.”

Maxwell handed her the paper, winked at her, and left to attend to his guests.

Victoria took the simple piece of paper and shoved it into the small reticule hanging from her wrist. She needed air, needed to be away. She hiked up her skirts and ran to the most secluded balcony, the one in Maxwell’s study.

The moment the door clicked shut behind her, the night air rushed to meet her. She inhaled deeply, willing her frantic pulse to settle. Just a moment to gather her thoughts, to tame the emotions clawing their way to the surface, because right now she was?—

“Hello, Victoria,”

That voice. Deep as midnight, smooth as brandy, and laced with something dangerously close to tenderness.

Can't be.

She turned slowly as if she was afraid to face who she knew was there. There was always the unladylike, immature choice to run back the way she had come as if hellhounds were on her heels. It would be what her survival instincts would demand. But it turned out she had none.

Stephen stood framed by the moonlight, his broad shoulders casting shadows across the stone balustrade. A cigar was dangling carelessly from his long fingers. The ember glowed, and the smoke coiled around his sharp features before dissipating into the night.

The silvery glow of the moon traced the sharp angle of his jaw and the aristocratic slope of his nose. His devastating blue eyes burned with an intensity that sent heat pooling low in her belly. She didn't even notice what he was wearing.

"I thought meeting by chance in private was limited to Colborne House," was the first thing that popped into her mashed brain.

"You say chance. I say fate," he said, smoke drifting from his lips.

"Well, either fate conspires to haunt me, Your Grace, or you simply enjoy lurking in the shadows."

A pause.

They looked at each other, suddenly realizing everything at once. They were alone.

Again. After everything that had happened. Both were shocked by how easily they teased and bantered with each other. It was heavy, it was devastating, it was?—

Stupid. That's what it is. Stupid.

“We are being thoroughly ridiculous,” Victoria admitted with a chuckle.

Stephen took a slow drag from his cigar, the ember flaring like the smirk that curved his lips.

“Speak for yourself, Miss Victoria. I'm being utterly poetic.”

Victoria heard the gargling laughter pouring out of her lips before she could stop it. She shook her head and approached him.

“Give me that,” she demanded, pointing at the cigar.

He hands it to her.

“What? No ‘this isn't proper for a lady’ lecture?”

“I figured you don't need to bury three husbands like Lady Weatherby to try it.”

Her laughter came unfiltered and from deep within her, from a place she thought would be permanently desolate.

Victoria brought the cigar to her lips and inhaled. Mistake. A wildfire of smoke scorched her throat. She doubled over, coughing violently. He was at her side in seconds.

“Breathe,” Stephen murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

“I miscalculated,” Victoria wheezed.

He held out his glass of brandy to her. “Want to complete the debauchery?”

Victoria took the glass with a glare that lacked any real heat before she took one big gulp.

“Ah,” she said, hissing from the sting of alcohol. “You’re trying to corrupt me.”

Stephen plucked the glass from her hand, his thumb tracing the rim where her lips had been.

“Merely expanding your education. Next lesson, gambling,” he joked. “Let’s put that mathematical brain of yours to good use.”

“The definition of good use is cheating in cards? What happened to the Duke who admired my perfect ledgers?”

“Almost perfect. You made one mistake.”

“Merely a calculated gesture so that you wouldn’t be intimidated by my perfection.”

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

“I would never!” he protested lightly.

They exchanged the cigar and brandy again, and this time it stung and burned less. Why was her soul more at peace with him, alone, than with anyone else?

She took a small sip of brandy and pinned him with a serious look.

“Why did you come tonight?” she asked.

The playful glint in Stephen’s eyes dimmed. He set the cigar aside, the embers fading to a dull glow. For a long moment, he simply looked at her, really looked at her, as if trying to memorize every detail.

“Why did you leave without saying goodbye?”

Victoria inhaled sharply. It was such a loaded question. It was riddled with so much emotion, so much pain. Pain they had caused each other.

One more sip.

“I am afraid I must return to my initial assumption. Weareridiculous.”

“I, too, must insist, My Lady. I am being poetic.”

“Ah, the Duke, melancholically gazing at the moon. Toocliché.”

“Clichés serve their purpose,” he said. “Thoughwewere never one.”

Victoria exhaled at that. “Cliché? Certainly not. Disastrous? Certainly yes.”

He chuckled, low and rich, the sound curling around her like the smoke between them. “How about we settle for exquisitely complicated?”

“Truer words were never spoken,” she said and handed him the brandy.

She watched, mesmerized by the way his throat worked as he swallowed. A drop lingered at the corner of his mouth, and she fought the absurd, traitorous urge to reach out and brush it away with her thumb. He beat her to it when his tongue flicked out, catching that stray drop, and her thoughts scattered like ash in the wind.

Only one thought remained—she was going away.

She might never see him again. She was going across the sea for who knew how long? And he was here, warm and real and so devastatingly handsome. This might be the last time they could ever be like this.

Before she could second-guess herself, Victoria closed the distance between them in one decisive step. Her hands found the lapels of his coat, her fingers twisting into the fine fabric as she pulled him down to her. Stephen’s breath hitched, just once, and then her lips met his.

She felt the brandy and the cigar on his lips—dizzying, intoxicating. She tasted his desperation and her anger, their passion and all the words they’d left unsaid. They didn’t have to talk; they rarely did.

His hands came up to cradle her face, his touch searing, as if he feared she might vanish if he held her any less fiercely. His fingers tangled in her hair as he backed her up against the balustrade.

He broke the kiss but didn't let go, didn't pull back. He just looked at her, making sure it was real—making sure she was real. He leaned in painfully slow and let his teeth graze her lower lip in a way that made her gasp.

She had scarcely caught her breath before his mouth descended on hers once more. He kissed like a man famished, as if nourishment had been denied to him for too long. Then, the kiss turned slow, yet not in a shy, attentive way. Not a gentlemanly peck. It was now deep and wet, the strokes of their tongues making decadent sounds that simply urged them on.

And she kissed him back with everything she had. She kissed him like it was the first time. Like it was the last time.

It is the last time.

That thought made her lips more frantic, her hands more daring. She, too, searched for her nourishment, the one thing to sustain her. She rose on her tiptoes, her spine arched in surrender. Her thighs brushed his, her knees nearly buckling as she leaned even more into his molten, fierce kiss.

I want you. I will miss you. I love you.

When they broke the kiss to catch their breath, he didn't let go. The hand behind her neck kept her forehead pressed to his, and the one around her waist kept her dangerously close. He breathed unevenly, his chest a riot of emotions.

Victoria tried one small step back, to let some air, some sense, between them. Some herald to the distance that would soon separate them. But he wouldn't have it. He cradled her face, their breaths mingling, her body so close to his that it felt as if they were one.

“Victoria,” he whispered.

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

She shuddered at the longing in his voice, at the surrender, as if he was forfeiting all to her. His title, his decorum, his damn life. She closed her eyes at that simple sound, a dream coming over her—an unattainable dream, a crazy fantasy.

“Victoria, I?—”

“I am leaving.”

“No, just stay in my arms for a little while longer.” His grip tightened.

Stephen was ready to talk, to express everything he felt. She could see. She could tell by the way his body tensed and relaxed at the same time, by the way he was looking at her with a “finally” etched into each glance.

She shook her head in denial. “Stay” was what he was asking of her, but the letter in her reticule was burning her world.

“I am leaving Britain.”

He went still, as if he were shot in the heart and had one second to realize what was going on. He pulled her back a little, still not letting her go, still debating if he could just take her and claim her and make what she was going to say irrelevant.

“You are leaving?”

“I...” She didn’t want to say it, but she had to. “I am leaving for Prussia.”

He made her look up into his eyes, searching for a flicker of a lie. There was no humor in her eyes.

“I am going to pursue my dream. Study Mathematics. Maxwell helped me.”

He staggered backward, his hands falling to his sides, but still keeping her trapped between the stone balustrade and his body.

“For how long?”

She said nothing.

“For how long, Victoria?”

“Two years? Maybe more. Maybe forever.”

He looked away. His hands went into his hair, and he breathed heavily.

“You are not seriously doing this, right? You can’t just leave.”

“I just... I just want to do this. I do not want to get married, but this has always been a dream of mine.”

Stephen wet his lips and looked up at the sky with a dry laugh. “Numbers are easier than men. Is that what you are saying, Victoria?”

She smiled, not ready to deny the truth.

“And what was this, then?” he demanded.

He came closer, and his fingers captured her chin. He looked intently into her eyes,

demanding and begging her at the same time.

“What was this kiss? This searing kiss? Your body shuddering in my arms?”

He sounded harsh and broken at the same time. Angry and Forlorn.

“It was goodbye,” Victoria said, her voice trembling.

If she were to take a sword and drive it through his chest, he would look less wounded.

His shoulders slumped.

“You are really leaving.” He shook his head in denial.

“I am really leaving.”

“Will this—?” He took a deep, steady breath. “Is this going to make you happy?”

Yes? No?

Victoria looked over his shoulder, biting her lower lip. She was hurt once by this man. It will take her a while to mend what was left of her broken heart. If she were to let go in his arms again, would she ever recover?

Fear won.

“Yes,” she murmured, avoiding his gaze. “This will make me happy.”

He nodded, biting his lip. He took a step back, then another. His body went stiff, and he folded his hands behind his back.

“Then I wish you good luck and all happiness.” Then, he added, “Miss Victoria.”

A bitter taste filled her mouth. The lid was closed on whatever this was that they had shared. One nail was hammered. She took a deep breath and drove in the other.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

They looked at each other, begging themselves, the other, the world to break, to stop this nonsense. But no one did. So, Victoria curtsied—by far the most absurd thing she had ever done—and left.

The moment she was in the hallway to her room, she let the tears fall.

She hurried into her room and slammed the door shut, sliding down to the floor. Everything faded away—the ball in her honor, the letter in her reticule, the last look he gave her. Only her pain remained.

It would be the last thing she would carry from him. And she knew part of her would always ache.

CHAPTER 23

Trigonometry

If Stephen thought he was in Hell before, after Victoria left his house in the middle of the night, he was now learning the true meaning of the word. At least before, he had that stupid, lingering hope that he could see her around, visiting his mother, attending his sister's balls—somewhere in the social scene. Sure, he could watch her from afar, perhaps exchange small talk, but she would still be there.

But now?

“Prussia... Two years? Maybe more. Maybe forever.”

The words carved through him like a dull blade, slow and brutal. He was startled by the sound of broken glass. Through his haze, he looked down and saw the empty, shattered decanter of brandy on the floor.

When did he drink the whole thing again?

He stumbled to the door, ready to shout the only command he had been giving his butler over the past few days. Brandy. But when he opened the door, he found

Frederick.

“I swear to God, Stephen,” his brother-in-law hissed as he pushed him back into the study, “if I have to leave Annabelle’s side to come and see you in this state, I will drown you myself in a barrel of the most expensive brandy.”

Stephen laughed. “Bring me that barrel now and watch me,” he slurred.

“Look at you!”

Stephen threw his head back and looked around. He had some whiskey in here for some special occasion, right? Didn’t get more special than him wishing for death.

“Stephen!”

Frederick was losing what little patience he had left. Before Stephen could take another staggering step toward his liquor cabinet, his brother-in-law seized him by the collar and dragged him out of the study.

“What the devil—?” Stephen spluttered.

He struggled against Frederick’s iron grip, but he was too drunk to fight.

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

“You want to drown yourself?” Frederick growled, dragging him out into the garden. “Then let’s do it properly.”

He led him to where a big stone trough stood full of rainwater.

Frederick didn’t hesitate. With a grunt, he shoved Stephen forward. His body fell into the trough, cold swallowing him whole.

Stephen gasped as water submerged his head, shock punching through his alcohol-fueled haze. He surfaced with a choked curse, his wet clothes clinging to him, cutting through the numbness.

“Much better,” Frederick said simply.

Then, he dragged Stephen back to his study and ordered blankets, dry clothes, and lots of tea before he started a fire.

Stephen stood on the carpet, dripping, shivering, and eyeing his brother-in-law murderously.

“What was that?” he bit out.

“Necessity.”

Minutes later, he was in dry clothes, nursing a pathetic cup of tea, staring into the fire bleakly.

“Now, listen,” Frederick said as he straightened his cuffs. “Tomorrow, I will come pick you up, and we will go to Walden Towers.”

At that name, Stephen stiffened and looked at him. “Walden Towers?”

“Yes,” Frederick uttered coldly. “You will bring some flowers, the engagement ring that has been in the possession of every Duke of Colborne, you will go down on your knees—both of them—and you will beg Victoria to marry you.”

Stephen laughed bitterly.

“It is not a laughing matter,” Frederick growled. “Then, I can be with my wife, who might be giving birth even as we speak, while I am here taking care of you as if you were a baby.”

“That simple?” Stephen said with malice.

“Pretty much. Any woman who managed to get the impeccable Duke of Colborne in this pathetic state must be worth it. I trust you can grovel hard enough.”

Stephen stared back into the fire. Victoria was worth it and so much more. That was why she was leaving. Why would she be the wife of the coldest man alive, who spoke of duty in his marriage proposal to the woman he loved?

He could already see it. The way her laughter would fade year by year. The way her eyes, once bright with passion and dreams, would dim under his rigid rules. Just like his father snuffed the light out of his mother’s eyes.

“So, sleep, get sober, and tomorrow?—”

“She is leaving for Prussia to study. Tomorrow.”

Frederick froze, then went to the liquor cabinet, took out the whiskey, and poured a few drops into their tea.

“She will be happy, following her dreams. I will only make her miserable,” Stephen sighed, his eyes still fixed on the flames.

“She seemed pretty miserable at the ball if you ask me.”

“That was because of me, too.”

Frederick didn’t ask him to clarify, realizing the insinuation.

“All I am asking, you thick-headed fool, is whether you told her how you feel.”

Silence.

“Thought so. Basically, you are ready to let the love of your life go in fear of humiliating yourself. Perhaps you don’t love her as much as you think, and you just enjoy dramatic gothic poets too much.”

Stephen fixed his brother-in-law with a look that would have killed a lesser man on the spot.

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

“All I am saying is, just dare. Bare yourself to her.”

“What if she says no?”

“What if she says yes?”

* * *

Stephen felt like a fool. Hiding away at the docks like a spy, lurking behind crates and piles of rope. His eyes were fixed on the ship scheduled to leave for Hamburg. The ship that would take her away. She would show up any minute. He was so nervous, not sure what he would do even if he saw her.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of an approaching carriage. It stopped before the ship.

His fingers were clenched around the book he had brought with him. For her. If he would ever step out of the shadows.

Maxwell got off the carriage and extended his hand. Stephen’s entire world narrowed to those stairs. Victoria stepped out, dressed in a traveling gown of deep blue, and his soul felt the warmth of the sun for the first time in days.

Stephen studied her face. She looked tired and pale, but she smiled at her brother, determined.

Stephen’s chest tightened. She was really leaving. This was what she wanted, what she dreamed of, and he had no right to take it away from her. He was ready to step

back, leave, and go back to his hollow life.

But then, as Maxwell talked to the servant who would serve as a chaperone and a member of the crew, Victoria looked away, to the docks, as if searching, as if she was expecting something. Her eyes swept over his hiding spot.

She looked so lost and pitiful, sad and desolate. She turned back toward the ship, her expression crumbling for just an instant before she schooled it back into calm resignation.

And at that moment, Stephen knew.

This wasn't the face of a woman chasing a dream. This was the face of a woman running. From him, from them, from the pain they'd caused each other.

"What if she says yes?"

Victoria took a step toward the gangway. Stephen took a step out of the shadows. And another, one more. Soon, he was running toward her.

"Victoria!"

She didn't turn around at first. She froze mid-step, her hands clasping the rope to steady her. The first one to react was her brother, who turned around and looked at him as if he could not comprehend what he was seeing.

"Bloody hell!" Maxwell's shout echoed across the docks. "Colborne."

"I would like to talk to Victoria," Stephen said firmly.

The world stopped. Victoria turned around, a slow movement that sent Stephen's

heart slamming against his ribs. Her eyes, those devastating eyes he'd drowned in a thousand times, locked onto his.

"Just a word, Victoria. Please."

"Excuse me, Colborne," Maxwell interjected. "What?—?"

"Please, Maxwell," Stephen said, openly begging. "Allow me to talk to Victoria. Please."

Maxwell's gaze darted between his desperate expression and Victoria's frozen form, and he sighed.

"Five minutes." He stepped closer, lowering his voice to a growl only Stephen could hear. "And if you make her cry, I'll throw you in the goddamn harbor myself."

"If I do, I will throw myself in."

Maxwell exhaled and stepped toward the carriage.

Stephen offered his hand to help Victoria off the gangway. This was the one gesture that mattered most in his entire life. All his life hinged on this moment, waiting for her to give him her hand, to give him a chance.

"Please, Victoria. Just... Please."

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

A heartbeat. Then, Victoria uncurled her hand from the rope and offered it to him.

Stephen's soul filled with hope. They stood across from each other. Suddenly, he felt like a schoolboy.

"I brought you this as a parting gift." He offered her the book.

Victoria looked at the book. A Treatise on Plane Trigonometry.

She gasped. It was the book she had been holding that night, that first night in the library, when they had crossed the line that brought them here.

"Thank you," she said softly, taking the book.

"And I came to return this," Stephen added as he took out the hairpin from his pocket.

Victoria looked from the small, insignificant thing to him.

The carriage. No, not the carriage, though that was so cherished and intimate. But the day they spent together in London, as if they had always belonged together.

"You... you kept it."

"Every day."

Victoria swallowed and blinked to chase away ready tears. She gave him a weak, sweet smile. "Keep it."

“No.”

Victoria was startled by his refusal. He cradled her face and made her look up at him.

“I want to be the one to pin it in your curls every day, for the rest of my life.”

For one breathtaking moment, her entire face lit up. Her lips parted, and her eyes widened with something perilously close to joy. Stephen smiled, ready to hold her so close, finally. Forever.

But his actions had cut deep. He had hurt so much that he saw the light dim, her joy restrained by pure survival instinct.

“I have told you before, Stephen. You don’t have to uphold your duty. I have no need for it.”

“Perhaps, but I need you.”

Victoria shook her head, but the motion was weak, less refusal than disbelief.

“You once told me that marriage was about duty. You can’t be?—”

“I was a top-tier fool.”

Victoria searched his face.

“Victoria, I wish I could go back to that thicket, smack myself upside the head, and then get down on my knees and tell you everything I felt. Everything I still feel. Everything I will always feel.”

Victoria opened her mouth to speak, but he stepped closer and took her hand in his

own. And kissed it not in the formal way of the ton, but in a “If I don’t touch you now, I will die” desperation.

“I love you, Victoria,” he croaked, his eyes holding hers.

Her jaw slackened, and her grip on his hand tightened. He nodded and held her hand in both of his now.

“I love your fire and passion, I love your light that dispersed the darkness in my life. I love your smile and your pout and the way you frown when I say something stupid.”

“Which is too often,” she scoffed.

They chuckled, but Stephen was not done. The dam inside him had broken, and he had no intention of holding back.

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

“I love that—though I do not deserve it—you keep looking at me as if I am better. I am better because of you. I will be better for you. I love your sharp intellect, even if it scares me to think how much smarter you are than I am.”

“Confirmed,” she said shakily.

He came closer, his voice dropping. “I love your lips, how they mold against mine.”

Victoria blushed.

“I love how you make me lose control just by looking at me, how your body feels against mine.”

She gave him a scorching look that defied rules and propriety.

He smiled at her and cupped her face in both hands.

“This is not duty, Victoria,” he said with pain in his eyes this time. “You were never a duty.”

Tears were ready to flow.

“Please don’t cry, or else I am obliged to throw myself in the water.”

She laughed, but one tear slid down her cheek. He wiped it away.

“I guess this one doesn’t count,” he said, his own voice shaking. “I want you. Your

laughter in my mornings, your arguments at my dinner table, and all your lilac tablecloths and dangerous mallet swinging.”

She was shaking from both laughter and ready tears now.

“Victoria, my Victoria,” he choked out. “Stay. Be my wife. Let me spend forever proving that I’m worthy of you.”

They looked at each other so deeply, so intimately, that the world stopped to matter. There was only them. Her free hand went to his chest to feel his beating heart. She took one step closer, modesty be damned.

“I love you, too, Stephen,” she confessed.

He exhaled and closed his eyes in relief, his chest heaving with laughter and tension.

“I love you exactly the way you are. Because of who you are. I love?—”

He didn’t let her finish. He kissed her right there on the docks, in full view of sailors, merchants, and her brother. Not the chaste peck Society would allow, but something wild and feral.

One hand cradled her face, while the other went around her waist to pull her closer. Victoria made a small, startled sound against his lips, but then her gloved hand slid up his neck.

He broke the kiss but didn’t release her, afraid he might lose what his heart desired most in the world.

“I wasn’t done,” she joked.

“Marry me.”

A cough interrupted them. Maxwell.

“When I warned you not to make her cry, I didn’t mean that.”

Stephen still didn’t let go of Victoria. This was outrageously improper, scandalous, but he didn’t care. His gaze remained locked on Victoria, his thumb tracing the curve of her cheek where a flush still burned.

“Marry me,” he repeated, his voice rough.

Victoria arched an eyebrow, her fingers still curled into the fabric of his coat. “You’re rather impatient for a man who took so long to get here.”

A low, breathless laugh escaped him.

“I’ve waited a lifetime for you. I refuse to wait another second.”

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

“For God’s sake,” Maxwell groaned.

“Yes, you insufferable fool!”

Victoria’s laughter was music to his ears. Stephen pulled her in his arms once more for a deep, searing kiss. He barely registered Maxwell’s growl of protest or the whistles from dockworkers as Victoria’s lips melted against his. Her hands, still gloved but no longer restrained by propriety, slid up to tangle in his hair.

When they parted, both were breathless. Stephen kept his forehead pressed to hers, their noses brushing.

“Lord Prevost would have a stroke,” Victoria joked.

“I owe the man a gift for pointing me to your scandalous ways,” Stephen countered.

They laughed in each other’s arms.

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

Colborne House awoke in full bloom. The gardens were wild with color. Lavender spilled over the paths, roses tumbled across trellises, and the breeze smelled of sun-warmed grass and something ineffably sweet, like the promise of a new beginning.

And it was truly the day for new beginnings. The day Victoria returned to the house,

not as a friend, not as a companion, but as its mistress.

The lakeside meadow had transformed into the liveliest reception the house had ever seen. Long tables draped in linen offered chilled lemon cordial, roasted pheasant, sugared plums, and a shocking number of meat pies.

Only close family and close friends were invited. An invitation was sent to Lord Prevost, but for some reason, he declined. And perhaps it was a good choice. The wedding was intimate, as well as the reception, so barely any decorum was shown. Like this moment, at the winding down of the festivities.

Stephen and Victoria lounged barefoot on a blanket under the willows, feeding each other strawberries and plotting mischief. Her back was propped against the trunk of the tree, while his head was on her lap.

“You know,” she said, licking jam off her thumb, “it’s probably illegal for a duke to be this relaxed.”

“I am not relaxed. I am plotting.”

“What?”

“Your annihilation in croquet.”

He jumped up and turned to their guests, who were either lounging in chairs, sprawled on cushions, or wandering under the shade of the trees.

“Everyone ready?”

Everyone was mobilized.

Stephen helped Victoria stand as she looked with a frown at everyone running around, procuring croquet equipment out of nowhere, and setting the field.

“I still insist that this close to the lake is risky,” Maxwell complained.

“What is this?” Victoria asked.

Stephen handed her a mallet. “Let’s finish one game of croquet. Finally.”

Victoria laughed heartily. “Oh, it’s on, Your Grace,” she said and swung her mallet ominously.

“I bet it is, Your Grace,” he countered.

It was not long after that all chaos descended on the gardens of Colborne House. No one remembered how the teams were chosen. At some point, alliances formed purely based on who had been wronged in previous rounds, and no one was keeping score.

“You are cheating, Stephen!” Victoria huffed. “Again! I can’t believe this runs in the family.”

“We are not cheating,” Dorothy, who had teamed up with her son, declared.

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

“It’s a strategic bending of rules,” Stephen replied smoothly.

Then, he aimed a very questionable shot that sent Victoria’s ball bouncing off course and toward a patch of daffodils.

“You will pay for that.”

“You married me. That’s punishment enough.”

She ran downhill to get her ball.

“Oh, not this again.” Stephen bolted after her.

And then he lunged. She shrieked, laughing, dodging, but he caught her mid-spin, and the force of it, combined with the slope of the lawn and the sheer lack of propriety, sent them both tumbling down the hill behind the willow trees.

They landed in a heap, her skirts tangled, his waistcoat stained with dirt and grass, both of them laughing so hard they could barely breathe. Stephen propped himself up on one elbow, his hair mussed, grinning down at her. She reached up, still smiling, and tucked a strand behind his ear.

“You were once the man who yelled at me from the window of your study to keep it down.”

“I was once a lot of things.”

He lowered himself slowly, gently, until his forehead touched hers. He kissed her then, warm and slow, the world spinning around them.

“I think we indulged our guests long enough.”

“Stephen!”

“Fine. A little more apple pie, right?”

* * *

The house had finally gone quiet. After hours of dancing, laughter, overturned lemonade, and a croquet match from hell, Colborne House was still for the first time that day. Candles flickered low in sconces, the scent of lavender drifting lazily through the halls.

Victoria was soaking in her second bath of the evening. The first had been practical—to scrub off the grass stains and sweat. This one was indulgent.

She laid back in the copper tub, the water just hot enough to make her sigh, her eyes closed, every muscle relaxing. Alfred had assured her that Stephen was “tending to some affairs.” So, she waited. And soaked. And dreamed of him.

The door creaked.

Stephen stood on the threshold. His hair was mussed, falling on his forehead in a reckless manner. But she didn’t mind that. He was wearing a robe. Just a robe. She could see the expanse of his collarbones, the light hair peppering his chest peeking from the opening in his robe.

“My tub was taking forever to fill,” he lied.

She could smell the soap from his bath. Stephen had come to torture her.

“We can share,” she said coyly.

Stephen looked upon her with hunger and mischief. Her Duke was not going to wait in their bedroom, in the dark, for her to go to him. He came to claim her.

He walked over to her. He reached the edge of the tub, untied the sash at his waist, and let the robe fall to the floor like a sigh. Victoria gasped and stared openly.

She had pictured him, of course. Her mind had wandered more than once to what he might look like beneath his perfectly pressed shirts and those damn cravats. But her imagination, thorough as it was, had not come close.

Her husband looked as if he were carved from stone. The candlelight fell on his broad shoulders, his strong arms, and the planes of his abdomen, which seemed sculpted by an artist. Skin taut over hard muscle, thighs strong, hands relaxed at his sides.

Victoria blushed when she realized she was staring at his naked body shamelessly. She looked away, suddenly too preoccupied with her wet hair.

Stephen chuckled and leaned closer. He caught her chin and made her look up to him. “You are staring, Victoria.”

She blushed even more. “I was merely calculating the golden ratio,” she lied.

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

“Ah.” He leaned even closer. “And what did your... calculations tell you?”

She pushed herself up and wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing him close to her.

Water sloshed gently around her as she leaned forward, brushing her lips over his just once. But it was enough to set him on fire.

Stephen inhaled sharply and closed the distance between them. The kiss that followed was nothing like their sweet, laughing ones from earlier that day. This one was deeper, wetter, hungrier.

“I’m coming in.” His voice was low and rough.

Victoria gave the faintest nod, her lips still parted, her chest rising and falling with anticipation. She could feel every inch of him, every breath he took, every heartbeat pounding in time with hers. Her head fell back onto his shoulder, her eyes fluttering shut as he pressed kisses to the curve of her neck. She squirmed, and every nerve in her body lit up.

Stephen smirked against her skin, before deepening his kisses. Now he was sucking lightly on her skin, his tongue trailing a path to that spot behind her ear that made her eyes close and her mouth fall open.

His hand drifted up, his fingers brushing the underside of her breast in a way that made her breath hitch. His other hand slid lower, below the surface of the water, tracing the curve of her hip.

“Stephen,” she said, urging him on.

“I am here,” he whispered in her ear.

He cupped her breast, his fingers grazing her nipple with a tenderness that was in no way less devastating. She tilted her head to look at him and the look in his eyes—voracious, barely restrained, and all focused on her—floored her.

He leaned in as he caught her nipple between his fingers and pinched it. The water sloshed as she almost catapulted off the tub.

But his other hand was there, nudging her thighs open for his touch. He wandered further and found her center wetter than the water around them. His fingers moved with patience, with skill, with a tenderness that undid her completely. Gentle, circling strokes that sent pleasure to her whole body and coaxed a deep sigh from her.

“You are divine,” he whispered, nipping her earlobe.

There was no part of his body that was not dedicated to unraveling her. His mouth kept kissing, licking, biting. His body swayed softly against hers, his muscles flexing behind her. His fingers kept rolling over her sensitive nipple, making her quiver. As for his other hand...

Her legs parted to bloom, to open fully to that touch that was winding her up tighter and tighter. His fingers slid from her folds to that bundle of nerves in slow but persistent strokes. Then, faster, a pace meant to drive her insane.

Her fingernails dug into his arm as the tension built higher and higher. She bucked her hips to meet him, earning an approving rumble in his chest. Water splashed over the rim of the tub.

“That’s it, Victoria,” he purred in her ear. “You will come undone for me.”

“Yes,” she breathed.

His touch became focused, his fingers circling her bud over and over, in tune with her thrusts, her sighs. Her body tensed as if the waves of the sea retreated. Her breath hitched.

“Yes,” he growled. “Let go for me. Now.”

The waves washed over her. She shattered in his arms with a cry that he swallowed with a searing kiss.

Suddenly, his arms banded around her, and he got up with her in his arms.

“Stephen?”

“I need to taste you. I need to have all of you to myself. Now.”

He wrapped her in a towel and carried her to their bedroom. He laid her on the bed and then slowly pulled the towel off her.

Victoria did not blush this time as his eyes drank her in.

He crawled onto the bed with her, his massive body looming over hers. He braced his hands on either side of her head, his gaze greedy, wild.

“You’re staring,” she whispered, breathless.

“I know.”

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

His hands began to move, one sliding up her calf, his fingers tracing the curve of her leg, pausing at the soft spot behind her knee. Her eyes fluttered almost shut. Almost. She didn't want to lose any of this, she wanted to watch as he touched her.

He leaned in for a kiss. It was not slow, and it was not tender. It was a whirlwind filled with hunger. Victoria gasped, and he swallowed the sound greedily. It was filthy, glorious, messy.

Their mouths met again and again, wet and greedy, teeth clashing, breath stolen. His hands were in her hair, tangled, clutching, tilting her head so he could kiss her deeper, rougher, harder. Her fingers dug into his back, feeling every muscle shift under her touch.

Stephen broke the kiss and followed a path down her body. He kissed her neck and nipped her collarbone. Victoria arched into him, and he didn't disappoint. He took one nipple into his mouth and swirled his tongue over it.

"Stephen, more."

"You have no idea," he breathed on her stomach, "how much more I want to give you."

Her fingers curled into the sheets. He lingered, letting his tongue tease and stroke until she was squirming again. She wrapped her legs around him, trying to pull him in, but he pulled away and pinned her hands over her head with one hand. She moaned

“My Duchess,” he drawled, “I want to pleasure you and make it good for you.”

“It is good right now,” she protested. “Just not enough. I feel so?—”

“I know. Let me give you more.”

Victoria nodded. She trusted her husband completely. So, when he kissed down her body, she just surrendered to the sensation instead of chasing it. She bit her lip when he dipped his tongue in her navel. She sighed when he grazed the inside of her thigh. And when he reached the aching core of her, she forgot how to breathe altogether.

Stephen kissed her there. Softly at first. Just a gentle press of lips that made her hips jerk in surprise. Then again. And again. He flicked his tongue, and she saw stars. She knew he wanted to take it easy and slow, but he snapped the moment he tasted her.

A low roar tore from his throat. He grabbed her thighs and lifted them off the mattress so that he could gorge on her essence. She threw her head back, her mouth falling open on a moan she couldn't contain.

“Sweet like apple pie,” Stephen murmured. “You were made for me.”

Her legs quivered, and she moaned his name as he licked into her.

“Again, let me hear you,” he ordered.

One last flick of his tongue, just right, just hard enough, and she lost all command of her body. The tension snapped, and she cried out his name, the sound drawn out and desperate. The wave of pleasure rolled over her again and again as he wound her down.

When she landed boneless on the mattress, he dragged his body up and settled

between her legs.

“I can’t hold back anymore, Victoria,” he grunted. “I am going crazy. I want you, I need you so much.”

She had no power to form words, but her body wrapped around him and pulled him closer. His eyes searched her face, asking for permission. Her response was to trail both hands down his chest, his abdomen, around his hips, and up his back. She watched as his eyes closed at her erotic, feather-light touch.

“It might sting, Victoria,” he warned as he leaned closer.

Stephen guided himself with care, his eyes never leaving hers. He entered her, slowly, inch by inch, watching her face for any sign of pain. She gasped, gripping his shoulders, and he paused to give her time to adjust.

“No, don’t stop. It’s so... I need...”

He pushed another inch into her. She moaned, biting her lip.

“So good. You take me so well, Victoria.”

His words ignited her, making her wet core gush and flutter around him.

“You like it when I say things like that to you,” he whispered, his breath ragged against her ear.

Victoria nodded, her eyes half-lidded, lost in the sensation. Her breath came in shallow gasps, her fingers digging into his back.

He rolled his hips deeper. He dropped his head to her shoulder and kissed the juncture

where her neck met her collarbone, his teeth gently grazing her skin. Then, he pushed into her further till he was sheathed inside her.

“How perfect you are.”

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

Victoria tilted her hips up to meet him more, to have all of him, take all of it. The ache was there, yes, but it was a stretching, a filling, an overwhelming sensation that hovered on the edge of pleasure.

Stephen moved slowly at first. Their fingers were intertwined, one arm under her waist, and their breaths mingled, sharp and ragged. Soon, his rhythm quickened and deepened, each thrust more insistent and more sure.

“Victoria,” he whispered. “God... You...”

His hands slid to her waist, holding her steady as his hips rocked into hers. A groan tore from his throat as he thrust deeper.

“Yes,” he gasped.

She moaned, her back arching, her body blossoming around him, clutching him deeper.

“Let go for me. I’m right here.”

She shattered. Her body convulsed around him, her arms locking around his back, her face pressed into his neck. He followed her a heartbeat later, his thrusts growing erratic, desperate, until he pushed deep one final time and stayed there, trembling.

His forehead dropped to hers, and his whole body locked around her as he spilled into her, a guttural groan leaving his lips.

“How are you, my Duchess?”

Victoria couldn't summon words, but she smiled at him and caressed his face reverently.

“I will take the silence as a good sign, and I will file that information for later use.”

Victoria pushed his bicep lightly, but she was drifting off already, exhaustion taking over.

“Sleep, my Duchess, my love,” he whispered, pulling the covers over them and cradling her in his arms.

Victoria nestled closer, flush against him, and he planted a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Forty-five,” she murmured, half asleep already.

“What?”

“Forty-five rooms in the house.”

Stephen laughed loudly.

“The country estate has one hundred and five rooms,” he whispered in her ear.

Victoria did the math and slipped into sweet bliss.

The End?