



Married to the Cruel Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "I can give you no love, no true marriage. So abandon your hopes now, little wife..."

Rebecca's family finally found a way to get rid of her: marry her off to the cruelest of all Dukes...

Even after losing everything, Duke William is known as a monster and he likes it that way. Until he lays eyes on his bride of convenience...

Every try to break her new husband's walls fails, yet Rebecca is determined. But no matter her pull on him, William must resist. For he has to protect his wife from the cruelest beast among them. Himself...

Total Pages (Source): 98

CHAPTER 1

Rebecca Crowton stood in front of her father's large desk. It was only a few years old. He had a new one made every few years just to show that eh could. This one was made of a dark chestnut with countless carvings in the side. The whole thing was nothing more than a show of wealth designed to intimidate anyone he bought here, and oh how it was working.

Rebecca clenched her hands as the sharp blue eyes she'd inherited glared at her from where he sat staring her down. Usually when she was here, it was because Solomon Crowton had found a reason to punish her, not that he needed much of a reason. The man would take any excuse he could find no matter how small.

She would be called in for no other reason than for him to tell her she wouldn't be getting dinner that night or the already meager amount he spent on her expenses was to be cut.

But that wasn't why she was here that time.

At least, that wasn't the main reason. His words were still ringing in her ears as she struggled to make sense of them when he spoke again.

"You may go now," he said, moving to go back to his papers.

"Wait!" Rebecca gasped, her outburst shocking herself almost as much as it shocked him.

“Did you need something?” he snapped when she didn’t say anything for a moment.

Rebecca locked her eyes on the ground, clenching her hands so they would stop shaking. “Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but I just needed you to clarify something for me before I go.”

“Of course you do. I always knew you were dimwitted. Go on. Out with it.”

She swallowed. It was clear she was only displeasing him more and more with each word. She knew it wasn’t smart to keep pushing, but Rebecca could hardly leave after what he had said. She needed to know. She needed to have heard wrong, so she forced herself to speak, voice coming out small and unsure, ready to be swept away in the quiet room. “You just- you just told me I am to be getting married-”

“Yes, I fail to see what is so hard to understand about that.”

“I- I understand that, but I’m afraid I must have heard the name wrong. Could you please repeat it?”

He let out a dismissive sigh. “Can you not even hear properly? Truly, Rebecca, can you do anything right? You really are a disappointment. Perhaps it was for the best that your poor mother never had to suffer the indignity of seeing the kind of person you have become despite my best efforts.”

She dug her nails into her palms, trying to block out his words. They weren’t the important part. There was only one thing she needed to know. “I am sorry I have disappointed you, but can you please just say it one more time.”

He sighed, rolling his eyes again. “Very well, if you insist.”

“Thank you, father.”

He continued as though she hadn't spoken. "I said you are to marry Duke Danton. Did you hear me properly this time or must I repeat myself once more?"

The ground fell out from under her as she fell into an endless abyss of shock and despair. It didn't seem possible, but she had heard right the first time.

Rebecca couldn't believe it. How could he do this to her?

She knew he never paid her much mind, but she never imagined he would do something like this to her.

"Can you not even hear me now?" he snapped. "If you don't have anything else to say then get out. I have work to get to."

Rebecca knew she couldn't stay silent. She couldn't let this happen, so she forced herself to find her voice. "But, father, surely this must be some kind of mistake or misunderstanding."

"Are you questioning my intelligence, girl?"

"No! Of course not!" she backpedaled as quickly as she could. "I wasn't trying to imply anything of the sort. I would never."

"Then what were you trying to do?"

"It's only that Duke Danton is such a recluse. How do we even know he is looking for a wife?"

"His solicitor has been asking around. I learned of his search when I was at a gentlemen's club."

“And you suggested me?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

“I agreed to have tea with them and discuss the possibility. We were lucky enough for Duke Danton to actually agree to wed you.”

“But why? We have never met. I don’t even think I’ve ever seen him before.”

“I hardly see why it matters what he sees in you. He has agreed to marry you, and considering your prospects you should consider yourself lucky.”

“No, I only meant to ask why you put my name forward to begin with.”

“I thought that would be obvious. Can you think for even a moment?”

Rebecca’s heart pounded in her ears. This couldn’t be happening. Even her father as awful as he was would never do something like this to her. She clenched her trembling hands in her skirts. She couldn’t let him see her terror. It would only make everything that came next worse. She just wanted all of this to be over as soon as possible. “Forgive me, father, but I think I need you to explain it to me.”

He signed. “Our family is doing well, but we can always do more to improve our family name. For once you can actually do something to help it.”

“But how?”

“Marrying him,” he said as though it should have been obvious, and perhaps he was right. He wouldn’t have to say things like this all the time if she wasn’t constantly doing something wrong. “It would be good for our family to have ties to a duke. I must say I was rather surprised you were the only one put forward. I would have

thought there would be at least a few other families putting their daughters forward.”

Rebecca hesitated. “Perhaps that might be because Duke Danton is known to be a—” she hesitated again. She needed to be careful here. It wouldn’t help her case if her father thought she was insulting him. “Rather harsh person,” she finally settled on. It was an understatement to be sure, and quite an extreme one at that, but it was as much as she dared to say.

“I thought you hadn’t met him before.”

“I haven’t but his reputation precedes him. I have heard people talk.”

“So you’re telling me you have not only been engaging in gossip, but talking negatively about someone of a higher status than you?”

“No, of course not! I-”

“Then what were you trying to say?”

“I was only trying to explain that I don’t know if this is such a good idea.”

“Is that right?” his face darkened as he leveled her with a glare cold enough to freeze the sun. “And you know what is good for this family do you?”

She stiffened at his sharp tone. Her heart pounded in her chest. She knew she needed to tread carefully. She had clearly already dug a hole for herself; she couldn’t let it get any deeper. “I only have concerns.”

“Clearly. I just don’t see why you think you need to voice them.”

She looked down, knowing when he didn’t want her to actually reply.

“This is a chance for you to finally do something good for this family and you want to throw it back in my face? You should be honored by anyone, much less a duke, is even willing to marry you.”

She locked her eyes on the ground.

“Who is the head of this family?”

“You are, father.”

“And who knows what is best for this family?”

“You do.”

“So who do you think you are to question me?”

“No one. I wasn’t trying to and I shouldn’t have done anything to make it seem like I was.”

“That’s right, so let’s try this again, shall we?”

“Yes, father.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

“You are to marry Duke Danton.”

“I understand,” Rebecca forced herself to say, keeping her voice as steady as she could manage.

“Glad to see you have come to your senses.”

She remained silent.

“Fortunately for us, he does not desire a long engagement, so he shouldn’t have time to come to his senses and change his mind about you. It’s also doubtful you’ll have to see him before the ceremony so you won’t have the opportunity to do anything that could risk giving him a reason to change his mind.”

“How long do I have?” she asked barely above a whisper.

“It’s hard to say for sure, but if I had to guess I imagine it will be sometime within the month.”

“So soon?”

“Of course. There’s no reason to wait.”

“But wouldn’t he want a rather extravagant wedding, being a duke and all?”

“You said it yourself he can be a bit of a recluse. I would be surprised if he wanted anything beyond the most discreet ceremony.”

“I see, so there won’t be any kind of reception?”

“Of course not. Why would you need something like that?”

She nodded. “Of course father.”

“The exact date will be decided as soon as he receives word from the bishop as to when soon they will allow him to wed. Once the service is over, he’ll take you back to his estate. We will try to come visit you at some point.”

“I see. Then I suppose I will begin preparing and patiently await your visit.”

He stared at her down, a sharp look on his face. She could tell he was waiting for something, but he wasn’t giving her any indication as to what it might be. “Is that all you have to say?”

Rebecca took a deep breath. That was it. Now she got it. She knew what he wanted from her. What she was expected to say.

Forcing herself into a small curtsy, she said a small, “thank you father.” She could only hope it would be enough. Rebecca didn’t have it in herself to go on and on about how grateful she was at the moment.

He studied her for a moment before he finally nodded with a deep sigh. “I suppose that’s a little bit better.”

She narrowly resisted the urge to let out a sigh of relief. Still, she knew better than to say a single word, instead waiting for him to continue.

He didn’t keep her waiting long. “I am glad to see you still know how to be grateful. You may go now.”

Taking a deep breath, she made her way back into the hall. Gloushire Manor was a moderate size house by the standard most of the ton would expect, but Solomon did everything he could to ensure it would cut an imposing figure.

To be fair, in many ways he succeeded. Every inch of the place was covered with ways to show off his family's status and wealth. From furniture to art, he only had the best he could afford of everything.

But Rebecca wasn't paying attention to any of that. She just kept walking as fast as she dared down the hall towards the gardens. It was one of the few places that wasn't pristine and ready for display.

In sharp contrast to the rest of the house, the gardens were overgrown as they had been for as long as Rebecca could remember. She had once heard the servants talking, apparently they had once been the pride and joy of her mother.

After she was born and her mother died of complications from the birth, Solomon demanded that no one was to set foot in the gardens. He even ordered that no one was to open the heavy drapes that covered the window looking out on the grounds. It was one of the only places Rebecca could let herself breathe and think.

It didn't hurt that Penelope Sutton, her only true friend, was her next door neighbor and had a habit of sneaking over to see her when she would see her from the window. The hours when the pair of them were able to hide out there together were some of Rebecca's fondest memories, but she couldn't help but hope she would be undisturbed that afternoon.

But halfway to the gardens, a figure came out to block her path. It was her older sister Dorothy. Despite only having a two year age difference, Solomon went to great lengths to ensure the girls would never be close.

In fact, he seemed to do everything he could to ensure Dorothy knew just how far above her younger sister she stood. Rebecca tried to just move around her sister and get on her way, but Dorothy moved to stand in her way with a haughty grin on her face.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

“Have you spoken to your father yet?” she asked, staring down at her younger sister with smug satisfaction.

Rebecca hesitated. She knew she couldn’t just deny it, but she didn’t want to talk about it any more than she already had. That didn’t even touch on the look on Dorothy’s face. But Father wouldn’t have told her first, would he?

“Rebecca, are you ignoring me?”

“No, of course not. I would never do that.”

“You had better not.” She crossed her arms. “I asked you a question. Have you met with father yet?”

She hesitated. “Why do you ask?”

Dorothy’s grin only grew, making the anxiety growing in Rebecca’s gut twist and wiggle inside her. “What does it matter? Just answer my question, or should I tell him you were being rude to me again?”

“No, you don’t need to do that!”

Dorothy gave her sister a pointed look. “You had better answer fast then.”

She took a deep breath. “Yes, I have.”

“So then did he give you the news?”

Rebecca looked up at her in shock. She couldn't believe this. Dorothy knew. Her father had told her first.

"Yes," she said, wanting nothing more than to run off and hide from this conversation. Even if she tried, though, Dorothy would just follow after her. She had made that mistake one too many times before and it was always worse when she caught her in the end.

Her sister laughed. "And are you excited to meet your betrothed?"

Rebecca held her tongue. She knew when there was nothing good to say. Of course Dorothy wasn't expecting a reply anyway.

"I know you are! After all, who would have thought a duke would want someone like you, even if he is terrible?"

Rebecca's eyes burned.

"But that's alright, and do you know why?" She didn't wait for Rebecca to reply before she continued. "Because you're terrible as well! You two deserve each other. Why don't you tell me how lucky you are?"

Barely above a whisper, she forced out a small, "I am very lucky the duke wants to marry me."

"That's right you are, but you aren't the only one that's lucky." She sighed, a dreamy look coming over her face. "It will be nice to finally have you out of the house. You just take up so much space. And I can only imagine how many more gowns I can have once father is no longer responsible for your expenses."

She pirouetted in place, demonstrating the lacy flow of her skirts in contrast to

Rebecca's mended gown. Rebecca couldn't remember the last time Solomon had gotten her a new gown. Almost everything she had was a hand-me-down from her older sister at best. Even when she did receive a new gown, it would be stripped of all adornment and embellishment before it was given to her. After all, those things could be reused on Dorothy's new gowns there was no point in wasting them on Rebecca.

"I hope he is able to get you everything you want," she forced herself to say.

"I'm sure he will, now that you won't be in the way."

"That's good. I'm happy for you," Rebecca said. She had learned over the years the more she pretended to agree with Dorothy the sooner she would get bored and let her go on her way.

Sure enough, after a few more moments, Dorothy crossed her arms with a pout. "Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

"Of course. What have you said that I could possibly disagree with?"

She clenched her hands, face turning red. "You little-" she cut herself off with a huff. "I have better things to do than stand here talking to you all day you know!"

"Of course. I won't keep you."

She glared like she wanted to say more before stomping down the hall with a huff.

When she was alone, Rebecca let out a sigh of relief before finally making her way to the garden. It was already late enough into fall that she was quite chilled in her thin shawl, but the air only served to help clear her mind.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

It was only once she was outside and sure she would be left alone that she allowed her tears to fall.

“This isn’t fair,” she whispered to herself, crumpling to her knees in the soil. Cold air crept up from the ground, pushing its way through her skirts. She couldn’t be sure how long she sat there before a gentle voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“Rebecca.” Penelope’s hand came to rest on her shoulder.

She looked up to see her friend, staring down at her, worry filling her large eyes. Her curly dark hair looked as black as charcoal in the fading lights, matching the ink staining her fingertips. The soft cotton of her simple but well loved day dress was like nothing Rebecca could ever hope to wear. “What are you doing out here? It’s far too cold.”

“I could ask you the same thing.” Penelope sighed. “But I’ll answer your question first, since you asked so nicely. I saw you sitting outside from my window. You looked upset so I was worried about you. And it seems I was right to worry.”

Rebecca looked away.

“Do you want to tell me what happened? Did your father say something to you again? Because if he did-”

“It isn’t what you think. This was different from our usual altercations.”

“Altercation,” she scoffed. “I think they tend to be a bit one-sided for that word. Still,

that hardly seems the point now. What made this different?"

"Because he didn't call me to his study for a lecture, but to give me news." Rebecca did her best to force a smile. "I am to be married soon."

"What?" she gasped. "To who?"

"Duke Danton," she whispered.

"What?" Penelope gasped. "You can't be serious! Your father—even he wouldn't do something like that, would he?"

"It seems he would."

"But Duke Danton is simply more than you can be expected to bear! Did you tell him you wouldn't be able to go forward with the match?"

"I tried to tell him my objections, but he hardly seemed willing to listen. I don't think I will be able to avoid it. He seemed rather set on the matter."

She shook her head. "But you can't marry him! Surely your father wouldn't force you to go forward with a match like this against your will."

"I'm afraid it rather sounds like you have not met my father. We both know my happiness was never a concern for him."

"Still, you must agree this is too far, even for him. Perhaps even if he won't listen, there is someone else we could talk to with the power to stop this."

Rebecca just shook her head. "I'm afraid there's no way out."

“There has to be!” Penelope insisted. “I won’t let him do this to you!”

“I think the best thing I can do is to try and make the best out of it.”

“But how can you possibly do that? Duke Danton isn’t just known as a reclusive or harsh man. We’ve both heard the rumors about what kind of man he is. Rumors about just what might have happened to his family.”

“We have, but they are just that. Rumors, and we both know the kind of things Dorothy has been saying about me. We can hardly trust them, now can we?”

“But this isn’t the same thing as someone complaining that her sister gets too many dresses or that she isn’t talented at the piano. This is serious.”

“But it is said with all the same conviction as Dorothy talks about me. I think it would be better to wait until I meet him to form an impression.”

“Do you have a long engagement at least? Perhaps you can find a way out of it if he treats you poorly.”

She shook her head. “No, not very long.”

“Do you know when?”

Rebecca sucked in a shaky breath. “Father seems intent on washing his hands of me as soon as possible.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

“But you deserve so much better than this.”

“I don’t know,” Rebecca forced a smile. “Maybe it won’t be that bad.”

“Rebecca, you can’t be serious!”

“Why not? It’s better to look on the bright side in times like these, isn’t it?”

“Bright side? Your father is marrying you off to some beast of a man you have never met but everyone knows is horrible. I know you tend to be a bit—well, my dear, a bit too willing to go along with what he wants to keep the peace, but you can’t. Not with this.”

“It isn’t as if I have much of a choice, even if I wanted to fight.”

“Even if you wanted to—” Penelope cut herself off, staring at Rebecca in shock. “Are you saying even if you could, you wouldn’t want to?”

Rebecca shook her head. “Truthfully, no.”

“What? But why?”

“If I’m honest it doesn’t seem like the worst option. It’s no fairy tale, but you have to admit it’s better remaining here,” said, forcing a smile. She could only hope if she held onto it long enough that it would become real in time.

Penelope crossed her arms. “You’re going to need to explain how to me, because I’m

afraid I fail to see any potential benefits here.”

“Well, to start with I would be a duchess.”

She gave a tight smile. “I will admit there is something amusing about the idea of your status being above your family’s.”

Rebecca chuckled. “I won’t pretend the thought had never crossed my mind. Honestly, that’s a huge part of why I am alright with this.”

“The status?”

“Being free from my family. Marrying would allow me to leave the family home. I would finally be out from under their thumb.”

“Still, who knows what he would expect from you as a wife...” she trailed off.

“My father detests me. My sister mocks me. How much worse can a duke be? At least there my home might have a chance to be my own. I could have a chance at choosing my own fate. There is no hope of that here.”

“Rebecca....”

“Besides, if he is as reclusive as rumor would have us believe, then perhaps he would simply leave me be.”

“And what if that is wishful thinking? You will still be living together.”

“Perhaps, but the home of a duke must be rather large. It couldn’t be that hard for us to keep to ourselves when home. Perhaps we could each lead our own life in peace. More acquaintances or perhaps even friends than husband and wife, but content

nevertheless.”

“That doesn’t sound like a woman talking about her betrothed.”

She smiled. “Maybe not, but I think it is the best I can hope for. I can’t ask you to be happy for me, but can you please try to help me accept it?”

“I am trying, but it’s hard because I know you deserve so much better.”

“I’m happy you think so highly of me, but it hardly seems worth dwelling on.”

“Rebecca...” Penelope trailed off.

“Please, try to understand, this could be my only chance to get out.”

“It was clear she wanted to argue more, but after a moment, she just sighed. “You’ve already made your mind up on this, haven’t you?”

“I hadn’t before I made my way out here, but the more I think about it, yes I rather think I have.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

“Then I suppose I can’t make you fight this one.”

“I think we both know there was never any chance I would.”

She sighed. “I know, but that doesn’t mean I could just go along with it.”

“I can understand that, but you don’t need to worry about me so much.”

“Don’t I? After who you told me you are about to marry, how can you expect me not to worry?”

“I understand it might be difficult, but you know me. I always find a way to manage, don’t I?”

“Perhaps. But don’t you see, you should be doing more than just managing?”

“Of course I want to do more, and I think this will help. All I’m asking is for you to trust me.”

“It’s starting to sound like you genuinely want this match.”

“As I said, it can’t be worse than here.” She hesitated, chewing her lips. “Penelope, I have never been in a position to chose anything, not the food I ate, or the way I live, not the people I see or even the very clothes on my body. I can’t say I want this. I don’t know that I’ve ever let myself want anything. All I haveever hoped for was a way out of this house. I don’t know if I will get another.”

She sighed again. “Then I will try to be glad for you, but we can talk more later. If you feel all right at the moment, then I need to get home. Mama will be expecting me for dinner soon.”

“Of course. We can talk more tomorrow.”

Penelope got to her feet and made her way back to her side of the fence. Rebecca stayed outside for a while after she left.

She hadn’t lied. She did feel better about the engagement now that she had talked it over a bit, but fear and anxiety still wrapped around her heart like vines on the trellis.

The sun had started to go down and it was close to dinner time when she went in. In most homes, Rebecca would be going to dress for dinner. But this wasn’t most home,s so she simply headed up to her room to wait.

Rebecca’s legs were growing tired when she finally made it to the top of the narrow back stairs. It probably would have been faster if she had used the main stairs, but then she would have risked running into her sister or her father and she just couldn’t take seeing either of them again in that moment.

Finally, she made it to her room. While Dorothy and her father had rooms on the main floor, Rebecca’s was tucked away in the dark, drafty attic, where they wouldn’t have to see or hear her.

The room itself was actually rather large. Rebecca did her best to make the most of the space, laying out rugs she managed to get off of servants before they threw them out, and drapes she made herself from an old blanket.

It went a long way to keep out the harsh chill, though when winter came in there was nothing to be done for it. Attics weren’t known for their insulation and warmth, but

she did what she could to make it work. After all, it wasn't as though she had many other options.

"I doubt Duke Danton will force me to sleep in an attic," she mumbled to herself. "Even if he is said to be cruel, I doubt he would do something like that without provocation."

She nodded to herself.

It would be alright. All she needed to do was make a good impression then stay out of his way.

It would hardly be all that different from what she was doing now at worst and an improvement in her circumstances.

She was still thinking this over when there was a soft knock at her door. Forcing a smile, she got up and went over to it to see Janet, the maid who usually brought her her food.

"Here's your dinner, miss."

"Thank you, Janet."

She handed her the tray then hesitated.

"What is it?" Rebecca asked.

"I heard Lady Dorothy talking. Are you getting married, miss?"

Rebecca forced a smile. "Yes, I am."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

“That’s wonderful news! I didn’t even know you were courting anyone.”

“I wasn’t. The marriage was arranged.”

“Oh, I see. Are you happy about it? Do you like the man at least?”

“I think I will be.”

“You haven’t met him?” she frowned. “Oh my dear, I’m so sorry.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I’m not. I don’t want you to be either. True, this was never how I imagined myself marrying, but I am still lucky to leave this place and be welcomed into his home.”

Janet sighed, offering a sad smile. “You have always had a remarkable ability to look on the bright side through everything.”

“Please don’t worry about me. I’m sure wherever I go will be better.”

She seemed like she wanted to say more, but just smiled and nodded. “I hope so, miss. Well, I will leave you to your dinner. Have a nice evening.”

“I hope you do as well.”

Rebecca watched her walk away then headed back into her room. She perched at her desk and uncovered her dinner.

It wasn't much, but that was hardly a surprise. If she had a big meal she'd probably end up wasting quite a bit. It was better this way with her small bowl of stew and day old bread.

She ate alone then left the tray outside her door for Janet to come and collect in the morning. It was still early, but Rebecca knew her father wouldn't want to see her out of her room for the rest of the night, so she started getting ready for bed.

Her bed was small and lumpy, but it was better than the floor.

She drifted off not long after laying down, her mind turning over her rapidly approaching future.

CHAPTER 2

Only a week later, Rebecca stepped into the carriage. Her heart pounded in her chest. She tried to keep her focus on the small bubble of excitement of getting to leave that house rather than the nerves at the thought of what comes next. She chewed her lip as she watched one of the footmen secure her meager bag of belongings secured on the back of the sleek black carriage. There wasn't much in there. In fact there so few things that the bag lay limp and could almost be mistaken as being empty, but it was all that her had. It held her few dresses, her two shawls, and her one cloak. Part of her was amazed her father had let her take anything given how he and Dorothy had treated her in the remainder of her time living there.

As awful as Dorothy could be, Rebecca was glad she was the only other occupant of the carriage. Solomon had ridden to the church ahead of them, leaving her alone with Dorothy. Her sister was smiling smugly at her from her seat across from her. She was decked out in all her finery in a sharp contrast to Rebecca's own simple afternoon dress. Anyone looking at us would think Dorothy was the bride, not myself, Rebecca thoughts. No onewould have guessed that Rebecca was doing anything more than

going out to do a bit of shopping and perhaps visiting a friend.

“You look so beautiful in your wedding dress,” Dorothy grinned.

Her words could almost be mistaken as kind if her snide tone made her mockery clear.

“Thank you, Dorothy,” Rebecca said, eyes locked on her hands folded in her lap. She focused on taking deep breaths. For good or ill, it would be over soon.

“I genuinely don’t know that I have ever seen a bride who looks quite like you do, at least not of our status. You truly are a marvel.”

“It was very kind of you to pick out this dress for me.”

“I do try. As your older sister it is my job to look after you. Besides, it also frees up space in my closet. I hope you don’t mind that I kept the lace for myself. But then, why should you?”

“Indeed, why would I? It was kind of you to think of me at all.”

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it? Be sure not to forget it after today. Are you excited to be a great duchess?”

Rebecca gritted her teeth. She only had a few more hours of this at most then she would be on her way to her new home with her new husband. At the moment, she would have almost preferred blows, deceit, or outright lechery to one more minute of her sister’s mockery.

“You still haven’t seen him, have you?”

“I’ll be meeting him today,” she replied, as though Dorothy didn’t already know that.

“I’ve met him, you know.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

Her head jerked up to look at her sister. “No, I didn’t.” Questions bubbled in her throat, but she didn’t dare voice any of them. She couldn’t risk giving her sister any more words to twist against her.

Dorothy hummed. “Yes, it was only once and not very long.”

“When?” she asked before she could stop herself.

The grin she gave Rebecca made her mistake clear, but it was too late. “It was at the very afternoon tea that father agreed you would marry him.”

“Why were you there for that? If I wasn’t able to be present, it hardly seems appropriate.”

Dorothy shot her a cold look at the audacity of Rebecca’s question, but it had been a fair question. After all, it was more than a little odd that she had been there, especially since Rebecca hadn’t.

In fact, not only had Rebecca not been there, not only did she not know about it, but she hadn’t even known her possible engagement was on the table. “Father arranged a formal tea to work out the details after he heard from the gentlemen’s club the duke was looking for a husband. As your older sister, it only makes sense that I would be there to help find an appropriate husband. Why wouldn’t I have been there?”

Rebecca backpedaled quickly. The ride to the church was far too long to be trapped with her sister while she was upset. “I can understand why you were there. Of course you had your reasons, but it just seems like the kind of discussion where only the

parties involved would be present.”

“But it does involve me. After all, having a sister married to a duke raises my prospects quite a bit. I hope you know just how lucky you are.”

Rebecca looked away. “Of course. How could I ever forget?”

“You are an ungrateful thing. I’m not surprised you would forget,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “Still, it is your wedding day, so I suppose I can forgive you.”

“Thank you. That is very kind of you.”

“Yes, it is isn’t it.” A slow smile curved Dorothy’s lips. “Do you want to hear what he is like?”

Rebecca hesitated.

“Come now. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors. I’m sure you want to know if they are true.”

“Well, I- I try to avoid gossip as best as I can.”

“I’m sure you do, but in this world it is rather hard to avoid. You can’t tell me you haven’t heard any of them.”

“I suppose I might have.”

“Then why don’t you ask me about them? Id be more than happy to tell you all about him.”

“I wouldn’t even know what to ask.”

“Come now, I’m sure you have questions.”

She didn’t say anything.

“If you don’t want to ask, why don’t I just tell you what I think?” Then she leaned in closer. “Every word is true,” she whispered.

Rebecca felt the color drain from her face. “What?”

“I said, every single word you’ve heard is completely true.”

She was too stunned to speak.

“Why don’t I start by telling you what he looks like?”

She wanted to tell her no. to tell her to stop. She knew it didn’t matter what she said. It was going to happen. There was no point in scaring herself, but she couldn’t force herself to say a word.

“He’s just as hideous as you have heard. Not only that, but he has an awful scar on his neck. I heard his brother gave it to him before he died.”

Rebecca’s heart pounded.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:39 am

Dorothy laughed, grinning down at her sister. “But you don’t need to worry. I think he’s positively perfect for you.”

“Perfect for me?” She dug her nails into her palm. “How-” she cut herself off, but it was too late.

“Of course he is,” she gave a cruel grin. “Do you want me to tell you just how well suited you are to one another?”

Rebecca hesitated.

“Don’t worry, I won’t make you ask. We both know you do.”

Dorothy took a deep breath, smiling like a woman who anticipated the most delicious of sweets. “Well, to begin with, he’s also known to be a rather cold man, just as you are a cold woman. Not only that, but he is known to hate balls and parties. I’m sure that must be quite a relief for you, after all, you wouldn’t even know what to do at a ball. No, it isn’t a place for someone like you.”

Somehow that was the thing that broke her out of her stupor. Maybe it was foolish, but she had always dreamed about going to a ball and dancing with a charming man the way Dorothy got to so often. “It wasn’t as if I ever had a chance to learn,” Rebecca dared to whisper, lip trembling.

That was a mistake. She should have known better than to let emotion get the better of her. She should have known to hold her tongue.

Dorothy leveled her with a look that could curdle milk. “Why would you? You’re too young to be out.”

“You had already been out for almost a year by the time you were my age.”

“But I’m the oldest, so that makes sense. You can’t be out until I get married. Besides, who would want to dance with you?”

Rebecca opened her mouth and did something she’d never dared to do. She talked back to her sister. It wasn’t a slip of the tongue. It wasn’t letting her temper get the better of her. It was a conscious choice to say something to her sister.

“Then perhaps you should be the one to marry the duke!”

Dorothy snarled at her. “Would you like to know another thing the two of you have in common, dear sister?”

Her fire started to dim. “And what would that be?”

Dorothy leaned forward, eyes glinting. “Everyone says he’s a murderer. Just like you.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I never-”

“Didn’t you?”

She shook her head, heart pounding. Not this again. She couldn’t do this. Not today. Not just before she was to be married.

“Because I think you did. Or do you not remember what you did to our mother?”

“I miss her too.”

“Miss her,” she scowled. “You didn’t even know her.”

“That doesn’t mean I-”

“You killed her with your birth! You were born wrong, and this is only one more thing that shows it..”

“I wasn’t-”

She scoffed, turning away from her. “There's no point in lying. We will all be better off when you are out of the house. Just don’t make more trouble for Father and me.”

Rebecca stayed silent after that. There was nothing she could say that would make things better. Her eyes burned with tears she had no time to shed.

For now, all she could do was to sit and wait for them to go the last little distance to the church.

When they finally arrived, Dorothy raced out of the carriage ahead of her without waiting for even a second. Rebecca had no choice but to trail a distance after her.

Before she could enter the church, Penelope was by her side. “Rebecca!”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She turned to her friend, heart pounding. “Penelope, I wasn’t expecting you to be here.”

“As if I would miss your wedding! How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” she said, but Penelope’s frown made clear she wasn’t buying it.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“It doesn’t make a difference what I want.”

“Rebecca,” she trailed off.

“It’s alright. It isn’t about this. It’s just.... Dorothy.”

“I see. Did she say something to you?”

“Doesn’t she always?”

“I’m so sorry. You don’t deserve that any day, much less today.”

“Thank you, but at least she won’t have as many opportunities soon.”

“So you’re still looking forward to it then?”

She gave a hesitant nod. “I think so.”

“That’s good I suppose.”

“Especially since there’s no going back now.”

“I don’t know. It isn’t too late for you to run off into the night.”

She chuckled. “No, it would be far better to just get this over with.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am. Give me a moment alone then I’ll see you once I’m a married woman.”

Penelope pulled her in for a tight hug. “I will come by and visit you as soon as it is proper to do so.”

“I know you will. And I promise I will tell you all about it.”

They shared a last look then Penelope nodded and released her.

Rebecca only had a moment or two to herself before Solomon was suddenly by her side, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Shall we get this over with?”

“I don’t- is this the type of thing one gets over with?”

He glared down at her. “It is in this case.”

“Right,” she looked down. “Then I suppose there’s no point in waiting, is there?”

“I’m glad to hear you are seeing sense.”

Then he snatched up her arm and all but dragged her into the church.

That was the first moment she caught a glimpse of her soon-to-be husband. When she saw him, her heart began to pound. She almost stopped in her tracks, much to Solomon's annoyance, but she couldn't help herself.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

Duke Danton cut an imposing figure. He was tall, with broad shoulders, dark hair, and piercing blue eyes. Then, of course, there was the scar on his neck.

It was a jagged stark white streak curving along his neck and up across his jaw. It only seemed to accent the harsh set of his mouth and bring out the coldness in his eyes.

Those eyes that were locked right on her. She didn't know what it meant, only that the sheer intensity of it knocked the air from her lungs.

"What are you doing?" her father hissed. "Get moving. You're making a fool of this family just standing here."

"I'm sorry father."

"Don't be sorry. Do what you are supposed to."

She took a deep breath and started making her way towards her... her fiance. The man who would be her husband.

The closer she got, the more intense the Duke's gaze became. Rebecca swallowed, clenching her hands to keep them from shaking.

They made it to the front of the church and her father stepped aside, leaving her to walk the last few steps on her own.

Finally, she was standing in front of the vicar and Duke Danton. There was a moment

when the vicar started to speak. Rebecca locked her eyes on the ground and tried to focus on just breathing.

It seemed like a miracle that she made it through the ceremony at all. She found herself unable to focus on anything but the way his eyes almost seemed to burn into her. She hadn't even spoken yet and she'd found a way to displease him. She looked away from his sharp eyes, fighting back tears.

But that just made her eyes linger on the scar peeking out from above his cravat. He'd made no effort to conceal it, and it was big enough that no one could avoid noticing it. It wrapped around his throat, an angry red line.

She tore her eyes away. What was she doing?

He was already disappointed in her and here she was staring at his scars like a mannerless child.

Rebecca looked back to his face and her heart clenched in fear.

The next thing she knew, the vicar was declaring them husband and wife. The parish clerk noted the completion of the ceremony and called Solomon and Dorothy over to stand witness. One look at Dorothy's snide face told Rebecca exactly what her sister wanted to say.

"The pair of you look so perfect together. You deserve each other."

She couldn't help but wonder what William thought about her. Rebecca glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes. He was still standing there as though he hadn't heard what the vicar said.

After a moment, he turned on his heels without saying a word. He walked from the

altar without waiting to ensure she followed him. After all, why would he bother? What else was she going to do?

When she made it outside the church after him, he was already getting into his rather nice carriage. It was far larger and more ornate than her family's. She gave herself a minute to take in the shining lacquered finish and gilded panels on the door. The very thought of sitting in the velvet interior made her want to wince.

It felt as though her very presence let alone her touch would cheapen or possibly even ruin it.

I suppose that is what you have when you're a duke, she thought to herself.

But did he really want her to ride with him?

The thought caused her to hesitate for a moment. It was possible he would have a second carriage take her home. He hadn't said anything.

In fact, aside from giving his consent to the match in the ceremony, he hadn't said a single word since she had met him.

He must be horribly disappointed with her. Rebecca chewed her lip. It wouldn't be the first time she disappointed someone. Still, she'd hoped it would take longer than this.

Her spiral was suddenly cut off when William stuck his head out the carriage window and asked, "Are you coming?" in a rough, annoyed voice.

She jumped and winced. She had been too slow and disappointed him again. "Yes, of course!" Rebecca hurried to join him in the carriage.

In her race to comply, her foot slipped and she started to fall, letting out a small yelp.

But before she could hit the ground, a hand closed around her wrist.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She looked up to see William staring at her, that intense look still on his face. Rebecca felt her face heat under it.

“Did you hurt yourself?”.

She got her feet under her before pulling her hand away. “No, I only slipped. Thank you for saving me.”

“All I might have saved you from was a tear in your skirts.”

“Nevertheless, I appreciate it.”

He huffed, crossing his arms. “Just get inside. I would like to return to the manor before dark.”

Rebecca scurried to comply.

CHAPTER 3

Rebecca and William were now trapped in a small box with nothing but each other for entertainment. Thought it was a very nice, comfortable and expensive box. He reclined comfortably on his seat across from her, looking out the window as they rolled along. But Rebecca perched on the edge of her seat. How could she do much else? As she ran the tips of her fingers along the decadent upholstery she couldn't help but feel a bit like she was tainting the carriage. Her father would never let her touch anything this fine. Her eyes darting around the space, taking it all in.

And there was just so much to look at.

The carriage was far nicer than her father's that Rebecca had ridden to the church in so many ways. It was far more comfortable for one. The seats were not only padded but also had pillows. There were even a few blankets stashed inside.

The windows even had thick damask drapes in a stunning emerald green. They were so nice she couldn't help but take a moment to admire the pattern of them.

She absolutely wasn't doing it just so she could avoid looking at her new husband.

Neither of them had said a word as they drove along. The silence hung, heavy and oppressive, between them. Rebecca felt like she couldn't breathe. There was no doubt in her mind that he must be disappointed, but she had thought he would have something to say.

Even if it was just to tell her that she wasn't what he wanted. She wished she knew what it was about her that he didn't like.

She knew she wasn't much to look at. How could she not? Her father and sister made a point to make sure she knew just how undesirable she was. Maybe he'd incorrectly believed he was going to marry Dorothy. She wouldn't put it past her father to allow him to think that.

Minutes ticked by and the Duke—her husband!—still hadn't said anything.

Perhaps he was waiting for her to speak first for some reason. Was he expecting her to break the silence? Would that be presumptuous?

Would he ever say a word if she didn't speak?

Could she ever recover his opinion of her if she tried and disrespected him further?

But if she didn't try, if she just laid down and accepted the silence, what was she saying? She knew she needed to try for the sake of her own future.

And so, taking a deep breath, she forced herself to do just that. "Are we going somewhere for a wedding celebration? My father said he wasn't having one, but I wasn't sure if perhaps you wanted one," she babbled. "After all, with you being a Duke and all, I'm not too sure what is expected of you. So I wasn't sure."

"No," was all he said in reply.

"I see." There was a moment of silence. "So are we simply returning to your home?"

He studied her for a moment with a thoughtful look in his eyes. Finally, he huffed, turning back to the window. "It isn't just my home anymore."

Rebecca couldn't help but smile, looking at him for the first time since she got in the carriage. A small seed of hope began to take root in her heart. Maybe they could live together in peace, even if she wasn't what he had hoped for. "That's very kind of you to say."

He made a face she couldn't quite place, looking away from her with a deep huff. "It isn't kind. I am simply stating the situation. You have married me. You have become the Duchess of Danton, and the Duchess of Danton is the lady of Batton Manor."

"Still," she tried to catch his eye, unable to help the small smile blooming on her face. "Regardless of why you said it, that doesn't change that I am grateful for the sentiment. Thank you."

William met her eyes and she immediately wished she hadn't tried so hard to make

him. He pinned her with a look that sent shivers up her spine.

It was easy to see why people would fear him. All of the rumors she had heard of him sprang to mind. It was said he killed his own brother and father when he was just a child. That wasn't even to get into the cruelty he had done to his own mother. It was said he never let her out of the house from the moment they died until well after her own death.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

And to look at him, well, he certainly cut an imposing figure, but to her surprise, she didn't feel anything even remotely resembling fear.

But even so, the way he looked at her was nothing like the way her father had always looked at her. True, there was mistrust, skepticism, perhaps even a fair bit of suspicion, but there was no animosity, no aggression. She doubted he would ever deprive her of food, or clothes. He didn't seem inclined to hurl insults or worse. She was surprised by just how safe that made her feel.

She had to bite back the urge to smile. She didn't think he would appreciate it at the moment, but she almost couldn't help herself.

He was nothing like she thought he would be. This life was nothing like she thought it would be. She was starting to hope that maybe, just maybe they could be happy together, but for the moment, all she could do was get through the moment in front of her.

The silence that settled over them once again felt different than the one that had existed when they first left the church, at least it did for her. Gone was much of the fear and anxiety she had entered with. In its place was a faint spark of excitement to see the place that would soon become her new home.

Batton Manor was situated right in the center of London, much to her surprise. She would have thought someone known to be as reclusive as the Duke of Danton would have fled for a country house, but apparently not.

The place was also shockingly well-maintained. If Rebecca hadn't been told who the

house belonged to, she never would have guessed.

Even from the outside, she could tell the place was far larger than her childhood home. Flowers climbed along a trellis on one of the pale stone walls.

She didn't move until William started climbing out, only then did she race after him.

"I don't expect much of you," he said, voice startling her. "But you are a duchess now, so you will have some duties. I'll have Mrs. Anderson, my housekeeper, explain them to you."

"Oh!" It should have been obvious, but Rebecca couldn't help but be a little surprised. Her father had never trusted her with even a trip to the market without someone watching over her.

"If you have any questions, I'm sure Mrs. Anderson will be more than capable of helping you. Aside from that, you are free to spend your time as you see fit. Would you like to change before dinner?"

For a moment all she could do was blink as she tried to grasp everything he had said. "No, I don't think I need to."

After all, it wasn't like she had a complex or proper wedding dress. Her hair was also rather simple and she didn't have any jewelry either. There really wasn't anything all that different from what she would wear on a normal day.

Part of her was more than a little disappointed if she was honest. Still, it wasn't something that surprised her. After all, why would they waste money on a new dress for her when there was no party or big ceremony. Not only that, but she was getting married before her older sister, something liable to bring Dorothy no small measure of shame and embarrassment. She was sure Dorothy was lamenting her lack of

worthy suitors at that very moment with some of her friends.

“Are you sure? I was led to believe most women would.”

“Perhaps, but I am plenty comfortable, I assure you. You don’t need to worry about me.”

He stared at her for a moment before he shrugged. “Very well, whatever you like. If there’s nothing you need, then you can simply follow me then.”

Rebecca scurried behind him, eyes darting everywhere, desperate to take in any details of her new house and what it might tell her about her new husband.

But he was moving fast and it was hard to notice much of anything. What she could see was more than overwhelming on its own. Everywhere she looked was finery. The place didn’t even feel like a home, rather a bit like a museum. Father’s home was full of flimsy but shiny new gimcracks, but here she was surrounded by old pieces that were clearly passed down through several generations.

Rebecca couldn’t help but smile. The few older pieces her father hadn’t sold off ended up in the attic with her. There was something reassuring about seeing something at least vaguely familiar.

Only a few moments later, the pair made their way into the dinning room. As William took his seat at one end of the long table, Rebecca finally had a chance to really take in one of the rooms.

The room was large, almost overwhelmingly so. It wasn’t all that ornate, only a painting on one of the walls, a few wall sconces, and the main decor was of course the table itself. It was long enough for a full dinner party, but there were only two chairs, one at each end. He sat at the head of the table then looked at her expectantly.

Rebecca raced to comply, all but falling into the seat at the other end. Silence hung over them.

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, servants came out and the plates in front of them. Then, they uncovered the tray.

When Rebecca saw just how much food there was she gasped. It seemed like there was everything she could possibly think of. There was fresh bread, roast beef, savory vegetables, and none of the portions were small. It was easily more than double what she would have eaten not for a meal but in a day at home. Surely this had to be a mistake.

For a moment, she thought the servants had mixed up their plates, but when she glanced over to him, she saw William's was the same.

Maybe it was because it was their wedding day. He might want to give her a warm welcome and thought it was a good way to do that. After all, she didn't want to think about the possibility that it could be some kind of test. She chewed on her lip, toying with her fork while she sat paralyzed and unsure.

"What's wrong?" he asked, startling her from her thoughts.

She looked up to see he had set his own silverware aside and was staring at her, a deep frown on his face.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

How could she disturb his meal like this? She should know better and just be grateful. “Nothing’s wrong. Why would you think something is wrong?”

His frown deepened. “You haven’t eaten anything yet. Is the food not to your taste? If so, I can call down to the kitchen and see what we can do.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” she said quickly. “It was kind enough of you to put all of this together.”

“It’s just a meal. It really wasn’t much effort, but if the problem isn’t the food, then what is it?”

“I suppose I’m just not used to being given quite so much. My plates at home barely had half of this.”

He frowned. “Is it too much? I can make sure they bring you smaller portions in the future.”

“You don’t need to go to all that trouble.”

“It’s no trouble. It is just telling them how you would prefer something done.”

“You don’t need to have them change anything,” she said quickly. “It’s perfectly alright. I just don’t know if I’m going to be able to eat it all.”

“If you don’t, that’s alright.” He frowned, but he didn’t seem angry as he gave her a thoughtful look.

She looked at him in shock. Her father had always reprimanded her when she wasted even a small amount of food. It would usually result in her portions getting cut to be even smaller.

He was still watching her expectantly. After another moment of hesitation, Rebecca picked up her fork and started to eat. Regardless of what he said, she couldn't help but fear it was some kind of test.

There had to be a right answer for how much she was supposed to eat, and couldn't help but worry about eating too much or too little.

She shot him one last glance before taking her first bite, but he had already turned away from her and back to his own plate.

Then, Rebecca brought the carrot to her lips. When the flavors hit her tongue, she couldn't help the sound of delight that escaped her lips. It was nothing like the plain fare she had eaten at her family home. It was well seasoned and absolutely delicious, rich with butter and fragrant with sage.

She ate with renewed gusto, going from carrots to roast to bread in delight. Any and all worries about her husband's secret plan flew from her mind. All she could think about was how good the food was and how hungry she was.

She hadn't been given any time to eat anything before the ceremony. It was only after half her plate was gone that she remembered her manners and her location.

She held back a wince. Rebecca could hardly believe she had let him see her like that. She should have known better. It was no wonder he hadn't said anything since she had started eating. He must have thought she was such a pig!

Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe she could still save this. All she had to do was start a

conversation, show him he could enjoy her company and that she was worth keeping around. Not that he had much of a choice anymore.

So she did the only thing she could. She spoke, breaking the silence that was suffocating them.

“You mentioned earlier that you wanted me to manage the household. Is there anything you want to make sure I know?” she felt like her voice, though barely above a whisper was a scream in the quiet stillness of the room.

He just shook his head. “Not that I can think of. I’m sure you will manage fine on your own.”

“On my own?”

“Well, you’ll have Mrs. Anderson. I suppose I mean without my instructions.”

She smiled to herself. “I... I see. I do appreciate the vote of confidence, but is there nothing you need from me? I don’t just mean with the manor, I mean as a whole. Is there anything you expect of me?”

He thought for a minute, a frown growing on his face. “Only an heir, at an appropriate time.”

Rebecca’s face heated, a deep flush creeping up her neck. She swallowed. “I will do my best to fulfill my duties, your gr... husband.”

“Try not to worry. There will be plenty of time for that once you have made yourself at home. For the time being, just take some time to settle in. I’m sure you’ll have much to learn here.”

“Thank you.” She had to bite back a sigh of relief.

“We only met a few hours ago. I have no doubt there will be much both of us need to become accustomed to.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

Rebecca smiled. "I will do my best to adjust as quickly as I can. I would hate to disrupt your life more than I must."

He just hummed in vague assent, letting the silence fall over them once more.

Rebecca enjoyed the rest of her food, but she couldn't stop glancing at William. In so many ways he was different than she had expected. He was quiet and seemed quite harsh, but Rebecca thought there was kindness hidden behind his eyes. Most importantly, he seemed to have an interest in this relationship developing into something more. Something real. All it needed was time.

After a while, William set his silverware down before getting to his feet. He turned to her with a stiff and distant expression on his face. "I have a few things I need to see to this evening. I will have my housekeeper come out to show you to your room shortly. Please enjoy the rest of your meal."

"Oh," she tried to hide her surprise. She also didn't realize she would be as disappointed as she was. "Of course. As a Duke you must be a very busy man. Will I see you again this evening?"

"It's doubtful."

"Of course., tomorrow morning then?"

"Perhaps."

"Then I look forward to it."

“Don’t look forward to it too much. I can’t guarantee that I will be able to join you then either.”

“Of course,” she said again. “I understand you are a busy man.”

“Quite.”

She forced a smile, pushing down her disappointment. It was foolish and selfish of her to think he would put whatever he needed to do on hold for the day. She did her best to push the thoughts from her head. “I completely understand. I hope you have a pleasant rest of your evening.”

He studied her for another moment before he turned. William paused in the doorway. “I hope you do as well. Please let Ms. Anderson know if anything in your quarters needs adjusting.”

“I’m sure it will be perfectly fine, but thank you.”

“Very well. It was nice to meet you, Lady Rebecca,” but his voice didn’t sound like he thought it was pleasant.

He sounded, annoyed, disappointed, and eager to finally get away from her.

“Of course, but...”

Her words trailed off lost into thin air as he turned and walked from the room without another word.

CHAPTER 4

Rebecca let out a long breath before turning to her food. She didn’t mind being on her

own. Really, she didn't it was fine. She was used to taking her meals alone.

Just because it was her wedding day didn't mean there was anything special about it, and really after the excitement of the day, she was grateful for a chance to catch her breath in peace. She wasn't used to so much excitement, so of course a break was nice.

She needed it really, so Rebecca enjoyed the rest of her meal, even if it was alone. Besides the food was so good it didn't require conversation to be enjoyed.

Just as she was finishing up, the door opened and a woman stepped inside. She was of medium height with dark hair and dark eyes. Just as William had when they first met, she studied her with an unreadable expression. Rebecca could only assume it was because she had disappointed her as well.

"Good evening, your Grace," she curtsied. "I am Mrs. Anderson the housekeeper."

"Good evening! I'm Rebecca."

"Yes, I am aware"

"Right, of course. You were probably told I was coming to marry Duke Danton ahead of time."

"That's right. We wouldn't have been able to prepare your room for you if we hadn't, let alone prepared this meal for you."

"Yes of course. I'm sorry I wasn't thinking."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“It has been a long day,” she said, a tight smile on her face. “I’m sure you must be rather tired. Would you like me to show you to your room?”

“Yes, that would be lovely. Perhaps you could show me some of the house on the way? I know Duke Danton expects me to manage things so I should start trying to get the lay of the land.”

“Of course, your grace,” she said, but Rebecca couldn’t help but notice the frown etching its way onto her face.

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” Rebecca said as she got to her feet and followed her from the room.

“It's my job to ensure you are comfortable here at Batton Manor.”

Rebecca followed her as she led her through the massive house. Here and there, the housekeeper made an effort to point out important rooms and items that she thought might be of use to her.

But try as she might, Rebecca couldn’t make herself focus on anything. It was all just so overwhelming. Rebecca had to bite back a sigh. It would just be another thing where she disappointed someone. It stung worse this time because she really wanted to prove she could do what they needed. She really thought maybe she could have done it this time, but she never even had a chance to really try.

Those thoughts were still circling in her head when they came to a stop outside one of the countless doors.

“Here’ s your room, my lady,” Mrs. Anderson said.

“Thank you. I should be fine on my own from here.”

Mrs. Anderson frowned. “Before I go, I should mention that I don’t believe your lady’s maid has arrived at Batton House yet. Would you like me to send someone up to help you change for bed?”

“That’s alright. I can manage just fine on my own.”

She studied her for a moment. “Do you know when we can expect her?”

“I- I’m not sure,” she chewed her lip. Rebecca knew she should just tell her that she didn’t have one, but found herself far too embarrassed that her father had never seen the point in such an expense. Not that it was a problem. She could manage just fine on her own.

“Then I will check among our staff to find a temporary one for you until she arrives.”

“You don’t need to go to all that trouble. I will be able to manage fine on my own. It’s perfectly alright.”

“It’s no trouble. It would only be temporary, and a duchess should never be without her lady’s maid.”

Rebecca smiled, shaking her head. “I appreciate it, but I can manage on my own just fine. You don’t need to worry about me.”

Mrs. Anderson spent another few seconds scrutinizing Rebecca. The longer she stood there, the more Rebecca could feel herself beginning to spiral.

Even though Duke Danton wasn't the most social person doesn't mean he doesn't care at all about his family image. If he wanted her to properly look the part of a duchess, they might expect her to get some more elaborate dresses and hairstyles, but how could she even consider it? Rebecca wouldn't even know where to begin, and that wasn't even to mention the cost! She could never expect William to pay for it, and it wasn't like she had any way to make her own money. Maybe she could-

"If you're sure you Grace," Mrs. Anderson said, cutting off her thoughts.

"Yes, I am, but thank you for your concern," she forced a bright smile, hoping it didn't look too stiff. If it did, she mercifully didn't say anything.

Instead the older woman just sighed. "If that is what you would prefer, I can leave you to settle in for the night. I will see you in the morning and we can go over your duties as lady of the house."

"That sounds perfect. Thank you."

"Very good. I shall see you then. I hope you have a good night, please let us know if you change your mind and need anything."

"I will. Thank you. I hope you sleep well as well."

"I always do."

Rebecca smiled as the other woman made her way down the hall, leaving her alone. Rebecca took a deep breath, turning to the door. She put her hand on the door knob, hesitating for a moment.

Who knew what would be on the other side. While she was sure whatever was set up in there would have to have been done well before she met William or Mrs.

Anderson, she couldn't help but worry she could have done something to make them change the room or take something away.

Still, it couldn't be worse than the attic she reminded herself. There was no point in lingering in the hall any longer. Rebecca took a deep breath, squeezed her eyes shut, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

When she saw the room, she gasped in surprise. She had expected it to be an improvement over her childhood room, but it easily surpassed her wildest dreams by leaps and bounds.

The room was large. There was a window over on the far wall, deep emerald green drapes blocking out the moonlight. The walls themselves were a pale cream, a stark contrast with the dark wood of the floor and the furnishings. Breaking up the space there was a thick rug covering most of the floor. It almost seemed thick enough that when she woke up in the morning, it would keep her feet from getting cold until she finished up getting dressed. Or at least it would if she didn't have to go over to the wardrobe on the other side of the room to get her stockings.

Perhaps she could ask about having it moved closer to the bed. As quickly as the thought formed, she shook it from her head.

How ungrateful could she be? There was no reason for her to ask for anything. They had gone to more than enough effort for her already.

Taking in the rest of the room, she saw a small, well-stocked writing desk near the window. It looked like it would get wonderful sunlight, especially in the morning. A short distance away was a dressing table. Then there was the wardrobe. The majority of the space was a large plush bed.

The bed itself was a dream in its own right, a vast improvement from where she slept in the attic. It was so large, with four posts and a damask canopy. The covers were thick and made of the softest material she had ever felt. As for the pillows, thick and plump and feathery, she could hardly wait to sink into them.!

Rebecca didn't know if she had ever seen that many together in her life.

"Is this really all for me?" she asked herself, running her hand along it.

She gave herself a few moments to marvel at it all before turning her attention to the only other thing of interest in the room, the single case she had brought with her from her family home.

Normally, unpacking something like this would have been done by a lady's maid, but she didn't have one so it had fallen by the wayside, but that was preferred by Rebecca.

She grinned to herself, making her way over to the small bag. Opening it, she set to work unpacking her few positions. There wasn't much in there, three-day dresses, two sleeping gowns, her two shawls, her warm cloak, and a few pairs of stockings. Her shoes were still on her feet so she didn't need to worry about those and she had never been allowed to have her own hobby supplies, so that was all she had.

Once she was happy with where everything was, she stood back with a smile. Maybe it was a bit selfish or conceited of her, but it was really starting to feel like her own space, far more than the attic ever had. She gave herself a moment to appreciate it all before starting the process of getting ready for bed.

It wasn't hard for her to get herself undressed. Wedding day or not, her dresses always tended to be rather simple. They were always Dorothy's cast-offs and she tended to strip them of any lace or decorations before she handed them off. Not only that but since they didn't want to get her a lady's maid, they tended to either be wrap dresses or have a bib front opening. That was the kind of dress she had on that day. She unbuttoned the small buttons on either side of her chest, letting the top fall open before undoing the ties where the short bodice turned into the skirt.

Once she slipped it off, she hung the dress with her others before slipping off her petticoat and unlacing her corded stays. Then she pulled off her shift and pulled a sleeping gown over her head.

Her hair was back in a simple bun and it wasn't hard for her to take it down and pull it into a simple braid so it would be out of her way when she slept.

Then it was the moment she had been waiting for since she stepped into the room.

It was time to slip into that heavenly bed.

Turning down the covers she couldn't stop smiling. Before she even climbed into the bed, she had to stop and marvel. The blankets felt so thick and soft in her hands. She just knew that when she was finally under them she would feel perfectly warm even in the worst of winter. She didn't think she could remember a winter where she had slept without suffering at least a few nights of the bitter cold.

But she wouldn't have to muddle through that here.

The very thought was enough to make her beam. Then she slipped under the covers and leaned back against the pillows.

She couldn't help but marvel at the sheer variety of them! Some were soft, some were firm, some had silky covers, and others felt more like cotton. Part of her didn't know what to do with all of them. As she lay there, Rebecca couldn't believe her luck.

This was her home now. She was going to build a life here.

She could only do her best to make sure she didn't let William down. He had already done so much for her that she couldn't bear the thought of letting him down.

She would just have to learn to be the best duchess possible. She would blow them away with just how competent she could be.

She had to.

CHAPTER 5

William sat behind his desk, burying his face in his hands.

What was he thinking? Why had he let Patrick talk him into this?

The second his solicitor had suggested it he should have shut the idea down.

Sure he needed an heir, but it all happened so fast. Now she was here, asleep in one of the rooms, his wife, Rebecca.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

He wasn't sure what he had hoped for when he had agreed to the match, but when he saw her standing there, he was shocked. With how eager her father had been to get rid of her, he had expected her to be more than a little homely, but she wasn't. Quite the opposite in fact, so much so that it stunned him.

He was startled from his thoughts by a knock on the door.

Before he could get a word out, the door swung open and Patrick stepped inside. He was a tall lean man with red hair and laughing blue eyes. When he saw William sitting behind his desk he frowned.

"I was worried I would find you here," the Irishman sighed.

William frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to check on you and make sure you weren't locked away brooding. Where's your new bride?"

"Sleeping in her room I imagen."

He hummed. "Doesn't seem like you spent a lot of time with her."

"I thought she seemed tired after the excitement of the day."

"If going to the church and having a meal with you was too much excitement for one day then I find myself worried for her health."

William rolled his eyes. “If all you have come here to do is check on me, then you have seen me. You can go now.”

“Don’t think you’re getting out of talking to me that easily. I have too many questions to go anywhere.”

William sighed. “If I can’t get out of this, why don’t you just ask me what you want to ask me.”

“Why don’t we start small, what do you think of her?”

William scowled. “Is that your idea of starting small?”

“Seems like an easy enough question.”

He looked away. “She will make a serviceable duchess.”

Patrick stared at him, clearly waiting for more. When he realized it wasn’t going to come, he spoke again. “Is that it? You marry a woman and all you can say is that she will make a good—not even good, just serviceable—duchess?”

“What more do you expect me to say?”

“How you feel, the things you spoke about, anything.”

“If you’re looking for specific information, then you should ask specific questions.”

“I suppose I should have known better on that one. Why don’t I try again. Do you think she is pretty?”

He stared down at his desk. William knew better than to risk eye contact while they

talked about her. “I suppose she could be.”

The other man chuckled. “That’s high praise coming from you. You must think she’s wonderful.”

He sighed. “She dresses plainly. Her gown was almost completely unadorned. I must admit I was a bit surprised.”

“But that just makes it easier to see her natural charms.”

“If you want to see it that way I won’t stop you.”

“So you think she’s pretty, that’s a good start, but I need to know more than that. What is she like? What did you talk about?”

“She seems.... Quiet?” he said unsure.

“Sounds perfect for you. The two of you can enjoy sitting together in a room and not speaking to each other.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Did you make the trip all the way here simply to mock me or did you need something?”

“Mostly to mock you. And to make sure you actually spend some time with your new wife.”

“Of course I did. We rode the carriage home together then had dinner.”

“Is that it?”

“I had things I needed to do. You know I’m a rather busy man. Honestly, I have no idea how I let you talk me into this.”

“It wasn’t as hard to do as you like to pretend. Whether you want to admit it or not, the simple fact of the matter is that you want more company than me and your staff.”

“Are you admitting that you are poor company? You don’t need to be so hard on yourself.”

“I am going to let that go since it is your wedding day.”

“And so that you can continue to ask countless questions about her.”

“You seem perfectly capable of counting all of my questions.”

“Just ask them so we can get this over with.”

“Why are you alone in your office?”

He sighed. “I’m sure she’s relieved I’m gone. We both know I’m not the easiest to get along with.”

“So you claim.”

“Because it’s true.”

“You have no concept of what you’re like as a person, do you?”

William rolled his eyes. “It is hardly the first time you have said as much, but you have yet to explain it.”

“I have. You just don’t listen.”

“That doesn’t sound like me.”

Patrick just grinned at him. “How long did you last into the dinner before you made your escape?”

“I’ll have you know I had the whole meal with her,” he scowled.

“Really? You sat there until both of you had finished eating?”

He looked away, “Well, not quite. You see, she was taking quite some time, but I stayed until I was done eating.”

“Why couldn’t you wait?”

“I had things I needed to work on.”

Patrick laughed. “Because heaven forbid you take a rest on your wedding day.”

“What was I supposed to do all day?”

“Spend time with her? Get to know the person you have agreed to spend the rest of your life with.”

“I doubt she would want that.”

“You don’t think she would want a chance to get to know the man she married?”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

William shook his head. “You didn’t see the way she looked at me.”

“I saw the way she was looking at you in the church. Like a mouse caught in a trap. You’d best learn why before she expires from sheer nerves.”

He shook his head. “Why would someone like her choose someone like me? I can hardly believe her family would agree to the match.”

“Her father is a notorious social climber. I don’t doubt he would have married her off to anyone who could offer the Crowton family more prestige. If you want my opinion-”

“Which I did not ask for.”

“She got lucky with you.”

He scoffed. “Do you have anything else to say or have you finished saying your piece?”

“I suppose, but -”

“I think it would be wise for you to stop wasting your time. The only reason I agreed to this this match was to sire an heir. There is no reason to act as though there is anything more than that going on.”

Partick stared at him, clearly wanting to say more, but he had knows William long enough to know a losing battle when he saw one.

“Fine, if you insist, I won’t push it, but make sure you spend some time with her tomorrow.”

“I’ll remember that you said that.”

“That isn’t the same as saying you are going to do it.”

William just smiled. “Have a good night, Patrick. I’ll see you when it’s time to get back to work.”

“Fine. And do try to give yourself at least a day or two to introduce yourself to your wife,” he called as he walked from the room leaving William on his own once more.

He waited until he heard his footsteps disappear down the hall before letting out a long breath.

Patrick was a good man, but he was too loyal. He couldn’t understand how Rebecca must be feeling. He never should have asked for this.

He spent a little while longer in his study, busying himself with some work before it was too late to justify anything other than going to bed. Getting to his feet, he ventured into the hall.

As he went, he ran into Mrs. Anderson.

“Good evening, your Grace,” she curtsied.

“Mrs. Anderson, I’m surprised you’re still awake.”

“I wanted to ensure everything was ready for our new resident.”

“And is it?”

“Most of it, but her lady’s maid still hasn’t arrived.”

William frowned. “That’s rather odd. I would have thought she would have arrived when her suitcase did.”

“As did I. I do hope she hasn’t run into any trouble.”

“I suppose for now we should be keeping an eye out for her. Let me know when she arrives. If she isn’t here by morning, I might reach out to Viscount Gloushire. Perhaps he might know what is taking her so long.”

“That might be for the best. It’s far too late. I should hope she isn’t still traveling now.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Did Lady Rebecca say anything about her room?”

“I left her alone outside of it. She said she didn’t want any help preparing for bed. I must say I was quite surprised.”

“Quite. I would be too.”

“I’m sure she will find the room itself more than adequate.”

“I hope so. Please check in with her tomorrow and see if she needs anything.”

“I will, sir.”

He nodded. “Very good.”

“Will there be anything else?”

“No, that should be everything. Thank you.”

She hesitated.

William sighed. “Yes, what is it?”

“I just wanted to ask if you were sure with all of this. It might be a lot with her-

“That hardly seems like an appropriate question.” He cut her off. “I’d prefer if you didn’t pry into this matter.”

Mrs. Anderson blinked in shock, a look of hurt flashing over her face. She quickly covered it with a professional mask. “Very well, your grace. Forgive me for asking.”

William shook his head. “What’s done is done. Don’t let it happen again.”

“Of course your grace. If that is all, then I think I am going to retire for the night.”

“Very good,” he said before continuing his own way to his bedroom.

On his way, he found himself making a small detour to walk by her door. It was late, it had been a long day. He was sure she must be asleep by now.

He didn’t want to wake her, but he couldn’t help but stop outside her door and listen for a moment. Of course there was no sound from inside, only the stillness of the night.

William shook his head. What else could he have expected? He made his way the rest of the distance to his room, shutting himself inside.

William never spent much time in his room. He never spent much time about his study in general, so the room was fairly spartan. It had what he needed, a bed, a wardrobe, a dressing table with a wash basin, brush, and a few other toiletries, but that was it.

After all there wasn’t a need for much more than that was there?

He shrugged off his clothes with little care. Any mess he left behind would be a problem for morning William to deal with. For the moment, all he wanted to do was lay down and wipe the day from his mind.

He couldn’t help but wish that he could have a do over of the past few weeks when he woke up.

Rebecca was a wonderful girl, far better than was fair given her situation. He wasn’t sure if he could do this.

William shook his head alone in the darkness. It didn't matter if he could or couldn't handle it. He had already made his choice.

There was no going back now.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning, Rebecca awoke warm without being uncomfortably hot for the first time in what felt like the first time in her life. She smiled to herself, running her hands along the soft, luxurious sheets. She still couldn't believe all of this was hers!

It all felt far too good to be true.

She laid there for a few more moments before pushing from the bed and making her way over to her wardrobe. It wouldn't do for her to be seen as shirking her responsibilities as Duchess of Danton. Looking through her dresses, she picked one and pulled it on with little thought before sweeping her hair out of her face and setting off to begin her day.

Just as Rebecca stepped into the hall, she almost ran straight into a maid with a tray.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Mrs. Anderson sent me to bring you your breakfast,” she said without looking at Rebecca.

“That was very kind of you. Thank you.”

She took the tray in shock, not paying any mind to the maid scurrying off without another word.

She slipped back into her room, eyes still locked on the tray. It was almost too much, especially after last night.

“Perhaps this is my food for the day?” she thought to herself as she looked it over.

That was the only thing that could make sense. There was so much! Toast, jam, hot tea, scones, bacon, and sausage! Who could possibly eat all of this for a single meal?

But as she ate, Rebecca quickly realized the answer was her. Despite the fact that she ate more last night than he had in years, she tucked the large breakfast away like she hadn’t eaten in days!

It was only when she was done that she sat back with a frown.

“I probably shouldn’t have done that,” she said to herself, chewing on her lip. “After all, if that was my meal for the day then I already wasted it. Looks like I might be going to bed hungry after all. I’ll have to be more careful in the future.”

She shook her head. There was no use in dwelling on it. She would just have to do

better next time. Taking the tray outside the door, she set it down before slipping out into the hallway.

Rebecca frowned to herself as she made her way down the wide, empty hall. The place felt almost deserted.

At her family home, even when they didn't have company, there was always activity. While it was true that she was rarely welcomed in whatever activities were going on, she could still be close by.

There was always something exciting about hearing the sounds of a party or nice dinner happening down stairs even if she wasn't allowed to attend.

There were even a few times when she crept to the top of the stairs and sat there, listening to everyone having a wonderful time.

On one occasion, she'd even managed to catch a glimpse of a few elegant gentlemen and lovely ladies getting ready for a dance.

Rebecca wanted nothing more than to sit there and try to see more. Maybe if she was careful, she could have seen them dance, but that was when she heard footsteps coming towards her.

Rebecca made it back out of sight just in time to miss Dorothy walking by with a few of her friends.

"I must say, I am rather surprised your sister isn't here," one of them said.

Dorothy huffed. "Why would she be? She isn't out yet."

"That might be true, but the ball is in your family home. We both know younger

siblings are known to sneak around so they can at least see these things even if they aren't partaking."

"That may be so in other households, but she knows this isn't the kind of place for her." Dorothy sighed, shaking her head. "You have no idea what she's like. I don't know that I have ever seen someone so uncivilized. I don't know if she will ever be ready to be out."

"Is she really that terrible?"

"You have no idea. Father worries she will never find someone who would be willing to marry her. I can't help but think he's right."

"Your poor family. I hope she proves you wrong in time."

"So do I, but I have my doubts. Shall we get back to the party?"

"Of course! Far more fascinating than learning about ghastly family failures."

Rebecca had never dared spy on a dance again. But even when there wasn't anything going on, there was still always so much life in the house.

There were always people racing around, preparing for something. Even when her family was out, it still wasn't quite.

If she listened quietly, she could always hear the servants at their work if nothing else.

But there didn't seem to be any of that here, only the empty silence of an empty room and the echoing of her footsteps.

No matter!

Rebecca had other things to worry about, mainly finding Mrs. Anderson. After all, if she was to be a duchess, she needed to ensure she did everything perfectly.

She had already let her parents down, she didn't want to let William down too.

She would also be delighted if she ran into William. It would be wonderful to have a chance to get to know her new husband, but she was sure he was a busy man.

She would understand if he didn't have time to see her today.

There was no point in pushing it. He was likely already disappointed in her. Pushing it would only make him feel worse.

Rebecca could only hope he would come to tolerate her in time. Still, at least he didn't seem to be out right cruel to her.

She could live with that. She just needed to get used to it.

Not only that, she knew she should be grateful for it. They had already done far more for her than she deserved. He had a beautiful room, plenty of food to eat. Asking for anything more than that was selfish of her.

Still, thinking about it too much made her feel too overwhelmed, so she decided to focus on the manor herself. Once she did that, she couldn't stop noticing just how quiet it is.

It made sense that it was calmer than her childhood home, but to her confusion, she hadn't seen anyone. It almost felt like the whole estate was deserted. She was starting to wonder if she was the only person inside when she came across a man she didn't recognize.

"Good morning," she called, walking over to him.

"It's closer to afternoon by this point," the man laughed. "You must be Rebecca."

"I am. And you are?"

"I'm Patrick, William's solicitor."

"Is it really almost afternoon?" she frowned.

"It is. It was close to eleven forty five last I checked."

"I see," she frowned.

"Is something wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing I can't handle. Can I help you with anything?"

He laughed. "I feel like I should be the one to ask you that. You seem rather lost."

"I'm just still learning my way around the place."

"I imagine it is going to be an adjustment," he studied her with a strange look in his eyes. "How do you found the place so far?"

"It's bigger than I was expecting."

“I see,” he studied her for another moment. “Well, if you don’t need anything else, I will let you get back to your walk.”

“Wait!” she called out before she could think better of it.

He paused, turning to her with an intrigued look on his face. “Yes? Did you need something?”

She hesitated. Why had she done that? What was she supposed to say now?

“I was just wondering if you knew where everyone is?” she asked, voice soft and hesitant.

“What do you mean where everyone is? I’m sure they are off doing their work.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Of course, and I wouldn’t want to interrupt anyone from what they were doing, but I was only wondering because I haven’t seen a single person since I left my room.”

“I can assure you they are around. I believe William asked them to give you space when you first arrived so that you could settle in in peace. He may have even give some of them time off for the occasion, knowing him.”

Rebecca forced a tight smile. “I see.”

“Is there someone in particular you are looking for?”

She hesitated.

“If it is William, I can warn you, I doubt you’ll see him any time soon. He’s holed up at his desk with work.”

“Of course. I’m sure he is rather bust being a Duke and all. What about Mrs. Anderson? I was hoping to learn a little about the running of the estate sometime today.”

“I see,” his face did something strange Rebecca couldn’t quite place. “I wouldn’t know where to tell you to look.”

“That’s alright. I appreciate it.

He turned to go, “I wish you luck on your search.”

“Thank you,” she said before setting off down the hall once more.

It took quite some time before she saw anyone again, but eventually, she rounded a corner and saw Mrs. Anderson walking down the hall.

She lit up, walking up to the housekeeper. “Mrs. Anderson! How are you this afternoon.”

“I am quite well, your face. Are you settling in all right?”

“I am, thank you.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Then she turned to go, but Rebecca called out to her.

“I was hoping you could show me a little of what goes into maintaining the estate.”

She turned to her with a frown. “Don’t you want to settle in a little more first? Your lady’s maid hasn’t even arrived yet.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to start sooner rather than later?”

“Perhaps, but it is such a big change for you. There’s no need to rush these things.”

She tried not to let her disappointment show too much. “I see. Well, you are the expert in these things. If you think we should wait, then I should trust you.”

“”That’s very wise of you,” Mrs Anderson said with a strange smile.

“How long do you think we should wait?”

“I can’t be sure, but I will let you know when I think you seem ready to start.”

“Alright, thank you.”

She moved to go, but Rebecca stopped her again. “Wait!”

She turned with a sigh. “Yes?”

“I was wondering if there was anything I could be working on while I get settled in?”

“Not at the moment, but I will let you know if I can think of anything.” Then she turned and walked away without another word, leaving Rebecca alone in the hall.

She continued to aimlessly roam the halls until it was getting late in the evening.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She knew it was getting close to dinner time. She knew she should make her way back to her room, but she couldn't seem to find it!

It felt like hours before she managed to stumble back inside. She headed over to her closet and looked over her dresses with a sigh. She hoped William wasn't too disappointed in her when he saw her at dinner. She was sure he expected her to dress, but nothing she had was nice enough for dinner with a duke.

"I wonder if he received a portrait of me or anything like that before we met?" she asked herself as she started to prepare for the evening. "I don't recall sitting for one, but maybe they didn't use a real portrait."

If that was true, she could only hope her appearance hadn't been too much of a shock and he wasn't too upset.

Still, it would feel like being lied to and he didn't deserve that. She could only hope he would accept the way she looked in time.

"All right," she said to herself. "Almost time for dinner with the duke."

He isn't just a duke, she reminded herself. He's your husband. It should have been comforting or helped her relax, but it only heightened her anxiety even more.

He had been so kind to her so far, but she could still upset him to the point that all of that could come to an end. Rebecca shook her head.

There was no point in thinking about that.

She wouldn't let it happen.

Not again.

She would make him proud. She would make him happy. She had to. That was her purpose now.

She was his wife, all she could do was try to be the best possible wife she could be.

That was still running through her mind when she was startled by a knock at the door. She opened it to see the same maid from that morning staring at her.

"Is it time for dinner?" Rebecca asked with a smile.

"It will be shortly. Duke Danton wanted me to inform you that he will be unable to join you."

Her face fell. "Oh, I see."

She didn't react. "In light of that, the cook wanted me to ask if you would still want to take your meal in the dining room or if you would prefer it some place else."

Rebecca tried not to let it sting. She was sure he was a busy man. It was hardly a surprise that he didn't have time just to have dinner with her.

"You can just have them bring it up here. Thank you for coming to tell me."

"Then I will let them know. Do you need anything else before I go?"

"I should be all right, but thank you for asking."

She nodded then made her way off, leaving her alone in her room once more.

She went inside and sat on the end of her bed, waiting for her to come back with her food.

At least they seemed like they were going to keep her well fed. Even if she did spend so much of her time alone.

This was all right, she reminded herself once more.

Rebecca was used to being on her own. She could manage just fine. He was a busy man. She needed to respect that.

After all, she was a duchess, he was a duke. He was probably often busy with his duties. She could hardly expect him to rearrange everything just to spend some time with her.

She just needed to be grateful and content.

Rebecca could do that.

CHAPTER 7

Things didn't change much after that as time went on. No one spoke to her more than they had to. Servants came and left her meals outside her door.

There was always plenty and her consistent meals became her one true solace, but that didn't make it any easier to take the isolation.

Still, as cold and distant as they were, at least no one had been cruel. For the most part, everyone seemed content to simply ignore her. Meals arrived on time, dishes were cleared away every day, but everyone gave her a wide berth.

She spent her days wandering the halls, desperate to see someone, anyone. The few times she had seen someone, the second they spotted her, they would give a small bow or curtsy then make a hasty retreat.

The more time that went on the harder it became. She was lonely, she just wanted a single friend somewhere, anywhere in the house, but they all seemed more than content to pretend she didn't exist.

Not only that, but she hadn't seen William since the night she arrived.

Even Mrs. Anderson seemed to be avoiding her. After a day or two she stopped going out of her room. Rebecca had accepted that she would only be in the way.

She wished Penelope was here. She would know what to do. She always seemed so full of ideas and hope.

But Rebecca knew better than to risk breaking decorum. It was too soon after the wedding to entertain any kind of guests or go out. She would be far better off contenting herself with her own company.

So imagine her surprise when there was a knock on her bedroom door after a few days.

She opened it to see a maid. “Your grace, I have been sent to inform you that your father and sister are here to see you.”

She paled. “But, I didn’t know they were coming.”

“I can let them know you aren’t available if you like, but they are waiting downstairs.”

“No,” Rebecca stiffened. “I- I can go down right now. Please lead the way.”

She turned and led Rebecca down the hall until they came to one of the parlors.

“They are right inside,” then she left without a word.

Rebecca took a deep breath then forced her way inside. The second she laid eyes on them, she could feel herself shrinking in on herself.

“There you are,” Solomon scowled from where he stood, arms crossed in the center of the room. “You kept us waiting, didn’t you?”

“I- I didn’t mean to. I came as soon as I heard you were here. I just didn’t know you would be coming today.”

“Do you expect us to announce ourselves everytime we want to visit you? Dorothy

scowled. “That feels like you are trying to distance yourself from us.”

“I’m not!”

“I should hope not,” Solomon said. “It seems like you need all the kindness you can get.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw the way that maid spoke to you. Does anyone in this house even want you here?”

She looked away, her mind turning back to her absent husband. Of course they didn’t want her here.

Her sister smirked at her. “That’s a shame. Even they know you’re useless and you haven’t even been here that long.”

Rebecca bit her lip. There was no denying that Dorothy was right. No one wanted her here. She had been a fool to expect anything else to happen.

“All the more reason you need to remember everything I have done for you,” Solomon said coldly. “You are indebted to us in a way you will never be able to repay.”

She clenched her fists, eyes locked on the ground. “I know, father. I won’t let you down.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

He scoffed. “There is no point in trying to make such a promise. We both know that is all you can do is disappoint.”

“I know, but I will try my hardest.”

He scoffed, “do you think that means anything?”

“How long do you think it will take until Duke Danton wants her out of his house too?” Dorothy smirked.

“Who can say, but that is all the more reason she needs to be grateful to us. If she is, perhaps we will consider saving her from the streets.”

She looked down, gripping her hands in her lap. “Thank you for your kindness,” she forced out.

“As you should, but I can’t help but worry you don’t sound as grateful as you should.”

Rebecca locked her eyes on the floor in front of her. “What would you have me do?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m sure we will think of something.”

They spent a few hours sitting there, mocking Rebecca until Solomon stood with a sigh.

“Well, I think it is high time that we return home. It will be time for dinner soon.”

“Before we go, can you give me a moment alone with my sister?” Dorothy asked.

“He sighed, “if you must. I will go get the carriage ready, but try not to take too long.”

“I won’t!”

Then he stepped out, leaving the pair alone. Dorothy smirked at her, stepping closer until they were only a few feet apart.

“Do you know why father sold you to the duke?” she whispered.

She didn’t say a word, biting hard onto the inside of her cheek.

“Don’t get me wrong, I have no doubt he would have been the only man who would have you, but more than that, we sacrificed you for our own financial well being and status. You will never be more than a stepping stone for me.”

She clenched her hands into fists. She needed to stay quiet, she needed to hold in her tears. There was no reaction she could have that would make any of this any better.

Finally, Dorothy turned and started making her way to the door. She paused just before she left, turning to Rebecca one last time.

“You are pathetic, I hope you know that.”

Then she was gone, leaving Rebecca alone.

For a long time, she just stood there, taking deep breaths and waiting to make sure they wouldn’t come back. Once she was sure they were gone, she started making her way back to her room.

It was only once she was safely shut inside that she crumpled to the ground, tears racing down her cheeks.

She was silent when she cried. It was a hard won skill for Rebecca, but she learned long ago not to bother anyone else with her despair. All it would do was bother those around her, so she did what she needed to to keep it to herself.

It felt like hours passed as she lay surrounded in her despair. She knew it was true when there was a knock at the door signaling it was time for dinner.

“I’m not hungry tonight,” she called back. “I’m sorry, but please take it away for tonight.”

There was a dramatic sigh from outside the door.

Guilt consumed Rebecca. How could she be so selfish? She should have taken the tray and made herself eat it, even if it did make her sick.

They had already gone to all the trouble to make it. If she had been that set on not eating, then she should have sent word to the kitchen that they didn’t need to make a plate for her, but she hadn’t done that.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She was too busy lying in her bed and crying.

As if she had any right to be sad.

It was everyone around her who was the real victim. All she did was cause trouble for those around her and she thought she had the right to be upset?

Rebecca knew the truth. Her father and sister hadn't said anything that wasn't true. She needed to accept that and move on.

As she curled up in her bed, bitter tears still racing down her face, her thoughts grew darker.

Perhaps it would be better for everyone if she didn't come out of her room again. No one would miss her if she just stayed inside, and she would finally be out of everyone's way.

Her last thoughts were about how much better off everyone in her life would be if she wasn't in the way constantly causing problems for them.

CHAPTER 8

The next morning, when Rebecca awoke, her eyes were sore and swollen, but the despair from the night before was gone.

In its place was pure determination.

She got to her feet and dressed, taking more time to ensure she was presentable than she had in the past. Sure, she still doesn't have much in the way of clothing or accessories, but she could still take care of setting her hair into a simple but neat bun and smoothing her skirts to be as presentable as possible.

Once she was as happy with her appearance as she was going to get, she headed out into the hall, determined to find Mrs. Anderson. She was going to be the duchess Duke Danton deserved whether they wanted to make it easy on her or not.

She wasn't going to disappoint him.

She wasn't going to go back to her family.

She would find a way to make him happy.

She had to.

Still, Mrs. Anderson seemed rather intent on avoiding her. In the end, Rebecca had to move into the servants quarters to find her.

"What are you doing in here, your Grace?" the woman asked, walking over to her with a frown.

"I need to start learning how to manage the estate."

"But you have only been here so long. You must still be settling in. Besides, your lady's maid still hasn't arrived."

"I am aware of that, but I don't know if that is the benchmark we should be waiting on."

She frowned. “Why ever not? Surely it would be far easier to begin once she arrives.”

“Perhaps, if there was one on her way that would be true, but my family won’t be sending anyone.”

“Then we can begin the process of looking for one for you. Would you like to have one of the household maids help you in the meantime?”

“Thank you, but none of that is necessary. You don’t need to go to so much trouble, but I would like to get started.”

She stood there, studying her. For a moment, Rebecca thought that she was going to say no, but finally, she let out a long sigh. “You seem rather set on this.”

“I am.”

She gave a curt nod. “Very well, but please go back up to the parlor. I will meet you there.”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

Finally feeling like she had gotten somewhere, Rebecca made her way back upstairs and into the aforementioned parlor. She wasn’t kept waiting for long before Mrs. Anderson stepped inside, a thick book clasped under her arm.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“And you are sure you want to start this now, your Grace?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. I can assure you. I am quite sure,” Rebecca nodded, not giving herself a moment to hesitate.

“Very well then. Shall we get a seat and get started.”

“Oh yes, please. That would be lovely.”

The pair did just that. Rebecca did her best to follow along, but there was so much it was hard not to be overwhelmed. Mrs. Anderson frowned, staring at her.

“Do you need to take a break?” she asked.

“No, I’m all right, I promise. Please, continue.”

“I don’t think it would be wise to overwhelm you.”

“But I need to work at this,” she said too fast. “I need to be the best duchess possible.”

“Why are you so set on this? I do not mind looking after much of the estate. You don’t need to push yourself.”

“I appreciate that, I really do, but you don’t understand. I have to,” Rebecca couldn’t help the edge of desperation that crept into her voice, mind still locked on her family.

“But why?”

She looked away, eyes burning. “My father has made it clear that I don’t have a choice. I can’t risk Duke Danton growing disappointed with me either.”

The woman softened. “I’m sure you don’t need to worry about that. Just do your best, but you don’t need to push yourself so hard.”

She shook her head. “I do think. If I work hard enough I know I can get it. Please don’t give up on me.”

“I’m not. Why don’t we go for a little bit longer and then make plans to continue tomorrow ? Would that work for you?”

She lit up. “You really want to continue to work with me?”

“Yes, dear I am the housekeeper. I wouldn’t be very good at my job if I wasn’t going to help you learn to run the estate.

She lit up. “Thank you so much! I will work hard not to disappoint you.”

“I’m sure you will do just fine.”

They spent a little longer working then Mrs. Anderson stood with a sigh.

“I think that is enough for the day. You did very well.”

“You really think so?”

“I do. Why don’t I meet you here tomorrow at the same time as we started today?”

“That sounds perfect. I’ll be here.”

She nodded and then made her way from the room.

Rebecca just sat there for a while. She could hardly believe how well that had gone! When she got to her feet, she couldn’t stop smiling.

“I wonder if I can find Duke Danton. I would love to tell him about my progress,” she said to herself as she made her way upstairs.

But no matter where she went, she couldn’t seem to find him. Days went by but she still didn’t see him. He wouldn’t even take his meals with her.

It was hard not to let it sting.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

It was still on her mind when she was working with Mrs. Anderson again almost a week later.

“Is something on your mind?” the older woman asked, startling her. “You seem rather distracted today.”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing, Mrs. Anderson.”

“Are you sure about that? You just seem so distracted today.”

She hesitated.

Mrs. Anderson smiled. “Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind, and don’t say it’s nothing. Whatever it is is enough to distract you so it must be important.”

She looked away. “It doesn’t matter.”

“If it is on your mind, I doubt that’s true,”

She looked away. “It isn’t anything important. I know he’s busy, but I had thought Duke Danton would have had at least a little time for me. We haven’t even had a meal together since my first night here?”

“He hasn’t seen you at all?”

She shook her head. “I understand he’s busy. I don’t hold it against him, but I can’t help but be disappointed.”

“I’m glad you can be understanding,” she said, almost stunned. “But there is nothing wrong with being disappointed.”

She shook her head. “I can get over it. There is no reason to let it distract me.”

Hellen studied her for a moment. “If you are sure you want to drop it for now, I won’t push it, but I am here if you want to talk.”

“Thank you, but I would rather just try to focus on our work for the moment.”

“I think I can do that.”

They tried to get through some more work on the estate, but no matter how hard she tried, Rebecca just couldn’t seem to focus.

Her mind just kept drifting to Duke Danton. He was nothing like she had expected, and if she was honest with herself, she had to admit, he was rather attractive, especially his eyes. No matter what anyone said, and as sharp as they could be sometime, when Rebecca looked into his eyes, she knew he was a kind person.

It was because of his kindness that she needed to get this right for him. She needed to be the kind of wife, the kind of duchess he could be proud to have by his side.

Hellen sat back with a sigh. “I think we have done about as much as we can for today.”

Rebecca’s face fell. “Oh, I see. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing like that. You just seem like you could use a break.”

“I can keep working, honestly.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should. I won’t hold it against you if you need some time. It seems like you have a lot on your mind.”

“Still, I need to improve. I don’t have time to take off.”

“I can assure you, you do. You’re doing fine, so try not to put too much pressure on yourself. As for the Duke, try not to worry too much. I’m sure these things just take time.”

“But there needs to be something I can do in the meantime. I can’t just sit around and wait.”

“I’m not saying to do nothing, but I don’t think this is the kind of thing you can do anything about. For now, just focus on getting more comfortable managing the estate. The rest will follow.”

“But you said I should take a break.”

“For today, but in general, I would advise against focusing on Duke Danton too much. Perhaps there is a friend you could invite for a visit? Take your mind off of things.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Do you think he would mind if I did that?”

“I can’t imagine he would,” she said, squeezing her hand. “Why don’t you give me her address, I can send over an invitation for a visit?”

“Thank you!” Rebecca wrote the address down.

“How soon should I tell her she can come?”

“As soon as she would like! I would be delighted to see her.”

And so, the very next day, Rebecca raced to her parlor to see Penelope waiting for her. When she saw her, Penelope lit up, pulling her in for a tight embrace.

“I have missed you!”

Rebecca laughed. “It has only been a few weeks.”

“And that is far longer than we have gone without seeing each other since we were children, but now that you are receiving visitors, I shall have to call on you more often.”

“I’m sure your family would prefer you to remain home so gentlemen could call on you.”

Penelope scowled. “And I simply can not abide the notion! Spinsterhood can not come soon enough! You have no idea the indignities I must suffer.”

“So you have said,” she chuckled, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, but I haven’t even asked about you yet. I have been so worried. How have you been?”

“I have been all right.”

“All right? Surely you have more to say than that. How do you like your new home? How do you like your new husband?”

Rebecca looked away. “I like it all well enough. The estate is lovely, but I haven’t seen much of my husband.”

“Why not? Is he terribly busy ?”

“He must be. I haven’t seen him since the day of our wedding. We had dinner together then he went into his study and that was that.”

Penelope laughed. “You lucky duck you.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because, it means you have all the freedom of being married, being out from your family’s house, and having a home of your own to run with none of the drawbacks, having a husband breathing down your neck. You are free to do as you please.”

“But what if he decides he isn’t happy with how I run things?”

“I doubt you will do anything that could displease him there. Just do what would make you happy. You are a duchess now. Embrace it, and be happy. He will follow or he will leave you to your own devices. Either way, there is no reason you can live

your life in a way that makes you happy now.”

Rebecca sat stunned. “I shall think about that.”

“I sincerely hope you do.”

“But enough about me. How have you been? How were the balls? You must tell me about them.”

“Must I?” she sighed. “There is nothing new there, I can assure you. I am forced to put on a gown of my mother’s choosing, I am told to dance with men who only wish to speak of trivial things until I am blessedly allowed to return home.”

“You make it sound like you are being tortured.”

“Because I am. It is misery. I do not wish to speak of it. Please, tell me what you have done with your wardrobe since becoming a duchess. How many new gowns do you have?”

Rebecca shrugged. “I haven’t gotten any new ones. The ones I brought from home seemed perfectly serviceable.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I would hardly have called them such when you were living at home. And now that you’re a duchess? I must grimace at the very thought.”

“Well, what would you have me do?”

“I should think the answer would be that it is rather obvious. I would propose we take today and go out on a little excursion.”

“Penelope! I can hardly just go shopping.”

Why not?”

“It isn’t my money for one.”

“Yes, it is. You are the Duchess of Danton. You have seen the books. You can’t tell me you don’t have discretionary funds in it.”

“I do, but-”

“Then what is the harm? Come now. You know you want to. What is the harm, really?”

“Well, I...” she trailed off.

“ Please, just for a bit. I promise that if you aren’t having a good time we can come straight back.”

“Oh, very well. I suppose there isn’t any real harm in it.”

She lit up. “Oh, wonderful! Do you want to go get the carriage or shall we take mine?”

“I suppose it doesn’t make a difference.”

And so, only a short time later, Rebecca found herself somewhere she had never been before.

The dressmaker.

She is in awe of the experience, it is almost overwhelming. In the end, she only gets two dresses. As she pays, she can hardly believe she indulged in such a luxury.

Once they returned to her new home, she said a pleasant goodbye to Penelope and headed inside.

The second she was through the door, she raced off to find Mrs. Anderson. She wasn’t hard to find, walking down the hall as she checked on the other maid.

“Hellen,” Rebecca lit up. “I need your help with a few things.”

“Well, I am glad to see you in such a pleasant mood. Did visiting with your friend help?”

“It did. Thank you so much for suggesting.”

“I’m glad. Can I ask what she suggested?”

“She said I should just focus on making the estate into some place I can be happy to

call my home.”

“I think that sounds like a great start. What can I do to help?”

She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. “I want to do a bit of redecorating. I was hoping you could show me through some of the rooms you thought might be a good place to start and take some notes for me. I understand if you don’t have time.”

“If you want to do all that, it might be time to find you a lady’s maid, but I would be happy to help you for a bit today.”

“Oh, thank you. Please let me know if I am taking too much of your time.”

“I will. Now, why don’t we start with your parlor.”

The pair spent a few hours going through a few rooms. They didn’t make any major changes. Rebecca was hesitant to do anything that required purchasing new furnishings or drapes.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

But after a while, Mrs. Anderson glanced at her watch and let out a small. “Goodness! I hadn’t realized the time. I need to get back to the others.”

“Oh! I hope I didn’t keep you too long.”

“No, nothing like that, but I do need to get back.”

“Of course. Thank you so much for what you’ve done.”

“I will come see you again tomorrow. We can see what else we can get done.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.”

Mrs. Anderson gave her a last look and then headed off down the hall. For a moment, Rebecca hesitated.

Perhaps she should stop now that she is alone. It might not be the best idea to make any changes without Mrs. Anderson here to supervise, but if she was supposed to be the duchess, then shouldn’t she make more of an effort?

Right, she thought to herself. That settles it then. If this is supposed to be my home, then I shouldn’t feel strange doing a little bit of work on my own.”

Then she squared her shoulders and made her way back into the hall. She didn’t make many changes on her own, mostly just opening curtains, doing some dusting, and trying to make the space feel lived in.

Then she came to a door she hadn't seen before.

It was small, and nondescript. She tilted her head to the side before carefully pulling it open. On the other side was a narrow, steep staircase. Intrigued, she made her way up the stairs. Each one creaked loudly under her feet.

Her heart pounded in her throat. She didn't know why but it made her nervous.

When she got to the top, she frowned. It was an attic, much like the one that had once served as her bedroom. In many ways, this one also almost looked like someone's room. It was positively packed with furniture and other forgotten items. Then, something in the back caught her eye.

There, lining the back wall were several paintings. Most of them looked like they contained the same five or six people. One of them in particular caught her attention.

It was smaller than the other, more intimate. There was a mother, a father, and two sons. Unlike the others that looked like they were carefully organized and formal, this one showed them all seated in a garden in what looked like their everyday clothes. Looking at the picture, she can't help but smile.

Rebecca wasn't sure what came over her, but she picked it up and made her way back down the stairs.

CHAPTER 9

William hated when work forced him from his sanctuary. He would never be able to get used to the stares and looks he received everywhere he went. It was hell.

But it was over.

The relief he felt when the carriage rolled to a stop in front of his home could not be put into to words. It was like he'd been underwater for hours and he could finally breathe.

Then he noticed Mrs. Anderson standing outside, waiting for him and he frowned.

When he got out, she walked up to him.

“Welcome home, your Grace. I hope everything went well.”

“It went as well as can be expected. Is there a reason you're greeting me at the door?”

“I just wanted to let you know that it seems Rebecca is settling in well.”

“So it's Rebecca now. What happened to Duchess Danton?”

She chuckled. “Yes, I suppose we have started to become rather friendly.”

He crossed his arms. “That's good, but I don't see why that warrants you meeting me here.”

“I just wanted to give you an update on her.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

He studied her. “Sounds more like you wanted to encourage me to go see her.”

“I don’t know how you could have gotten that impression, but if you are considering it, I doubt it would go amiss.”

“You know I have things to do,” he huffed, pushing past her and heading inside.

“Of course, your grace,” she called after him.

But when he came inside, William faltered. Someone had taken the time to open all of the curtains, the fading evening sunlight filled the space as though it belonged there.

Was this what she meant by changes? William had assumed she would have simply bought new things.

He shook the thought from his head. It didn’t matter. As long as it kept her occupied. With that in mind, he started making his way down the hall.

The more he saw, the more confused he got. Then, he heard her voice. He couldn’t help but move towards it.

It drew him to the dining room. He didn’t hesitate to step inside. Much like the other rooms, it had been cleaned and light had been let in, but that wasn’t what caught his eyes.

No those were drawn to the painting on the back wall. His heart pounded in his chest.

Why was that here?

He knew he'd locked it away with all the others. His servants should have known better than to touch it. So that could only mean....

His face went pale before turning red. "What did you do?" he snarled.

She chewed her lip, her voice coming out small. "I- I just did some redecorating. I thought you would be happy."

"Happy? I don't care what you do with the room! Hang whatever drapes you like, but I want you to tell me where you got that!" he pointed to the painting.

"I- I was just going through some of the rooms, and I-"

"Some of the rooms?" he took a step towards her. She staggered back. "That was not just out in one of the rooms for you to stumble across. What were you doing in the attic?"

"I already told you I was just looking around it wasn't locked or anything."

"And you think that just means you can go in there and do whatever you please?"

"I didn't mean to-"

"Do you think I care what you meant to do?"

She flinched back.

"I can't believe this!"

Suddenly, something in her posture shifted. She straightened her back voice coming out strained and tight. “If you are going to do something about it, just do it already and get it over with.”

His anger was replaced with confusion. “What do you mean do something?”

“Are you really going to make me say it?” finally, she met his eyes, defiant even as tears threatened to roll down her face. “Then fine, I’ll say it. If you are going to strike me, just do it and get it over with.”

He recoiled, shocked. He staggered back another step. “What kind of person do you think I am? I would never do something like that to a woman!”

Her eyes widen in surprise.

That was when a chilling thought entered his mind. It was out of William’s lips before he could even think. “Did your father raise his hand to you?”

She looked away. “My family was very good to me. I am eternally grateful to them.” Her voice came out calm and practiced, as if she was reciting lines in someone else’s play.

He shook his head. “I’m glad you think that, if you really feel that way, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She still refused to meet his eyes. “My father is a good man. Everyone says so.”

“Don’t care what everyone else says. I want you to know that if he did hurt you, you didn’t deserve it.”

Something in her seemed to crumble at his words. “But I must have. If I didn’t, then why else would he do it?”

“Oh, Rebecca,” William softened. He slowly moved towards her, opening his arms.

Slowly, giving her plenty of time to move away or tell him to stop, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling Rebecca to his chest.

For a moment, she stiffened and he thought she would pull back. Then, she melted, wrapping her arms around him as well. William could feel a wet spot forming on his shirt where her tears fell.

He held her as she cried.

Suddenly, she pulled back, face red and whipping at her eyes. “My apologies. I shouldn’t have done all that.”

“It is all right, Rebecca,” he said, voice far more gentle than he thinks he had ever heard it.

“I fear I may have misjudged you.”

William looked away, shaking his head. "It was hardly like I gave you much of a choice."

"Perhaps," Rebecca hesitated. "Perhaps we could start over."

He nodded. "That seems like a good place to start. I think the two of us should go somewhere to talk a bit more." His eyes flickered back to the painting. "Do you mind if we move this to the parlor?"

"If you like," she muttered, still avoiding his eyes.

"Thank you."

They made their way into one of the other rooms and sat on opposite ends of the sofa inside in complete silence.

After a moment, she spoke. "My father had treated me.... Different... from my sister for as long as I can remember. He said it was because our position was different."

"Different how?"

"She's the oldest, she's the prettiest, she's the future of our family. I was... an afterthought at best. Everything I had, clothes, furnishings, even my meals were left over from others."

"What do you mean your meals were left over from others?"

"When the servants finished their dinner, I got what was left."

"That's terrible! I'm so sorry you went through that."

“It could have been worse,” she shook her head. “I never went hungry. The servants always made a point to save me something.”

“Still, it never should have been something you had to worry about. I hope you don’t feel like you need to worry about it here.”

“I won’t lie, it took me a little while to get used to it, but no. it isn’t something I think about now.”

“That’s good. I never want you to worry about that again.”

She hesitated.

“What is it?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“That does seem to be what we’re all doing here.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Why haven’t I seen you since our wedding day?”

He let out a long breath. “I suppose that’s a fair question. I won’t lie, I have been avoiding you. You deserve to be happy, and I don’t think I can give that to you. Originally, I thought I never should have asked you to marry me, but seeing where you came from, I can’t bring myself to feel that way.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “I’m glad you don’t regret asking me to come here. Does that mean that you’ll stop avoiding me?”

He hesitated. “That’s complicated.”

She said nothing, waiting for him to continue and after a moment, he did.

He let out a long breath, “I’m sure you have heard the rumors of what happened to my family.”

“I never put much stock into such things.”

He shook his head. “Well, prepare to, at least for a time.”

“But-”

“Please, we need to talk about them for you to understand.”

She hesitated for a moment before nodding.

He let out a sigh before he continued. “Everyone suspects I had something to do with the death of my father and brother, but they often forget how old I was when they were murdered. I was only five, and I almost died in the attack myself. I- while they weren’t killed right in front of me, they might as well have been. To this day I can still hear their screams when I close my eyes.”

“What happened?” she winced. “I’m sorry. I probably should n’t have asked that.”

“It’s all right. If we are going to talk, you should get to know. I wasn’t supposed to be with them, but I had convinced my father to let me go with him and my brother to see to some business. That was when the bandits attacked us. I was the only one who survived.”

Her hands flew to her mouth. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea you were so young when you lost them.”

“It’s in the past now.”

She nodded. “Still, it couldn't have been easy.”

“It wasn’t, but it was far harder on my mother than it ever was on me. Her grief consumed her. After a while, she couldn’t handle me leaving the house without her. Of course, it could only be put off for so long before I had to go away for school. Only a few months after I left, she passed away.”

“I’m so sorry. No one should have to go through that much loss.”

“I am still alive. That’s the part I need to focus on. I am the only one left to keep this family going, so I need to keep going for their sake.”

“Is that why you wanted to get married? To keep your family name alive?”

“It is. I am sorry to have brought you into my own machinations.”

“Don’t be. I won’t lie, when my father first told me I was to marry you, I had some apprehension, but I was still so glad someone might actually want me in their life instead of just tolerating my presence. You have been far better to me than I could have hoped.”

He stared at her in shock. “Do you really mean that? You are happy here?”

“I am, and I think I will only grow more content as time goes on, but if it isn’t too much trouble, could I ask a favor of you?”

William studied her for a moment, curiosity peaked. “Ask and I will tell you if I will accommodate it.”

“Thank you for hearing me out. I would like to ask if you would have dinner with me occasionally. I understand you must be very busy, but perhaps we could do something once a week if you have time.”

He blinked in shock. “Why would you want to have dinner with me?”

She smiled. “That’s rather simple to answer, because you are my husband, and I want what I think any bride wants. I want to get to know you. I want us to grow to care for each other.”

He blinked in shock. “I don’t know that I will be the best company.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that? Besides, I have been told I am subpar company myself, so even if it is true, I’m afraid you still might be the one with a dull conversation partner.”

He let out a long breath. “Then I suppose it can not hurt to try, but I have one condition.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“I want that painting taken down.”

“Of course, she said voice soft. “I think that can be arranged.”

“Right,” he got to his feet. “I’ll see to that, you go dress for dinner.”

“You want to start tonight?” she gasped.

“Why not? I haven’t eaten yet. Have you?”

“Not yet.”

“Then that settles it. I thought you would be happy.”

“I am, but there is a slight problem.”

“What is it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything nicer than this to wear. I’m not sure I own anything nice enough right now.”

He frowned. “Your family didn’t send over any of your dinner dresses?”

“I never took dinner with them.”

“I see. Well, you will just have to get some new gowns. You should go to do some shopping tomorrow.”

“I’m really glad to hear that because earlier today my friend Penelope persuaded me to go to the shops and order a few.”

“That’s good. As a duchess, you should have some nice gowns. As for today, I’m sure what you are wearing is just fine. We can have dinner as we are. Just let me go let the servants know.”

She smiled. “All right. That sounds lovely. Thank you.”

He nodded. “Very good. I’ll be back in just a moment.”

When Rebecca had a moment alone, she let out a shaky breath.

The last hour or so had been such a whirlwind she could hardly believe it. After what felt like far too long, they were finally making progress.

Maybe this would be a turning point for them, but still, Rebecca knew better than to get her hopes up too high.

So why was it so hard not to?

A few moments later, he came back in.

“They will have dinner out shortly. Shall we make our way back to the dining room?”

“What about the painting?”

“I’ve already taken care of it.”

“I’m sorry about that again.”

“I think it would be best to just move past it. Now, dinner?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She nodded, following him down the hall. Neither of them said a word as they took their seat at the table and the food was brought out.

“Have your meals been to your taste since coming here?” William asked when the silence had stretched on for far too long.

“Yes, thank you. Everything you have put together for me has been absolutely wonderful!”

“It would be all right if you had any requests thought. In fact, I think you should. Why don’t you talk to Mrs. Anderson and put together a menu for dinner in a few days.”

“Are you sure I can do something like that?”

“You are the lady of the house. It is well within your rights to set the menu. One could even argue it is your responsibility.”

She chewed her lip. “Does that mean I should have been doing that from the beginning?”

“It means if you want to do it, you should feel comfortable to start.”

She lit up like he had given her the world. “Then I will speak with Hellen tomorrow.”

“Good, that seems like a good start.”

Rebecca smiled at him. “How was your day today?” she asked.

“It was fine.”

“What all did you get up to? Did you do anything fun?”

“Just work,” he sighed. “There isn’t much to say.”

“Right,” she said, falling silent.

He shifted around for a moment before asking, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What did you get up to today?”

“My friend Penelope came to visit today, she was the one who encouraged me to take the role of duchess a little bit more seriously.”

“Have the two of you known each other long?”

“We have. All but grew up together really. Our homes were right beside each other. We used to slip into the garden and she would sneak over the fence almost every day.”

“The two of you must be rather close then?”

“Oh yes, we are. She’s probably the person who knows me best in the world.”

“That must be nice.”

“It is. Do you have someone like that?”

He tilted his head to the side, thinking for a moment. “Yes, I suppose I do.”

“Who is it?”

“His name is Patrick, he’s my solicitor.”

“The one who approached my father.”

“The one who told me to consider looking for a wife in the first place.”

“Then I suppose I owe him a thank you.”

“Don’t you dare. If he even hears you were considering it, I would never hear the end of it.”

She chuckled. “Very well, I will keep my thoughts to myself at least for the moment. How did the two of you meet?”

“Like I said, he was my solicitor.”

“True, but he isn’t that much older than you, so he couldn’t have been with the estate your whole life or anything like that. Did you meet when he inquired about the job?”

“He was studying under the man who came in to help manage the case after my father passed away. In time we became close and when his teacher was ready to retire, I kept Patrick on as my own personal solicitor.”

“It looks like it worked out well.”

“Perhaps. In the moment I was so stunned he took my silence for a yes.”

“But you must have said yes at some point.”

“I don’t recall, but I suppose I never said no.”

“Well, in this scenario it seemed to be virtually the same thing.”

“I suppose. Have you met Patrick yet?”

“Briefly, one of the first days I was here, but it was a rather brief interaction. I didn’t have time to form much of an impression of him.”

“I will have to ask him over one day.”

“Then perhaps I should do the same for Penelope?”

He hesitated. “Perhaps.”

“Then again, there is no need to rush into anything.”

“No, I suppose not. I think it might be best for us to take a few days just to get to know one another.”

“I think that sounds lovely.”

“Then I will see what I can do about making some time for you. At least a little bit every day.”

“Are you sure you have time for that? I would hate to distract you from your work.”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t have time.”

“But-”

“Rebecca, why don’t you just let me worry about that,” then he hesitated. “Unless you don’t want to of course. I would understand if it is too much.”

She shook her head, a wide grin spreading across her face. “That sounds wonderful,

actually. I just didn't think you would be able to make that much time for me."

He looked away. "As I said, why don't you leave that to me to worry about."

"But--"

"Please," he couldn't meet her eyes. "After everything, it is the least I can do."

She looked away, a soft flush coloring her cheeks. "But you must let me thank you."

"What is there to thank me for?"

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Because I never imagined you would go to so much trouble for me.”

“It really isn’t any trouble.”

“Still, it is far more effort than anyone has ever gone to on my behalf, so thank you. It truly does mean quite a lot to me.”

“It-” he cut himself off, shaking his head. “I am glad you’re happy.”

“I truly am.”

The rest of the meal was a bit awkward, both of them trapped in their own swirling thoughts too much to say anything.

Rebecca couldn’t believe how lucky she was! Perhaps they could grow to care about each other after all.

When the meal ended, they both got to their feet, staring at each other for a moment. Rebecca was the one to move first.

“I hope you won’t think I’m being ungrateful, but I’m quite tired. Would you mind terribly if I retired for the night? I am so sorry to cut our evening short.”

“If you are tired, then you should go rest. There will be plenty of time for us to see each other tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

He hesitated. "Perhaps it would be best if you called me William."

"Only if you call me Rebecca."

"I think that can be arranged." He smiled. "Good night, Rebecca."

"Good night, William, and thank you again for all of this."

Then she slipped from the room.

CHAPTER 10

When Rebecca stepped inside of her room, she was surprise to find she wasn't alone. A young woman only a few years younger than her was over by the wardrobe.

She dropped into a curtsy when she saw Rebecca. "Good evening, your grace. I hope you had a lovely evening."

"I did, thank you, but can I ask what you're doing in here?"

"My name is Mary. Mrs. Anderson sent me up. She said you were in need of a lady's maid."

"Oh that was very kind of her, but I will be all right. Neither of you needed to go to so much trouble."

"It's no trouble, ma'am. Shall I help you prepare for bed?"

Rebecca shifted on her feet, nerves gathering. "I suppose."

She had never had a maid prepare her for bed and wasn't entirely sure what to expect.

Rebecca stood there as Mary helped her out of her dress and into a nightshirt.

“There,” Mary smiled. “Now, why don’t you go take a seat at the dressing table and I’ll be over in a moment to help you with your hair.”

Rebecca wanted to tell her that wasn’t necessary, that she didn’t need to go to all the trouble, but she didn’t want to seem ungrateful, especially after Mrs. Carter went to so much trouble to select Mary.

So she simply took her seat and waited. A moment later, Mary’s hands were in her hair, gently pulling pins free and brushing through her locks until they were smooth.

“How do you like your hair while you sleep? Do you put it in a braid or something else?”

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Oh!” Rebecca was startled for a moment. “A braid is fine.”

Mary smiled. “Then I’ll do that and let you get to sleep. What time do you want me to be up with your breakfast in the morning?”

She thought for a moment. “What time has my breakfast been coming up? Whatever that is perfectly fine. There’s no reason to make anyone else change their routine.”

“I’ll have to ask in the kitchen and see when they have been sending it up. Is there anything you want me to prepare for you in the morning?”

“No, I should be all right. Thank you.”

Mary stepped away. “Then if there is nothing else, I will see you in the morning, ma’am.”

It was only when she was alone that Rebecca let out a sigh. She hoped she didn’t make too much extra work for her.

Still, she fell into bed and drifted off looking forward to the next day.

Rebecca was sitting at her dressing table when there was a knock at the door. Then Mary stepped inside, breakfast tray in hand.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she said then hesitated, setting the tray down on the bed. “Did I come later than we discussed?”

“Not at all,” Rebecca smiled.

“But you are already up and dressed.”

“Yes?” she said, then Rebecca realized her mistake. “I’m afraid I have gotten rather used to not having a lady’s maid. It may take some time for me to unlearn my ways.”

“But hasn’t it only been a week or so since your wedding?”

She winced. “Yes, I suppose it has.”

“Well, if you are used to being dressed and ready by the time they have been sending up the tray, perhaps I can plan to come up about an hour before?”

“I hate to have you start your day so early.”

“It’s no trouble. If you are used to getting up , then that is when I can be here.”

“All right. If you’re sure.”

“Now, why don’t you eat some breakfast and we can talk about the rest of your outfits for today.”

“The rest of them?”

“I mean, if you are planning on spending the day in, then I suppose there’s only dinner to change for.”

“Right,” she sighed. “Well, I’m afraid you are going to be rather disappointed for the moment. I don’t currently have any dinner dresses, but I have ordered some. They should be here soon.”

“That’s all right. Why don’t you let me take a look at your wardrobe today and see what I can come up with?”

“If you like you’re welcome to, but I’d hate to make more work for you.”

She smiled. “Why don’t you let me worry about that ? Now, eat up then I can get started on your hair.”

She hesitantly ate the rest of her breakfast as Mary set some things up at her dressing table. When she was done, she took her seat and let Mary start on her hair.

It felt strange, having someone else do it, but she found herself relaxing as the woman worked her hair into something far more complex than she would have been able to do on her own.

Finally, Mary stepped back with a smile. “There, how do you like it? Is it to your taste ma’am?”

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Do you need anything else this morning?”

Rebecca shook her head. “I’m all right, but thank you.”

She curtsied, “Then I will leave you to go about your day and see you when you come up to prepare for dinner. Is there a time you would like me to be here?”

She shook her head. “Just ask the kitchen when they are planning on serving it and let Mrs. Anderson know what time you would want to start helping me get ready.”

“You want me to choose?”

Rebecca nodded. “As I said, I’m not used to having someone help me get ready, so I would rather you choose what you think would be best, at least for the moment.”

Mary blinked in shock. “Very well, if you are sure. I will talk to the cook and let you know.”

Then she curtsied and headed out.

Rebecca turned to look herself over in the mirror. In truth, she didn’t look that different, but her hair. It was far more elegant than anything she could have done herself.

She smiled. “I suppose I should try and get used to it. I am a duchess now.”

Then she made her way down the hall and headed off to meet with Mrs. Anderson.

Usually, she had some time to walk around and relax, but she was running late. No doubt the other woman would be there any moment if she wasn't already there waiting for it.

Sure enough, when Rebecca slipped into the parlor, Mrs. Anderson was already sitting there with a cup of tea.

"Sorry, I'm late, Hellen."

She waved her off. "It's quite all right, but can I ask what kept you."

"I'm afraid I'm not used to getting ready with a lady's maid," she said, taking her seat.

Mrs. Anderson smiled. "That's understandable, but how did you like it? Did you and Mary get on well?"

"She's wonderful, but I feel bad taking her away from her previous responsibilities."

"You aren't keeping her from anything. She'd the cook's daughter who just finished her training. If you like her, she'll stay on here, if not, she will stay with her mother while she seeks other employment."

"So it's up to me whether or not she has a job?"

"I assure you, that if you two don't have good energy then she will be able to find a job someplace else. However, generally speaking, yes, as the Duchess of Danton, you do have the ability to hire and fire staff. There will be times you need to let someone go or you need to fill a position and you can't hire everyone who applies."

"But how am I supposed to handle that? I don't know if I could look someone in the

eyes and tell them to go.”

“Why don’t we start by you telling me what you think of her.”

“She’s wonderful, but I find myself worried she is overqualified for the position.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Well, I’m sure she wants to dress her lady in elegant gowns and do beautiful hairstyles before she goes off to balls. I doubt I will be doing much of that.”

“Even if you don’t, you are a Duchess. That means there is a level of finery that is expected of you. I assure you, once you get comfortable with your position, you will be pleased to have her. All that matters is that you like her, but you don’t need to say anything now. Take some time to get to know her. Get to know her work. We can talk about it in a few days. How does that sound?”

Rebecca nodded. “I think that sounds like a good start.”

“Wonderful! So, moving on to business, was there anything you want to go over or should we just continue from where we were?”

“Actually, I do have something I wanted to ask about.”

“Of course. What is it?”

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She hesitated. “Well, you may have heard that William and I are going to start having dinner together.”

“I did. I must say it is nice to see you two getting on.”

“Well, he mentioned that the duchess would usually put together the menus?” Rebecca tried to sound confident, but her voice came out small and unsure.

“That’s right. Did you want to try your hand at it?”

“Perhaps, but I wanted to learn a little more about it first. For example, what dishes the cook is comfortable with and how many dishes there should be.”

Mrs. Anderson nodded. “I have a book of all the recipes our cook normally does and if there is something you want and you don’t see it we can always talk to her about it. As for the amount of dishes, we have a basic template we can start with and we can always modify them if you see fit for any reason.”

“Can you show me those?”

“Of course.” Mrs. Anderson looked through a few of the books before handing her two of them. “There you are.”

“Thank you,” Rebecca took them, carefully opening the first one. “Goodness, there’s so many of them, I don’t know where to start.”

“Why don’t we set the meals aside and start by looking at the dinner outlines ? That

way we can get an idea of what is needed for different occasions?”

“Yes, that seems like a good idea. I won’t lie, all of this is a bit overwhelming.”

“I can understand that, but it isn’t so bad once you break it down. It just takes time and patience.”

“I’m glad you have such faith in me, I’ll try not to let you down.”

“You won’t, I can promise you.”

Rebecca wanted to tell her that her hope was misplaced, that all she ever seemed to do was let people down, but she held it in. There was no point in letting all that out now. She just had to prove herself wrong. She couldn’t let them down, not after everything they had done for her.

So instead, she forced a smile. “Please show me where to start.”

Rebecca hadn’t realized just how many types of meals there were. Formal dinners, semi-formal dinners, family dinners, formal family dinners, it seemed endless. And that wasn’t to mention all the types of lunches, and teas, and even breakfasts.

“Goodness!” she gasped when there was a moment to breath.

“I know, but we can start small.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Perhaps an informal lunch would be easier than a dinner.”

She frowned. “But who could I have for it? I think William is only free for dinners.”

“Why don’t you ask him ? It can’t hurt, now can it?”

“But I don’t want him to feel like he needs to find more time for me. He’s already done so much.”

“If he doesn't have time, he will tell you, but I don’t think it can hurt to ask.”

She hesitated for another moment, “I’ll think about it.”

“Please do.”

From there they spent some more time working out a basic lunch plan until Mrs. Anderson sat back with a satisfied smile.

“I must say, I feel like this went rather well, especially for your first time.”

“Thank you. I’m so glad you think so. Is this what we’ll have for lunch today then?”

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Not today I’m afraid. We already gave the cook the menu for today, but we can soon. Tomorrow perhaps.”

“How far out do you typically plan out the menu?”

“I prefer to plan them out a week or so in advance. Typically, I sit down on Monday morning and write it out.”

“So you don’t do it every day?”

“No, I don’t. I know there are some people who prefer to, but I find it inconvenient and rather limiting.”

“How so?”

“Because what happens if you are running behind one morning? Not only that, but some dishes require preparations the night or even days before. You can’t make any of those if you’re taking care of it day of. It just leaves so many areas for things to go wrong.”

“I suppose that makes sense, so would you prefer to wait until then to have me plan any meals.?”

“Just because it’s how I like to do things doesn’t mean you have to. Why don’t I just show this to the cook and see what she thinks?”

“Do you think its good enough for that?”

“I do. I wouldn’t have offered otherwise.”

“Then I think that sounds like a good idea. Thank you.”

She nodded. “All tight. I suppose that’s all for the day then?”

“I think so too. Why don’t you go enjoy your lunch and check out the library?”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you for the suggestion.”

“Have a wonderful afternoon, Rebecca,” she said then she stood and left to get back to work.

Rebecca looked over the books again before sitting back with a sigh. She was finally getting somewhere.

A maid came in a moment later with her lunch. When she was done, Rebecca made her way back to the library.

She hadn’t spent much time there up until now. There always seemed to be so much else to do. When she got inside she spent a moment just taking in its splendor. There were comfortable arm chairs scattered about, a writing desk, and of course countless books lining the walls.

Rebecca smiled, running her hands along the spines until she found one that captured her interest and she pulled the volume from the wall. Curling up in one of the arm chairs, she sat down and began to read.

But she couldn’t have been more than ten pages in when the door opened once more and William stepped inside.

“Oh!” she moved to stand. “I’m sorry. I can go if you want to use the library.”

“Why would you need to do that? The space seems plenty big enough for the both of us, wouldn’t you agree?”

A hesitant smile graced her face. “I suppose, but you must tell me if I get in your way.”

“If all you intend to do is sit there and read I doubt you could.”

Rebecca smiled, turning back to her book, but as she read, she couldn’t help but sneak glances at William as he searched for his own book. Once he found one he sat in one of the chairs not far from her. She would have to be careful if she tried to look at him again, he might catch her.

So she forced herself to lock her gaze on the words in front of her, but just knowing he was so close was strange. She couldn’t help herself, she stole one more glance.

When she did, Rebecca was surprised to see he was looking at her. She flushed, quickly looking away.

He chuckled. “How is your book?”

“It’s good,” she stammered. “What about yours?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I’m enjoying it.” Then he turned back to his own book.

Rebecca gave him one last glance, a smile spreading across her face.

After that, it seemed so easy to go back to reading. She found herself able to enjoy her book in peace.

It wasn’t until William got to his feet sometime later that she looked up.

“I need to get some more work done. I’ll see you at dinner.”

She hesitated a moment. “Mary, the lady’s maid said she wanted to try having me dress for dinner. I told her I didn’t have anything that would work but she seemed rather set on it.”

“I see, then I’ll put in the effort too. I look forward to seeing you then, Rebecca.”

Then he stepped from the room, leaving her alone. She spent a little longer reading her book before making her way to her bedroom.

When she came in, Mary was already waiting.

“Welcome back your Grace,” she curtsied. “Shall I help you dress for dinner.”

“If you like. Were you able to find anything suitable? I hope you weren’t too disappointed.”

Mary smiled. “While it is still hardly the most extravagant gown, I think you will be surprised to see what I was able to pull together.”

“Then please, do show me. I can’t wait to see it.”

Then Mary began the process of dressing her into a gown she didn’t recognize. It was a pale blue wrap dress with delicate lace on the sleeves and neck line.

“Where did you get this?” Rebecca asked with a frown. “I don’t recall ordering this one from the dressmaker, nor does it seem like it has been long enough for any of them to arrive.”

Mary grinned, tying the wrap front in place. “You truly don’t recognize it?”

“I don’t own any gowns with lace.”

“I tacked some in for the moment. I can leave it in or take it out after tonight if you prefer. It will still be perfectly acceptable as a day dress with the lace so you don’t need to worry about that.”

Rebecca hadn’t been worried about that. She was still just in awe at wearing something that actually had any kind of adornment. She shook her head. “It’s lovely. Thank you.”

“So would you like me to leave it on?”

“Yes, I believe I would.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Now, why don’t you take a seat and I can get started on your hair.”

Rebecca moved to sit at the dressing table. That was when she saw a variety of boxes she hadn't seen before spread out on top of it. "What are all of these?"

"Duke Danton sent over the family jewelry for you."

Rebecca shook her head. "There's so much of it."

"This isn't all of it. There's more in your dressing room. I only brought what I thought would look best with your gown for this evening. If you like, we can go take a look at the rest later today or tomorrow."

"That sounds- I need to talk to William about this first, make sure he is truly all right with me having all of this."

She smiled. "You are the Duchess of Danton. It's yours."

Then she picked up one of the cases revealing a beautiful gold necklace with a few pearls studded in it.

Rebecca gasped.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I thought we would stay simple tonight. I don’t want to overpower the dress.”

This is simple?She thought to herself, shaking her head in shock. “It just seems like so much.”

“Don’t worry. You are going to look beautiful.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I’m sure you will do a great job.”

The pair continued in comfortable conversation while Mary finished getting her ready.

Finally, she stepped back with a smile. “There you are. Please look in the mirror and tell me what you think.”

Rebecca looked at herself in shock. There was more finery on her than she have ever even touched in her life before. There was a necklace with matching earrings and bracelet and even a jeweled hairpin glittering away in the updo Mary had twisted her hair into.

“You did a wonderful job. Thank you,” she finally said.

She lit up, dropping into a curtsy. “Thank you, your Grace! I’m so glad you are happy with it.”

Rebecca smiled. “I need to go join William for dinner, but thank you for helping me.”

As she made her way down the hall Rebecca couldn't help but feel nervous. William had said he was going to dress for dinner, and while she felt beautiful and more elegant than she ever had in her life, she was still very aware she that the dress was wearing was an afternoon dress and not an evening or dinner dress.

Still, it was the best she had so she made her way into the dinning hall. When she stepped inside William was already waiting. He turned to her and looked her over.

"Mary, the lady's maid Mrs. Anderson found for me said she had some jewelry you said was for me?" she said voice sounding less and less sure with every word.

"She asked Mrs Anderson about the jewelry you got when you received your title. I told her she was welcome to let her know where it was."

She softened. "Thank you, it's beautiful."

"There's no need to thank me. It is yours by all rights. I hope you like it."

"I love it!" she exclaimed.

He studied her bright face in shock of her joy.

"I have never owned anything even half as lovely before."

"Have you had a chance to look over the others then?"

"Not yet, but I know they must be."

"Right," he looked away. "Shall we sit for dinner?"

"Of course."

She joined him at the table and a moment later, their plates were brought out. After a few moments, she spoke.

“How was your day today?”

“It was fine.” He paused for a moment. “What about you?”

“It was wonderful. I worked on putting together a menu and got to know my new lady’s maid a bit.”

“And how did all that go?”

“Quite well I think, but Mrs Anderson thinks it would be best to start with a lunch menu before I try a dinner menu.”

“I suppose that makes sense. When will we do that?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She lit up. “You want to have lunch with me?”

He frowned. “I’d assumed you would want me there for the first meal you planned.”

“I do, but I didn’t think you would be able to come since it was a lunch and not a dinner.”

“I think I can find the time to come to a lunch.”

“Then I would love that. I will ask Mrs. Anderson the next time I see her to find out when we can do it.”

“Once you find out just let me know so I can make any necessary arrangements to ensure I will be free.”

She smiled. “Thank you, William. I appreciate that.”

He stiffened and look away. “What book were you reading when I interrupted you earlier?”

“You didn’t interrupt me. I was in your library.”

“You live here too. You have just as much of a right to the room as I do.”

Rebecca gasped and looked away. “That’s- thank you. I don’t know that anyone has ever said anything like that to me before.” Then she met his eyes. “I don’t know that anyone has every tried to make a place feel like it was my home too.”

He was stunned. “You never had that feeling when you lived with your family?”

She shook her head. “It was hard to when I was always seen as an after thought at best and a burden at worst. I wasn’t even given my own bedroom,” she confessed.

“But then where did you sleep?”

“In the attic with the extra furniture.”

“How inhumane! It must have been freezing in there in the winter!”

“It wasn’t as bad as it sounds.”

“But why did your father do it? You can’t tell me the house wasn’t big enough.”

“It was easier to keep me out of sight that way. After all, no one who came over would want to see me anyways.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, but it is true. Most of the guests would never have even met me.”

“Why not? Surely he had taken you out at least for walks in the park or trips to the shops.”

“He had occasionally taken me a few places, of course, but if there was any possible reason to leave me behind, then they would do so.”

“That’s terrible.”

Rebecca forced a smile. “It wasn’t that bad. Besides, it was nice to have the house to myself. It made it easier to move around without worrying about getting into any trouble.”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about getting into trouble for just moving around and living in your own home.”

“But that’s the thing I have come to understand. That place was never my home. It was just a place I had little choice but to live in. Besides, it wasn’t all bad. I never would have met Penelope and I don’t know what I would do without her.”

“She must be some friend.”

“She is. I don’t know what I would do without her.”

“Then you should have her over more often.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She smiled. “Thank you, and I am sure I will, but I want to take a few days for the two of us first.”

“That’s-” he cut himself off. “Whatever you like.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being so comfortable with me inviting her over.”

William blinked, stunned. “That’s- as I said, it is your hope to. You should be able to have a friend over if you want to.”

“Still, it makes me glad to hear you say that.”

He hesitated, unsure what to say to that, thankfully, she didn’t wait for him to try. Instead she continued herself.

“Dinner is delicious tonight.”

“I supposed, but it is only a basic roast.”

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t isn’t great.”

From there, the conversation flowed easily. Even when they had both finished their plates, they sat there, talking until a servant came and hesitantly knocked on the door.

“Excuse me,” they said. “We just wanted to check and see if you needed anything else.”

William glanced at the time and shook his head. “I think we should move this conversation into the parlor. Wouldn’t you agree, Rebecca?”

She lit up. “You want to?”

“Why not? I don’t have anything else to be doing for the rest of the evening, and we seem to be enjoying each other’s company.”

“Yes! I would love that. I was just a bit surprised you asked. I thought you would be too busy.”

He shrugged. “I’ve got the time if you do.”

Rebecca got to her feet and followed him from the room. They made their way to one of the parlors where William’s gaze immediately fell to a chess set.

“I don’t suppose you would want to play,” he said.

“I would love to, but I’m afraid I don’t know how.”

“You have never played before?”

She shook her head. “I am sorry to disappoint.”

“You didn’t. Just-” he hesitated for a moment. “Would you want me to show you?”

“Would you want to?”

“If you would like.”

“Yes, I rather think I would.”

“Great, then. Shall we?” he motioned to the table.

Rebecca eagerly took her seat and listened intently doing her best to follow along as he explained how all the pieces moved and how to win.

“Its a lot more complicated than I thought it would be,” she said when he was finally done.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Do you want me to go over it all again? We can also stop for the day if you like.”

“No, I want to try and play, but just know I don’t think I’m going to do very well.”

“That’s alright. No one does their first time.”

She smiled. “Then can we try now?”

“If you like. Do you feel ready?”

“I do!” she nodded eagerly.

“Very well. Do you want to play black or white?”

That evening, they ended up playing three games. Rebecca lost all of them, but they had fun playing.

After the last one, William sat back and started resetting the pieces. “I think that’s enough for tonight. Did you enjoy the game?”

She nodded. “I did, and I have to say, I did better than I thought I would.”

“You did well, especially considering it was your first time playing. You just need to practice.”

“Does that mean you would want to play more some time?”

“Of course. It is one of my favorite ways to pass the time and it’s nice to play with someone other than Patrick for a change.”

“Is really good at the game?”

He chuckled. “Oh yes. I can’t remember the last time I ever won a game against him.”

“Goodness! Then I had better hope I never have to play a gain against him.”

“Somehow I dout he would go all in against you,” he smiled. “Besides, give yourself time. You could end up being better than him.”

She looked away. “You have such faith in me.”

“It isn’t like that,” he said, looking away. “I just don’t think you give yourself enough credit. You are far too hard on yourself, Rebecca.”

A hot flush crept its way up her cheeks. “It’s very kind of you to say, but you truly don’t need to say these things for my sake. I don’t need you to give me false complements.”

“I’m not.” He said, a frown etching its way deep onto his face. “I wouldn't bother trying to lie to you.”

She floundered for a moment. “I don’t think you would lie. I think you’re just trying to be nice.”

“Do you think I look like the kind of person who would say something just to be nice?”

She shook her head. "I suppose not."

"Then what do you have to be worried about? If I said it, it's true. Now, I am going to go get some rest. I'll see you in the morning. I hope you sleep well."

"You too. I will see you in the morning."

When she made her way back to her room, Rebecca was surprised to find Mary was already inside, waiting for her.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting long!" she said, coming inside apologies bubbling on her lips.

"I had a book. I don't mind waiting." she shrugged.

"Still, I'm sure you have better things to do than sit around waiting for me."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“It is my duty to help you get ready for any occasions. I don’t mind at all. Would you like me to prepare you for bed now?”

“Yes, I suppose that would be wise.”

As Mary helped take her hair down and brush it out, Rebecca spoke once more.

“I want to thank you again, for all the effort you put in to helping me look so nice for diner.”

She shook her head. “Its my job, besides I enjoy it, but I am pleased to hear you are happy with my work.”

“Perhaps tomorrow, if you have time, you could show me some of the jewelry and other finery you mentioned I had access to.”

“I would be happy to. If you like, we can go as soon as I finish dressing you tomorrow.”

“Yes, that sounds perfect, but are you sure it won’t take too much of your time?”

“Not at all. Is there anything else I can do for you tonight?” she asked once she had changed into a night dress.

“I should be alright. Thank you for all your hard work today.”

“I hope you sleep well, ma’am.”

CHAPTER 11

The next morning, Rebecca's heart ponded in her chest as she and Mary stood outside of one of the rooms she hadn't spent much time in yet. The lady's maid turned to her with a smile.

"Are you ready?"

"As I will ever be."

Then Mary pushed open the door. Inside was another wardrobe as well as countless dressing tables covered in boxes.

"All of this is mine?" she asked, running a hand over the elegant wooden boxes.

"It is. Why don't you open one of them and take a look."

"I don't even know where to start."

"Why don't you start with the one right in front of you?"

"I suppose that is as good of a place to start as any."

She hesitated for another moment then carefully pulled off the lid. What she saw inside made her gasp.

It was an elegant diamond necklace that seemed fit for a queen. Her hands hovered in the air, hesitant to touch it lest she sully or break it.

"Is this truly mine?" she whispered.

“It is,” Mary smiled. “Do you like it?”

“How could I not? It’s beautiful.”

“Then I’ll be sure to select something that it matches for you as soon as your new gowns come in.”

“Do you think they will look all right with it?”

“I think you will look lovely. Do you have any idea when the gowns will be done?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid I’m not sure.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“That’s all right. Do you mind terribly if I send someone down to the shop to ask? I’m rather excited to see them.”

“Sure, why not. I don’t see any harm in it.”

Mary lit up. “Thank you! I will send someone to ask about them as soon as I get back down stairs.”

“Very good. Thank you.”

The pair chatted for another few moments, then Rebecca headed off to meet with Mrs. Anderson in their usual parlor.

“Good morning,” she smiled at the older woman as she walked in.

“Good morning, your grace. I see you are on time this morning.”

“I am. Mary made a few changes to our morning routine to get us back on track.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Does that mean you have gotten more used to having someone help you get ready in the mornings?”

“I don’t know if I would go that far, but it was easier than it was yesterday, but it still feels like so much more than I need.”

“You are a duchess. I can assure you, you need it, even if you don’t feel like you do just yet.”

She nodded.

“Did you have a chance to ask Duke Danton about having lunch?” Mrs. Anderson asked, changing the subject.

“I did, and you were right. He said he would be more than happy to have lunch with me. All we have to do is let him know when.”

“Then I will ask the cook how soon we can serve your menu and pass that day along to Duke Danton.”

“That’s wonderful! Thank you!”

“There’s no need to thank me. I’m happy to help. Did Mary get a chance to show you your jewelry?”

“She did. I didn’t look over all of it though. There’s just so much! I can imagine I will ever be able to wear all of it even over my whole life!”

“You will wear more of it than you think, even if you never go out much, dressing for dinner alone can use more than you think.”

Rebecca smiled. “Then I will do what I can to wear it well. Now, what did you have for us to work on today?”

“I would like for us to keep working on menus. I thought we could just have you make a few practice ones if that sounds good to you.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Then let’s get started.”

The pair spent the better part of an afternoon doing just that.

Later that day, Rebecca was back in the library when William entered with a soft knock at the door.

“I was about to go for an afternoon ride,” he said, dressed in his finest riding outfit.

“Of course,” she set her book aside. “I do hope you enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, I will.”

But he didn’t leave, hesitating in the doorway. Rebecca looked up at him. She was about to say something else when he spoke once again.

“I don’t suppose you would want to join me.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“For a horse ride?” she confirmed, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice.

“If you like. Of course you are not under any obligation,” he moved to step away, a excuses already growing on his lips.

But she cut all of them off. A bright grin bloomed on her face. “I would love to!”

“Well then, why don’t you go get changed and we can make our way to the stables.”

She faltered.

“Is something the matter? As I said, you are not obligated to go.”

“It isn’t that. I want to, truely, but I am afraid I don’t have anything suitable to wear. I also may not be very good. My father rarely gave me a chance to go riding.”

“That isn’t a problem. You can barrow something of mine.”

She hesitated. “But what if someone sees? It isn’t appropriate.”

“I won’t push the issue, but we can stay on our grounds. Theres no need to go anywhere where we could see others.”

She smiled. “All right then, if you are sure.”

“Perfect. Head up to get changed. I will send someone up with something for you to wear shortly.”

Rebecca smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

They each went their separate ways. Rebecca wasn’t waiting in her room long before Mary came in with a bright smile and a stack of clothing in her hands.

“I hear you want me to help you change to go horse back riding?” she asked with a grin.

“That’s right, but I didn’t have anything of my own. I hope you didn’t go to too much trouble to find something for me to wear.”

“Oh, I’m not the one who went to any trouble. Duke Danton just gave me a few of his things for you to wear.”

“His clothes?” she gasped in surprise.

“Yes, is that all right?”

“Of course. I was just surprised he wasn’t able to find something else or that he would offer that at all.”

“I think he must be rather excited to ride with you then.”

“I can’t imagine why. It isn’t as if I am a skilled or experienced horsewoman.”

Mary chuckled. “I imagine it is less about your skills and more about spending time with you. The two of you make such a lovely couple.”

Rebecca flushed, staring out a few words.

Mary continued on as though she had never made the remark to begin with. “Your

hair should be fine. Let's get you changed."

As Rebecca pulled on his clothes, she couldn't help but smile. They were so big on her, she almost felt like a little kid playing dress up. The sleeves billowed around her arms and the pants had to be cuffed several times to keep from dragging on the ground.

Then, Mary stood back and smiled at her. "There, you're ready. I hope you have fun. I'll be here to help you change when you get back."

"I'll try not to keep you waiting around too long."

She shook her head, "Don't worry about me. Go and have fun."

Rebecca hesitated a moment longer then smiled. "Thank you."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

When she made it down stairs, William was already waiting for her. When she saw him, she sped up, calling out to him.

“I’m sorry I took so long. I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

He frowned. “You hardly took any time. I was expecting to be waiting for far longer. Did the clothes I sent up work out?”

She smiled. “Yes, they should work perfect. Thank you.”

“Then let’s get going. Have you been to the stables since moving in?” he asked as they walked.

“Not yet. I’m afraid I haven’t had the chance.”

“They are quite nice. I spend a lot of time at them myself.”

“Do you enjoy riding then?” she winced to herself. “I mean obviously you must. Otherwise why would you spend so much time at the stables. I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For asking a stupid question.”

“Did you? I didn’t hear one.”

She gave him a disbelieving look.

“I enjoy our time together. You don’t need to be so careful around me.”

“I’m just worried I will overstep your boundaries.”

“If you overstep, I will tell you.”

She let out a bright, a smile working its way onto her face. “I appreciate that. Thank you.”

He was about to tell her there was no need to keep thanking him, but decided sometimes it was better to not push things too hard all at once. Instead he offered her his arm and the pair made their way out to the stables and the horses.

When she saw them, Rebecca lit up, all but breaking into a sprint toward the horses. When she realized what she had done, she froze, turning to him with a flush on her face.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why not? What did you do wrong?”

“It isn’t lady like to run.”

“And? You are in your own home.” After he said it, he heard his ton and winced. “You don’t need to worry so much, Rebecca. The grounds are made for someone to run and play in. they have been far too still with only me here.”

“What do you mean?”

He stiffened.

“I’m sorry. Should I not have asked that.”

“I told you you were free to ask whatever you wanted.” He let out a long sigh. “The truth is, after my brother and father were well...” he trailed off. “My mother became protective of me. Well, protective might be an understatement. She became convinced it was only a matter of time before something happened to me. She became obsessed with doing whatever it took to keep me safe. The included preventing me from any ‘dangerous play’ like running outside or horseback riding.”

“But she must have come around eventually. Clearly you learned to love it somewhere.”

“No, she never did. I learned at school. If she were here now, I’m sure she would be horrified,” he let out a bitter laugh.

“That must have been hard for you, but I won’t lie and say I don’t understand why she did it.”

“I do too. That was never the issue, but the level of paranoia she had,” he shook his head. “It was hard, especially as I was just a child. I was so young. All I wanted to do was play and have fun doing the very thing that terrified her.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“It must have been hard.”

“It was, but it was worth it to have her there. When I lost her too, I developed a bit of paranoia of my own.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

William hesitated, but before he could speak the sound of hooves cut him off.

A great grey horse ran over to them, coming to a stop a few feet from William. Only a few yards behind came an out of breath stable hand.

“I am so sorry, your grace!” the man said, catching the horse’s reigns. “He heard your voice and he just bolted.”

“It’s quite all right. I know how he can be.” William turned to Rebecca. “I suppose this is as good of a time as any for you to meet my horse. Rebecca, I would like to introduce you to my noble steed, Hawthorn.”

“He’s lovely. Will I be riding him?”

“Oh heavens, no. even if I wasn’t planning on riding him myself, I wouldn’t recommend Hawthorn. He’s known to be a bit... spirited.”

The stable hand chuckled. “That’s a very kind way for you to put it, your grace. He can be quite a handful when he wants to. Shall I go saddle up one of our more docile horses for Duchess Danton?”

William looked to her. After a moment she spoke a smile spreading across her face.

“Yes, I would appreciate that. Please select whatever horse you think would be best.”

“Of course your grace. I’m sorry we didn’t already have one ready for you. I had no idea you were coming.”

“No, I’m sorry for causing you trouble. I should have sent word ahead of my arrival.”

“I was the one who invited you,” William cut in. “if anyone was causing trouble it was me. Hearing that, do you still think you were causing trouble?”

She hesitated, but before she could speak the stable hand spoke once more.

“Its no trouble. I’ll go get one of them ready for you right away. I’m thinking Sunflower. She is a real sweet heart.”

“She sounds perfect. Thank you.”

He headed off leaving the couple alone for a moment. Rebecca turned back to William.

“Thank you again for bringing me.”

“Its nothing.”

“It isn’t. Not to me.”

He looked away. “Come on. We wouldn’t want to keep Sunflower waiting.”

They made their way the rest of the way to the stables where both horses were now

waiting and ready.

“They are both all set up for your rides. I hope you have a pleasant journey.”

“We will, thank you. I can take over from here,” William said.

The stable hand bowed before heading off to attend to the other animals. William turned to Rebecca.

“Can you mount on your own or do you need any help?”

“I should be able to handle it on my own, but thank you.”

They each mounted their horse then made their way out to the fields. In the late afternoon air, Rebecca breathed in the sunlight. Sunflower was as gentle as the man had said, her pace slow and steady as she trotted behind Hawthorn.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She found herself relaxing in the saddle, confidence growing with every step.

“Doing all right back there?” William called. “I know you said you didn’t have much experience.”

“I don’t but I feel good so far. Sunflower is a sweet girl.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but still be careful. Horses can be unpredictable animals.”

“It’s all right,” she smiled. “I trust her.”

He blinked in shock. “Then perhaps you trust too easily.”

The pair enjoyed a pleasant ride for the rest of the afternoon, only returning when it was close to dinner time.

“That was lovely,” Rebecca said. “Thank you so much for inviting me along.”

“It was nothing. I was going to go either way, so there was no harm in bringing you along.”

“Still, you didn’t need to think of me, so thank you.”

He looked away. “Yes, well, I will see you at dinner.”

“Your right. I need to go wash up before we can eat. I’m going to head up a bit early.”

“I had assumed you would want to. Mary should be in your room with a bath and change of clothes.”

“Thank you for setting all that up.”

“Again, it was nothing.”

The pair went their separate ways, Rebecca making her way up to her room where Mary met her, a gent smile on her face.

“Welcome back, your grace. How was your ride?”

“It was lovely, thank you.”

Mary set to work helping her undress then got her into the waiting wash bason.

“You won’t believe what came in while you were out,” Mary said as she helped wash Rebecca’s hair.

“What?”

“The gowns you ordered.”

“So soon?” she gasped in surprise.

“I know. I was rather shocked myself. Would you like me to pull one of them for you to wear tonight?”

“Yes, thank would be perfect. Thank you, but please send someone to let William know we will be dressing more formally.”

“Of course Ma’am.”

She helped her finish up in the bath then stood.

“Why don’t you enjoy the warm water for a few moments while I go get your evening apparel ready.”

And so a few minutes later, Rebecca got her first look at her new gowns. When she saw it, she gasped.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, unable to help herself from reaching out and running her hands long the smooth silk. It was a pale yellow with gold work along the hem.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I thought so too,” Mary agreed. “I also took the liberty of selecting jewelry that included that necklace you looked at the other day.”

Rebecca barely breathed as Mary helped her dress in more finery than she felt she had any right to. She was terrified to breath too hard and somehow rip the gown or move to hard and accidentally break the jewelry. It was all far more than she deserved.

When Mary was done, Rebecca turned to her in awe. “Thank you for doing all this. I don’t think I have ever felt this beautiful before.”

“I am glad to hear you are pleased with my work, but it was nothing, really. All I did was work with what was already there.”

“Be that as it may, you did amazing work. Thank you.” She glanced to the clock and gasped. “Goodness! I need to get to dinner. Thank you again.”

“It was nothing. I will see you when you come back up. Enjoy your evening.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Rebecca was surprised to find she made it down before William had. She let out a sigh of relive when she realized that meant she wouldn’t be able to keep him waiting.

Maybe she could talk to Mary and arrange things so that she would always be ready before him.

Before she could think too much on that, the doors opened and William stepped inside.

Rebecca's breath caught in her throat. She wasn't sure if she had ever seen him in full formal attire. He cut an imposing figure in his suit coat and vest. She looked away before she could get caught staring.

CHAPTER 12

When William stepped into the dinning hall, he found himself speechless. He didn't think he had ever seen a more beautiful sight. Rebecca was in one of the new gowns she had ordered, the neckline was a bit more daring than her usual attire.

Then there was the stunning bit of diamonds in her ears and around her neck. The whole thing was pulled together with a few jeweled pins holding back her hair.

She wasn't looking at him. Rebecca must have noticed she was staring. He needed to say something.

"You look lovely this evening," William finally said.

Her eyes darted up to look at him, a smile speaking across her face. "That's very kind of you to say. Thank you, it is all thanks to Mary's hard work."

"Somehow I doubt everything about how you look can be credited to the work of a lady's maid."

She flushed looking away. "That might be true, but everything of note is."

He shook his head. "Some how I doubt that," he repeated.

Her face warmed even further. “Shall we sit to eat?”

William found himself unable to take his eyes from her for the entire meal.

She was breath taking. A fresh wave of guilt threatened to wash over him, but he did his best to push it down. Rebecca may have been forced to marry him, but his guilt did nothing to help the situation now.

The least he could do is try to court her properly, try to give her the kind of marriage she deserved.

They ate in a haze of pleasant conversation.

“I was thinking we might go on a picnic tomorrow,” he said during one of the natural lulls in conversation. “We could go on a walk of the whole grounds, give you a bit of a tour, make a day of it if you like.”

She lit up. “I would love that! Truly.”

“Then it is settled.”

“But don’t you have work I would be keeping you from?”

“I can assure you, that if I offer you my time, it is because I have it, I promise.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She nodded. “Then I think that sounds lovely. Thank you.”

“Then that settles it.”

The pair enjoyed the rest of their meal in a content silence.

The next morning, when Rebecca dressed, she didn’t make her way to the unusual parlor where she would meet with Mrs Anderson. Instead she headed down to the landing where William was waiting for her, a large basket in his hands.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked when he saw her.

“I am, but are you sure you want to carry that basket the whole time? I can understand if you would rather simply return home for lunch.”

“I want to carry it. I could also simply have someone arrange the picnic while we are on our walk, but I wanted to do it this way.”

She hesitated, “Very well, if you are sure.”

“Then let’s go,” he said, offering her his arm.

She hesitated for a moment, flushing softly before the couple stepped out into the late morning light.

They spent the better part of the morning walking the grounds and talking about everything under the sun.

“When we get back, I need to meet with Pat rick today.”

“Why? Is everything all right? I hope you aren’t having any difficulties with your business.”

“No, nothing like that. He simply prefers to have me look everything over t least once a week to ensure I am still happy with it. It usually doesn’t take long, but I may run late for dinner.”

“Then would you like to invite him to join us? It seems a shame to send him all the way home hungry with you working so late.”

“I can ask him, but I’m not sure if he will be free.”

“If he doesn’t want to, I understand. I just thought I might save him a trip.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Then again, it might make trouble for the kitchen if they don’t know we might have an additional guest. Perhaps you could have someone send word to him to see if he would want to.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but even if we don’t find out until he arrives, it shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“I’m glad. Even if he can’t stay, perhaps you could stop and introduce him to me for a moment.”

“I can if you like, but I don’t understand why you want to meet my solicitor so much.”

“The other day, when I was talking about Pnelope and I mentioned she was the person I was closest to in the world, you said Patrick was the person you were closet to.” she paused, smiling at him. “That makes him seem rather important if you ask me.”

William blinked in shock, stunned. “I didn’t realize you would remember that conversation.”

“How could I not? It seemed rather important.”

“Still, I- I didn’t expect you to. I will see what I can do about having him stay for dinner.”

“Thank you, please let him know if he can’t stay tonight, I would like to invite him another day.”

“I will let him know, but I doubt he will turn down the invitation. I have no doubt he will want to meet you.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Did I ever tell you how I came to be looking for a wife to begin with?”

She shook her head.

“It was all William’s idea. I would never have even let myself consider it on my own. I’ve lost so many people it seems almost selfish to bring anyone else into this, but he knew how important it is to me to keep my family line going. He played on that to talk me into allowing him to search for a wife on my behalf.”

“How did it go, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“I wouldn’t know. He didn’t say a word to me about it after that until he found you.”

“Oh,” she could hardly hide her surprise.

“It’s true, but I don’t imagen it went well.”

“What makes you say that.”

“Because the time between when he initially asked and he told me about you was so long I had almost forgotten the conversation had happened at all.”

“It could have just taken a while for them to hammer out the details of it all.”

He let out a half laugh. “Somehow I doubt that. I won’t lie, I was rather surprised he was able to find anyone willing. I know what is said about me. Any reasonable family would have been terrified to marry their daughter to me.”

Rebecca looked away. “Forgive me. That came out wrong.”

“We have been walking for quite sometime. Perhaps it is time we stop to eat.”

“Of course. If you like. There should be a nice clearing just up ahead. It should be the perfect place for us to take a rest.”

Sure enough, only a short walk later, they found themselves standing in a large clearing. William walked a short way ahead of her and started to set up their picnic.

The more she saw him pull out of the basket the wider Rebecca’s eyes grew.

“Were you just caring all of that our entire walk?”

“Obviously,” he laugh. “It didn't magically appear when we arrived at our chosen spot. It had to come from somewhere.”

“Still, it’s all so heavy. It couldn’t have been easy to carry all that.”

“It wasn’t that bad. Besides, now we have a nice change of scenery for lunch today.”

“I suppose that is true, but it feel rather unfair to have you do all of the work.”

“If it bothers you that much you can always carry the basket on the way home.”

She winced. “That wasn’t quite what I had in mind.”

“If you don’t want to be the one to carry it then keep your thoughts to yourself.”

She looked away “I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’, sorry. That was supposed to be a joke, but clearly it wan’t a very good one.”

“No, I’m sure it was fine. I tend to take these things a bit more personally than I should.”

“That might be true, but if you aren’t laughing then I don’t consider it a good joke.”

She flushed, looking away. “There you go again, being so very kind to me. I’m hardly worth all the trouble.”

“I think you are, so let me be as kind to you as I like, all right?”

“If you insist, who am I to argue?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

He chuckled and the pair made their way back to the estate. It was only a short time later, when Rebecca made her way to the dinning room, dressed in her best, heart pounding in her chest.

She could hear voices from where she stood on the other side of the door. She took a deep breath.

She wanted desperately for this to go well. It was her first chance to make a good impression on Patrick. She could only hope their first meeting didn't leave him with too bad of an impression of her.

Rebecca took a deep breath then pushed inside.

The second she stepped through the doors, William and Patrick both turned to look at her.

"Patrick, I'd like you to meet my wife, Rebecce," William said with an easier smile than Rebecca was used to seeing him wear. "Rebecca, this is Patrick, my solicitor."

"Lovely to properly meet you," Rebecca smiled. "I have heard so much about you."

"I wish I could say the same, but William won't tell me anything no matter how many times I ask."

"Oh," she tried to hide the way her face fell. She should have known he would have better things to talk about than her.

“Forgive me for trying to discuss business when you tell me you came over to discuss business.”

“But this is business! I spent so long arranging it. The least you could do is tell me if things are going well.”

William huffed out a half laugh.

“But you will tell me how things are going, won’t you, Rebecca?” he asked turning to her.

“What?” she asked, stunned. “I-I don’t know.”

“You don’t need to worry, I am simply teasing you.”

“Why don’t we sit down and enjoy our meal?” William said.

“Of course,” Patrick grinned. “That is why I’m here, isn’t it?”

William scoffed, rolling his eyes.

Rebecca was starting to worry something was wrong, but when she caught his eyes, he just shook his head and smiled.

Patrick waited until after they had been served their meals to speak once more.

“So, I hear the pair of you have been spending quite a bit of time together lately. What have you been doing?”

“I would rather discuss how you heard what I am doing in my personal time,” William interjected.

“That is hardly the point! I just want to know if you are up to anything exciting!”

“We went for a picnic earlier today,” Rebecca said after a moments hesitation. “And while we were out, he showed me the grounds.”

“That must have been nice, but why did it take you so long for you to see the grounds? Shouldn’t he have done that when you first arrived?”

“I had a tour of the manor, just not the grounds outside,” she said a bit too quickly.

“I suppose I can understand that, but it still seems like a major over sight.”

“She needed some time to settle in and adjust,” William said, shooting her a reassuring smile. “I rather think we both did.”

Rebecca found herself smiling back, relife flooding over her. It looked like she hadn’t said anything too foolish after all.

“Regardless, did the two of you enjoy your picnic?”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“We did,” William said. “It was a nice change of pace. In fact I would go as far as to say we should go for walks more often.”

“I would be free if you wanted to,” Rebecca hesitantly volunteered. “Mrs. Anderson said I didn’t need to spend as long studying if I had something else I wanted to do as long as I kept trying hard and come to her if I have any questions.”

“I’m glad to hear you have already made so much progress. Perhaps we could start doing morning walks together.”

“I think that sounds lovely, but do you have that much time?”

Patrick chuckled. “You don’t need to worry so much. He has far more time than he lets on.”

“Careful, if you tell her all my secrets she may start using them for her own.”

From there the meal continued in a pleasant buzz. When the evening was coming to an end, Patrick managed to get a moment alone with Rebecca when William had to step away for a moment.

“How are the two of you doing?” he asked.

“William said-”

“I know, but I am asking you. He’s- well he is hardly one to talk about what’s going on or how he’s feeling. I don’t actually need to know any details, whatever jokes I

might make. I only want to know that the two of you are getting on well.”

Rebecca smiled. “I won’t lie, we got off to a rather rocky start. It took us some time to come to understand one another, but yes, I think that it is more than fair to say that the pair of us are getting on rather well. I won’t speak for William as to how he feels about me, but I know I have grown rather happy about the life we could build together.”

“And the pair of you have begun that? Building a life?”

“I would like to think so.”

“Very well,” he got to his feet. “That is all I needed to know. Please tell William I will see him in a few days for our next meeting.”

“I’m sure he will be back any moment if you would rather tell him yourself.”

“I’m sure he will be, but that is quite all right. You were the one I wanted to speak with when I agreed to dinner. I see him often enough. I will have plenty of time to talk to him again then.”

She hesitated a moment more. “Very well, if you’re sure.”

“I am. As I said, I would appreciate it if you would let him know I wish you both a pleasant evening, and that I am happy for you both.”

“Thank you. That is kind of you to say. I hope you have a pleasant evening as well.”

Then they went their separate ways.

Rebecca was only alone for a moment or two before William came back in.

He frowned. “Where did Patrick run off to?”

She looked away. “He said he needed to go but that he would talk to you at your next scheduled meeting.”

“Is that right,” he rolled his eyes. “I supposed I shouldn’t be surprised.” Then for a moment, William hesitated for a moment. “He didn’t say anything to you, did he?”

“Like what?” she frowned.

“Nothing,” he shook his head. “Forget I said anything.”

She studied him for a moment, but when it became clear he wasn’t going to say any more, she let it go.

“It’s getting rather late. Perhaps we can talk more on another walk tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, I would like that. I hope you sleep well.”

The next two weeks were spent in each other’s company almost exclusively. They went on walks, enjoyed meals together and slowly became better acquainted.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

But they hadn't left the estate. Either together or on their own. Still it was something neither of them could avoid forever.

William couldn't help but worry.

It was rather typical for him to stay home unless there was a good reason for it, but Rebecca was a young woman with friends who must want to be out living her life.

It was hard to help the guilt from creeping in the longer he thought about it.

The more time they spent together, the more it consumed him. He knew he needed to say something or it would only continue to fester. Still, it took the better part of another week before he found the ability to grant a voice to them. So one day as they were on what had become their daily walk, William carefully broached the subject.

"Does it bother you, bein trapped in this house all day, Rebecca?" he asked. "You know you are free to go out whenever you like."

"I know, but we have been spending so much time together. It has been lovely, and I didn;t want to pause it just so I could do something as simple as go into town."

"You didn't ask me to come with you either though."

"Because I know you dislike going out."

That is true," he sighed.

“Then there was no point in asking.”

“But just because I don’t like going out doesn’t mean I would say no.”

“But you hate it.”

He sighed. “I’m trying to say,” he cut himself off shaking his head. “Forget it.”

“No, please tell me.”

“I was simply saying that if you were set on going out, I wouldn’t mind. I would be willing to do it for you.”

“I appreciate that, but how can I ask that of you?”

“If you want to go out, we can always do something small. Perhaps go on a promenade.”

“That sounds lovely! Only,” she hesitated. “Would you mind terribly if Penelope joined us?”

“Do you want her to join us?”

“I would like for her to, but I understand if it’s too much.”

William hesitated then took a deep breath. “If you want her there then I don’t see the harm in it.”

She lit up. “Oh! Thank you so much. I’ll send word over to her when we get home to see when she is available.”

“I am glad to make you happy, Rebecca.”

And so, just like that arrangements were made for them to promenade with Penelope the very next day.

CHAPTER 13

The following morning, Rebecca struggles to hold still as Mary finished getting her ready to go promenade.

“Is everything all right, your grace?” she asked as she tried to pin Rebecca’s hair in place once more.

“Of course they are. Why wouldn’t they be?”

“Forgive me for asking, but you seem rather nervous.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Yes, well, this promenade is my first time going out since becoming the Duchess of Danton. I want to make a good impression.”

“You don’t need to worry. I just know you are going to do great.”

She took a deep breath. “Thank you. I just hope he and Penelope will get along all right.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“I don’t know. It’s just hard not to worry that something will go horribly wrong.”

She laughed. “Well, try not to. You’re going to have a great time, I just know it.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I will try to relax.”

Mary opened her mouth to say something else, but before she could, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Rebecca called.

A footman stepped inside with a bow. “Miss Sutton is here to see you.”

She nodded. “Oh, of course. Please let her know William and I will be right down.”

The man bowed then slipped form the room.

“Well, I suppose I should head down now. Thank you again, Mary for helping me to get ready today.”

“I’m always happy to help, your Grace. I hope you have a wonderful time.”

“I’m sure I will. Thank you again.

Then Rebecca got to her feet and started making her way down the long halls. Her heart pounded in her chest. She wasn’t sure why she was so nervous. It wasn’t like they were doing anything all that adventurous.

It was just a walk she reminded herself as she stepped into the sitting room where Penelope was already waiting.

She lit up when she saw her long time friend.

“It’s good to see you again,” Penelope said, pulling her in for a tight hug. “It has been too long.”

Rebecca chuckled “it has only been a few weeks.”

“As I said, too long. When will William be joining us?”

“Not long I’m sure. I thought the three of us could enjoy a nice walk together at the park.”

“I know. You already told me as much in your letter. Why do you seem so nervous?”

“I’m not,” she squeaked.

Penelope shot her a look. “You know you can’t lie to me.”

She sighed. “I’m just nervous. It’s my first time going out since I was married.”

“So? It isn’t like you have to make a big production out of it.”

“I know, but I just want to make a good impression. Especially since it isn’t like I got out much before.”

“That just makes it even easier.”

“How?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“No one has much of an idea if you in their head. You can just be yourself.”

“But what if I make a bad first impression?”

“”How could you? We’re just going for a walk, aren’t we?”

“I suppose...” she trailed off.

“It is. You aren’t at a ball. You aren’t making any kind of official public appearance. You’re just a woman out for a walk with your husband and your friend.”

“You’re right,” Rebecca smiled, taking a deep breath. “I can do this. It’s going to be fine.”

“Is everything all right in here?”

The pair spun to the door to see William hanging just outside of it, a frown on his face.

Rebecca softened when she saw him. “We were just talking for a moment while we waited for you, please come in.”

He stepped inside, an apprehensive look on his face.

“William, this is my best friend Penelope,” Rebecca said, looking between the two of them with a nervous smile. “I hope the two of you are able to get along.”

Penelope stepped forward, looking him over with a critical eye. “As long as everything you have told me is true, I’m sure we will get along just fine.”

“What has she said?”

“I believe that is best kept between her and myself. All I care about is that you treat her well.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I would never want Rebecca to have anything but the best.”

She studied him for a moment then nodded. “That’s what I like to hear. Now, shall we go?”

Penelope didn’t wait for a response, she simply started making her way to the door, as if she knew for a fact the others would simply follow behind without a second thought. Though to be fair, she was right.

Still, Rebecca noticed William hesitate for a moment. She turned to him with a smile.

“I know she can be a bit much, but she means well.”

“She worries about you. I can respect that,” he took a step forward. “Come, I don’t know her well, but she doesn’t seem like the kind of person you want to keep waiting.”

She chuckled. “I can’t say I disagree.”

The pair made their way out to the waiting carriage. The park wasn’t far, but neither Rebecca or William seemed to know just how to start the conversation.

Fortunately, Penelope didn't seem to have that same problem. She chattered on and on about the latest balls her mother had forced her to addend.

Rebecca just smiled to herself. She did her best to push down the nugget of disappointment she felt and envy that sometimes reared it's head at hearing her so vehemently reject something Rebecca would likely never get to experience.

William seems to notice something is amis and tries to catch her eye, but she just forces a smile, shaking her head.

He frowned but let it go for the moment.

Finally, they all make it to the park. It was a beautiful day, sunlight streaming down through the trees, casting beams of light like stained glass windows through the red and yellow leaves.

As they walked through the park, Rebecca couldn't help but be aware of eyes glancing at them, hushed whispered behind hands after they passed. She chewed her lip, eyes darting around.

William nudged her. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"For what?"

“The whispers.”

She shook her head. “It isn’t your fault people like to talk.”

He nodded. “I suppose, but-”

“Are you two coming back there?” Penelope interrupted.

“Yes, of course we are,” Rebecca said, chasing after her.

William just smiled and followed behind her.

The trio enjoyed a pleasant afternoon. When they went to leave, Penelope’s mother met up with them and the pair headed off on their own with a polite goodbye, leaving William and Rebecca to return to their carriage just the two of them.

“That went rather well,” she said as they walked.

“So you had a good time then?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Good, I’m glad I was worried we-”

Rebecca drew in a sharp breath and he fell silent for a moment.

“What is it?” he asked, following her gaze.

William grit his teeth when he saw her father and sister approaching them with tight smiles on their faces.

“If we go back into the park for a few moments, we can do another round so we can miss them.”

She shook her head. “I think it’s too late for that.”

Then they were on them, Dorothy stepped forward first, a cruel smirk on her face.

“Rebecca,” she poured out, voice deceptively sweet. “I’m surprised to see that we ran into you here.”

“Why is that?” William asked.

“Well, it’s just a bit surprising Rebecca would want to be out. After all, it isn’t as if she has any connections.”

William stepped between them. “I hardly see how that is any of your concern.”

“She’s my sister. She’s always my concern.”

“And my daughter,” Solomon stepped forward, a critical gaze tracing over her.

“And now she’s my wife, so she’s my concern.”

“Is that right?” Solomon studied him for a moment then frowned. “I must admit I thought you had better taste than that, being a duke and all. It would seem I was wrong. Though I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“It’s strange, I could say the same about you. For all the airs you put on, showing off

your status you are hardly the pinnacle of taste yourself. Other wise, you would spend far more time with your fine daughter.”

“I spend plenty of time with my fine daughter Dorothy. I treat them as they deserve to be treated.”

“And what exactly did Rebecca do to warrant her treatment?”

His eyes hardened, turning to her. “She knows what she did. If you don’t know yet, you will soon enough.”

“And why is that?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Because it won’t be long until she does something to show you her true colors.”

“You have certainly given me plenty of chances to see yours.”

“And I look forward to the chance to see your own. I wonder if you’re anything like the man I have heard you are. If so I’m sure you will know just how to handle her when you finally see the truth.”

William’s face darkened. “Are you implying that I would lay a hand on my wife?”

“I am simply stating that I think you are the kind of person who can do what needs to be done.”

He grabbed Rebecca’s hand and started to pull her away. “Come, Rebecca. There’s no reason for us to stand here and take this kind of treatment.”

“But-” she started to protest. Then she met her father’s eyes and she fell silent. Her spine stiffened. “You’re right. Let’s go home.”

As they walk, Rebecca is filled with gratitude.

“Are you all right?” William asked as they got back in the carriage.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“For what?”

“Standing up for me like that.”

William shook his head. “There is no need to thank me. It was nothing.”

“Not to me it isn’t. I don’t think anyone has ever stood up for me like that.”

He turned to her, a complicated expression on his face. “I don’t want it to feel special. As long as I’m around, I will never let anyone speak to you like that again.”

Rebecca’s breath caught in her throat, eyes burning for countless wounds she had never given herself a moment to feel before. Her mouth opened and closed, trying to find her words. “Thank you,” she finally said. “I don’t think there are words for me to tell you just how much that means to hear.”

He looked away. “I might not understand it, but I am happy I could give it to you. I hope in time you come to accept that it is the bare minimum you deserve.”

“I don’t. I hope I never get used to it or I risk taking it all for granted.”

“I don’t know if anything would make me happier than seeing you take for granted that you deserve to be treated with basic respect.”

Rebecca was too stunned to speak. Her lips move but she couldn’t get a single word out. After all, what could she say to something like that?

“I just don’t understand what I ever did to deserve this,” she whispered more to herself than him.

“You are a kind person, Rebecca.”

“You can’t know that. We hardly know each other. I just haven’t had time to show

you the truth of my heart,” she whispered, shaking her head.

He fell silent for a moment, before he said. “You’re right. We haven’t spent enough time together for me to witness your the truth of your heart, but it isn’t just my thoughts I’m pulling from to see this.”

“Then how?”

“I know many dukes probably wouldn’t put much stock into the words of their servants, but personally, I do. Especially given that I spend so much time at home, I take great care to get their thoughts on relevant matters. Every one of them had something nice to say about you, about how kind you are. You deserve this and far far more than I am capable of giving.”

She shook her head. “You’re wrong. You’re giving me far too much credit.”

“Not from where I’m sitting. Just look at the kindness and compassion you have shown me. How many other people would have done that? Even though you never chose this, never chose me, you have never held it against me.”

“How could I? You asked for my hand, you gave me a place to stay. You wanted me around when no one else did. When I came to live with you, for the first time in my life, I felt wanted, welcome, safe.”

“That’s because you are.” Then he hesitated. “May I?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

Rebecca nodded, though she wasn't quite sure what she was agreeing to.

He reached out, taking her hand in his own. "Shall we go home now then or would you like to spend some more time in town?"

She shook her head. "I think I have had quite enough for today. Let's go home."

CHAPTER 14

Rebecca chewed her lip as she stood outside the sitting room a few days later. William was already inside waiting. She rubbed her hands down the skirts. It was one of her new gowns. She still couldn't believe such fine things belonged to her. It seemed like far more than she deserved.

She hoped she looked as nice in it as Mary told her she had. She had spent extra time with her lady's maid getting dressed that day, using it in an attempt to energize herself for this conversation.

All of that brought her thoughts back to the closed sitting room door in front of her. It was so simple. All she needed to do was reach out and turn the handle, step inside and say a few words. It wasn't that hard.

It shouldn't be that hard.

Part of her wanted to say it wasn't worth it and simply enjoy her time with William. She could always ask another day. There was no reason to rush into this.

And yet, ever since the their little confrontation with her father in town, she found herself growing more and more comfortable in her new role.

She was even getting better at putting together menus. So good in fact that she had almost completely taken over the task from Mrs. Anderson. That wasn't even to mention the growing tenderness between her and William.

It was getting to the point that Rebecca couldn't help but begin to hope that something was blooming between them.

But none of that was the point at the moment

The day they returned from the park, she had made a decision, and now today was the day. She was going to ask William about it.

After all, the worst he could saw was no.

And so, she gathered her determination, took a deep breath then pushed her way inside.

William had likely been waiting for some time and had already made himself rather comfortable. He was reclined in his usual chair, a thick book open on his lap.

When he saw her, he looked up and then frowned.

She couldn't blame him for the look of concern on his face. She was sure she looked just as stressed and nervous as she felt.

"Are you quite all right, Rebecca? You seem a bit tense," he asked, worry creeping into his voice.

“Yes! I- well, that is...” she trailed off.

“Whatever it is, take your time. If you need a minute before you want to talk then we can talk about something else or sit in silence for the time being.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t want to put this off or I might lose my nerve.”

“Well, I must admit, you have piqued my curiosity,” he set the book he had been flipping through aside. “Please, you may continue whenever you are ready.”

“Thank you,” Rebecca took a breath and then started to speak. “There’s something I want to ask you.”

“Of course,” he gave her a reassuring smile. “Please feel free to ask whatever you like.”

After a moment, she continued. “I was wondering, it’s only that I am duchess now, typically that comes with certain responsibilities. I had noticed there were a few I hadn’t started working on quite yet.”

“Do you feel like you’re struggling with them? I can talk to Mrs. Anderson if there’s more you want her to do to help while you get used to things. Perhaps even set up more lessons with her or even another lady who can help.”

“No, no it’s nothing like that, but it is good to know I can get more help if I need it.”

“You can always get more help if you need it. I want you to be confident and comfortable in your position, so whatever it takes to make that happen is yours.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“It means a lot to hear that. I hope that means you will consider my request.”

He smiled. “I would be happy to talk about it as soon as you tell me what it is.”

“I was thinking, maybe if it isn’t too much trouble, we could host a dinner party?” she squeaked out, hands toying with her skirt as she chewed on her lip.

He hesitated. “Rebecca, I don’t know about that. It has been some time since I went to anything like that let alone hosted it. I don’t mean to discourage you. I just want to make sure you’ve thought about this. It would be a lot.”

“I understand, and I don’t want to push it, but I really want to try and host something. It wouldn’t be anything big. Just a few people. It wouldn’t be a ball or anything either. All I want is a simple dinner party I promise to keep the guest list short.”

He hesitated but didn’t say no. Instead, he asked, “Why don’t we talk about this a bit more first.”

“Of course,” she lit up. “What do you want to know?”

“Why don’t we start with something simple? Who all would you want to invite?”

“I wanted to start small, so I only had a few people in mind. Just Penelope, her mother, and Patrick, as well as Patrick’s wife if he has one. I can’t remember if you mentioned one or not, I’m sorry. And I seem to be rambling a bit now. Sorry. I will give you a minute to collect your thoughts,” she winced, falling silent.

William frowned. For a moment Rebecca was sure he was about to say no. She opened her mouth to tell him it was all right and they could do something else instead. After all, the last thing she wanted was to make him uncomfortable.

Besides, she probably wasn't even ready for this. What was she even thinking asking? She needed more time, and more experience before she could even consider something like this.

But then he said, "If we are going to do this, you should invite your father and sister as well."

She lit up. "You mean I can do it?"

"As long as you keep it small, I see no harm in it."

"Oh, thank you, William! I promise I will do a good job putting it together," she raced forward, pulling him into a tight embrace.

William stiffened, arms hovering awkwardly in the air. After a moment, he wrapped them around her though they lay stiff and unsure on her shoulders.

The hug went on longer than usual, nerves growing in Rebecca's chest the longer she stood there. She had expected him to pull back almost as soon as she had leaned in, but he hadn't. Time ticked by but both of them still stood there.

Maybe she should pull away now?

Before she could move, he did. Pulling back, William straightened out his jacket.

"I have no doubt that you will do a wonderful job," he said, with a tight smile. "But before we go on, I would like to talk about it a bit more."

“Of course,” she said, taking her seat beside him. “I would be more than happy to tell you whatever you want to know or let you decide any details you need to to feel comfortable with this.”

“I don’t need to give you my opinion on every little thing. The main thing I was worried about was the size.”

“Then what else do you want to talk about?”

“When did you want to do this? did you already have a day in mind or did you need help coming up with one?”

Rebecca smiled. “I was going to ask Mrs. Anderson for help with that if you said yes, but there’s no reason the two of us can’t start on that if you want to help.”

“I think I would like that.”

He smiled. “Me too.”

“Why don’t we start with the day? Are there any days you already have plans?”

He thought for a moment, “I don’t think I have anything coming up for at least the next month or so. Or were you thinking of doing it further in the future than that?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know exactly how long it takes to put something like this together.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Well, why don’t we call Mrs. Anderson in? I’m sure she would be able to help.”

“Are you sure we should do that? I would hate to take her away from her other duties. I already take up so much of her time.”

“I can say with the upmost certainty that she would be happy to help us get to work on this as soon as possible.”

She lit up. “All right then, if you’re sure, I would love that.”

“Then I’ll go and get her. Give me just a moment.”

A short time later, the three of them were all sitting together. Once Mrs. Anderson joined them, he found himself sitting back and watching more than anything else.

Watching how excited Rebecca got he couldn’t help the way his own excitement seemed to grow. It was almost contagious. He could feel it starting to creep in, doing its best to push away the concerns and the doubts.

Still, he couldn’t quite press down the seed of anxiety blooming in his chest at the thought of all those people coming into his home.

He was glad she wanted to keep it small. He wasn’t sure if he could handle much more than that.

But even keeping it small, he couldn’t remember the last time anyone other than Patrick had come to see him.

One thing was for sure, it was going to be quite the adjustment, but for Rebecca, he would find a way to manage.

It was no less than she deserved.

CHAPTER 15

The second she got the approval, Rebecca threw herself into preparations for the dinner party. Even though they were keeping it small, it still seemed like there was an endless list of things to do.

The guest list and the date may have been set, but there was still the invitations, the menus, any activities she might want to plan for the evening. Not to mention deciding on the silverware, place settings, Mrs. Anderson even asked if she would want to change out the drapes or the art on the walls for the party.

It was all enough to make her head spin.

A few days later, she was in a sitting room, putting some of the finishing touches on the menu. Originally she had expected they would send the invitations out first, but Mrs. Anderson recommended getting the kitchen staff the menu first so she was almost done with it when a voice startled her from the doorway.

“You seem to be hard at work. Should I come back later?” Penelope’s voice called, making her jump.

Rebecca turned to the door at lit up at the sight of her friend. “You are always welcome here. I just wasn’t expecting you. Come in. sit down.”

She smiled, taking her seat. “Don’t you know by now you should always expect me.”

Rebecca chuckled. “I supposed I should by now, but some how you always seem to keep surprising me.”

“Well, I do try.” Penelope grinned, glancing at the papers Rebecca had in front of her as she started to set them aside. “Are you working on something for the dinner party?”

Rebeca blinked in surprise. “How did you know about that? We haven’t even sent out the invitations yet. Unless, William or Mrs. Anderson did it on their own, but I thought I was going to help with that.”

“You don’t need to worry,” she smiled. “I didn’t get an invitation or anything like that.”

“But then how did you find out?”

“I saw William on the way in and he told me I should ask you about it that’s all.”

“Oh, of course. I should have known it would be something like that,” she said shaking her head.

“So? Tell me all about it?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything!”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

Rebecca chuckled. “That’s rather a big ask.”

“I suppose I can understand that. I should give you a place to start. When is it? That seems as good of a place as any. Oh! I am just so excited for it!”

“Me too. It should be in about a week or so, but I haven’t sent out invitations yet because I still need to confirm everything with the kitchen before that.”

“Well, my mother and I will be there I can’t wait.”

She chewed her lip. “Thank you, me too.”

“How have preparations gone so far?”

“Well enough so far, I think,” she nodded. “Mrs. Anderson has been a huge help. I don’t think I would be able to make this work if it wasn’t for her.”

“I’m glad you have someone in your corner who can help you with it. I know little things like that can make all the difference.”

“I would be so out of my depth without her. My father never thought it was worth it to teach me any of this. I didn’t know the first thing about being a lady of the house, much less a duchess before I met her. She’s been a wonderful teacher.”

“I’m not surprised. I won’t lie, I was worried you would never be able to marry out of that house before Duke Danton came along. I’m so glad he was able to get you out of there, and he does seem to treat you well.”

Rebecca smiled. "You have no idea. He's so good to me. Though, I must admit, I'm more than a little nervous for the dinner party."

"Why is that?"

"Quite a few reasons. Mainly because I want to ensure I do honor to him and his family name. I don't want to be an embarrassment."

"Oh, Rebecca," Penelope smiled, shaking her head. "You couldn't do anything like that even if you tried."

"You don't know that! So many things could go wrong I don't even want to think about it. Not to mention, it will be my first time hosting, and my first time hosting as a duchess after all," she said, wringing her hands.

"I know it's a lot, but I have faith in you. Trust me, you can handle this. Besides, you've kept it small haven't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I was careful to keep it under ten people. I don't think either of us wanted to risk getting overwhelmed."

"And you have been the one planning all the meals here for a little while now haven't you?"

She nodded once more.

"Then you have nothing to worry about," she assured. "It will hardly even be that different than what you are all ready used to. You're going to do great. If you don't mind me asking, who all did you invite?"

"You and your family, his solicitor and his family," Penelope was nodding along

when Rebecca hesitated. Finally she named the last guests. “and my father and sister.” She said it quickly, hoping it would minimize Penelope’s reaction.

Of course it did no such thing.

“You what?” she gasped, hands flying to her mouth. The shock and horror on her face was so extreme it was almost comical. “I don’t understand. Why on earth would you invite them?”

Rebecca sighed as she said, chewing on her lip. “Well, at first I wasn’t going to-”

“As you shouldn’t!”

“But,” she continued. “William suggest I should.”

“Why would he do that?” she shook her head. “I thought he treated you right and seemed to care about you, but maybe I was wrong! Doesn’t he know the kind of people they are? Have you told him how they treated you in the past?”

“We have talked about them some, but no, I haven’t told him everything.”

“Why not? I bet if you told him, he would agree that it is a terrible idea to invite them.”

“Perhaps he might, but the longer I thought about it, the more I’m sure he is right to have us invite them.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“But why? You know how they are going to be. It isn’t fair for him to make you deal with them on such a special night!”

“It would probably make us look poorly if we were to leave them out of our first time entertaining as a married couple.”

“I suppose I can understand that, but I still think its a bad idea. What if they try to cause a scene?”

“I’m sure it will be fine, and if they do try, then they will be the ones who lose face in that situation. Not us. Like I said, I want to insure I do a good job and make the Danton family look good.”

Penelope crossed her arms. “I suppose part of me can understand that at least a little, but you should have to have them here at all if you ask me. It’s just asking for trouble.”

She huffed out a half laugh. “Perhaps you I would agree with you, but this isn’t just about what I want. I need to do what is best for the Danton family name.”

She grunted. “It just doesn’t seem like a fair position to put you in.”

“I’m a duchess. I can’t let myself forget that.”

“You are handling it far better than I ever could.”

“I’m sure if you were in a situation like this, you would handle it far better than you

would expect.”

“I still hope I never have to find out. All I want is to settle down as a spinster and be left to my own devices.”

“So you have said, but are you sure you really want that?”

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Just- I can remember when we were younger. We both wanted to find love. I just don’t want you to rob yourself of the ability to have something you would rather have.”

“But I won’t regret it. I know this is better for me. Look around. How many people do we know who got married?”

“Quite a few.”

“And how many of them were able to marry for love?”

“Fair point, but that doesn’t mean you couldn’t.”

“It means it isn’t worth trying for. I’d rather just enjoy what I have and be content.”

“I suppose I can understand that, but do think about it?”

“I think about it plenty. You should think more about yourself. You have got a dinner party to plan after all.”

“I know. I have been putting a lot of time and effort into it. I just hope it goes well.”

Penelope smiled. “I’m sure it will. After all, anyone will be able to see how much work you put into it.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said, chewing her lip.

“I know I am. You don’t have anything to worry about. It’s going to go great.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you have faith in me. It means a lot.”

“Of course I do. I’ve known you long enough to know that you’re going to do great.”

CHAPTER 16

Rebecca sat in her parlor, putting the finishing touches on the plans for the dinner party. Earlier that very morning, William had set out for a business meeting, the invitations heading out with him.

Any moment now, the guests would be arriving at the doors. It was starting to seem like everything was really coming together and she couldn’t be happier.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She hadn't been at it very long when a voice sounded from the doorway.

"Don't think I don't see what you have done, Rebecca."

Her blood ran cold. This couldn't be happening now. Why was he here? Taking a shaky breath, Rebecca turned to see her father standing in the doorway, a cruel sneer on his face.

"Father," she said, hoping her voice didn't sound as nervous as she felt. She folded her hands in her skirts, hoping it would help hide the way they were starting to shake. "What are you doing here?"

"Aren't you going to stand and greet me properly?"

"I- I asked you a question. I would appreciate it if you would answer it."

He hummed, taking another step into the room. "Can't I just come to visit my daughter? Even if she does seem intent on disrespecting me from the very moment I entered the room."

"I- I- wasn't!" she was about to launch into her usual apologies, but she caught herself first. "I mean, why would you do that? You've never done it before."

"Oh Rebecca," he cooed in a voice dripping with mock kindness. "You wound me. Do you not remember when your sister and I took the time to come see you shortly after your wedding? I believe we were the first people to even consider coming to see you. How could you not remember?"

She grit her teeth at the memory of that horrible day. At least it help to jump start her relationship with William, not that she would let them take credit for her work. “I- I suppose I do, but-”

“Then why would you make up such lie?” he shook his head. “I must say, I’m disappointed in you. Thought I don’t know why I would have expected more from you, Rebecca. You have always been a liar.”

She clutched her hands into fists on her lap. Her heart pounded in fear, but she was surprised to find that was no longer the only emotion growing in her chest. Growing just as fast and hot beside it was anger. “You- you can’t talk to me like that anymore!” Her voice grew in volume, but it also grew in pitch. It hid her anger, instead making her sound nervous, even a little scared. While that was true, it wasn’t the impression she wanted to give, still it was too late to take it back now.

“Can’t I?” scared and stepped closer to Rebecca until he was towering over where she was sitting. “Just because you managed to ensnare the duke doesn’t mean you have me fooled. I’ve known you too long to fall for your childish tricks.”

“I haven’t done anything to him!” she insisted.

He scoffed. “As I said, you can’t possibly expect me to believe that. As I said, you seem to forget I’ve seen your tricks since you were a baby. I just assumed he would be able to see through them too. Now, why don’t you tell me what you’ve done to him.”

“I haven’t done a single thing! If he is acting a certain way around me it is because he cares about me, something you have never taken the time to do!”

“Is that what you tell yourself? How could you possibly think anyone could come to care for you? If he has any kind of positive feelings towards you then it is only

because you have deceived him.”

“I would never-”

“You already did, but it’s only a matter of time before he figures it out. What do you think will happen to you then?” he took a step even closer to her, legs bumping her knees.

Rebecca shrunk back into herself, resisting the urge to curl into a ball or flee the room. She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to cover herself as much as possible. “I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“I think you do. You and I both know it’s only a matter of time before he sees through you and tosses you out.”

“You’re wrong. He would never do something like that.”

“When he does, you can come back home, if you help us.”

“I don’t care what you want. I won’t do it. William is a good man and he would never do something like that.”

Solomon’s eyes hardened. “Then if you are so sure about that, you won’t mind if I start telling people the truth of your relationship.”

Her blood went cold. “What do you mean the ‘truth’?”

He shot her a cruel smirk. “You know exactly what I mean.”

Rebecca shook her head, refusing to believe what she naturally wanted to assume. “I don’t, I want you to spell it out for me.”

He sighed. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you can’t put the pieces together on your own. You never were the smartest, now were you?”

Rebecca didn’t reply, hands clenching into fists. She glared down at her skirts with enough fire to burn holes into them. Still, she knew better than to speak right now. One wrong word and he might not tell her anything.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I mean, I will tell everyone how cruel he is and how poorly he treats you.”

“But he doesn’t, that isn’t true. You know that isn’t true.”

“Do I?” he shook his head. “Even if it isn’t, who do you think people will believe you or me? One word from me and I will destroy him. Do you understand me?”

She swallowed. “What do you want?”

“Nothing a good daughter shouldn’t have already been doing anyway. I want you to use your sway with the duke to help your family, Rebecca. Be a good daughter for once in your life.”

“I - I talk about you frequently.”

“All your vicious lies, I’m sure. I think we both know that isn’t what I mean.”

She clenched her hands into fists.

“So let me tell you what’s going to happen now, I am going to leave, you will apologize to your husband and tell him you shouldn’t have made up whatever lies you told him about us and correct the record. Make sure he knows how kind I was as a father. How much I gave up raising an ungrateful brat like you. Then, in a few days, when he understands tell him he should be helping us. We’re family and it is the least he can do, and if you don’t,” he shot her a cruel smile. “Well, I’ve already told you what will happen.”

She couldn't bring herself to look at him. She kept her eyes locked on the ground.

"Well, I will let you get to it," he said, smiling as he turned and strode from the room.

Rebecca sank to the floor the second she was alone.

She wrapped her arms around herself. This couldn't be happening. She was supposed to be free.

She wanted nothing more than to refuse.

To throw her father's words back in his face and tell him to never speak to her again.

But she wasn't the only one at risk now.

It would be one thing for her to suffer the consequences, but could she do that to William?

After everything he had done for her, every kindness he had shown her, how could she risk his reputation, his good name?

Her eyes burned a lump growing in her throat.

"Your grace!"

She looked up to see Mary gasping at her in alarm. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Her heart pounded. What could Rebecca say to that?

How was she supposed to answer?

“Nothing,” she shook her head. “I just slipped is all.”

“But you look like you’re about to cry. Did you hurt your ankle or something?”

“Yes, I suppose that must be it.”

“Let me help you up and get you to the sofa. Do you need me to call a physician?”

“That isn’t necessary. It was just a little fall. I’ll be right as rain after a few minutes.”

Despite Rebecca’s words, Mary didn’t seem convinced as she helped her to the sofa.

“Very well. I won’t call a physician, but what about Duke Danton?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“No!” she said a bit too quickly. “I mean- well there isn’t much he could do anyway. We shouldn’t interrupt his business. It’s so rare for him to go out.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you wanted him to come back a bit early.”

She shook her head. “I will be all right. Why don’t you go bring me some lunch.”

“Of course, I can do that. Do you need anything else?”

She shook her head. “I should be all right. I think I just need a few minutes to think.”

“Of course, ma’am. I’ll be right back with your meal.”

Then she scampered off and Rebecca had a moment to catch her breath. She knew she to figure this out before William returned home.

She didn’t think she could face him otherwise.

CHAPTER 17

William groaned as his home finally came into view. He always hated days when he had to go into town for work. They grated on his nerves. Everything about it was pure misery.

It started as soon as he left the house that morning.

The streets were crowded due to some last minute market he hadn’t heard about

making the carriage slow.

After thinking it over for a minute, he sighed tapping on the door to signal to the driver.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the time to be stuck in this. I will walk from here.”

The driver hesitated. “Are you sure, your grace?”

“Yes, I don’t have time for anything else.”

“Very well, your grace. I will be there to pick you up at the agreed upon time, but please do call me earlier if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Then with little other option, William stepped onto the street and began making his way towards Patrick’s office.

No sooner had he stepped onto the streets than he wished he hadn’t. It felt like every pair of eyes in the market were on his neck, staring at his scar. That wasn’t even to mention the amount of whispers that seemed to start the second he stepped past people.

It was as if they couldn’t even bother waiting until he was out of ear shot to start talking about him.

After what it felt like an eternity, he managed to make it to Patrick’s office. When the door was firmly shut behind him he let out a sigh.

When his solicitor saw him he frowned. “Did you have a pleasant trip here?” he

asked in the way that made it clear that he did not think William had had a pleasant trip.

“There’s no reason to discuss that.”

“I was just trying to make small talk.”

“That’s quite all right. There’s no need for that. I think it would be best if we simply moved on with our business.”

He hesitated.

“Please, the sooner we do, the sooner I can go home.”

Patrick chuckled. “Very well, I don’t want to keep you from your lovely wife.”

And to his credit, Patrick didn’t get off topic for the rest of the day. It was only as they were packing up their notes and papers that the conversation turned personal.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I wanted to thank you for the invitation to dinner. Obviously, we will send a formal response, but you can expect to see us there.”

“I’m sure Rebecca will be pleased to hear that.”

“No doubt, though I must say, I’m rather surprised.”

“By what?”

“The fact that you have agreed to this. You must truly be falling for her.”

William scoffed. “Whatever you’re picturing, I can assure you, it’s nothing half as elaborate as that. It’s only a small dinner party with a few guests.”

“Even so, you must admit that that is still rather shocking for you. I mean aside from my visits which were never done by invitation per se, I have to say, I don’t know that I have ever seen you willingly have someone over before.”

“Yes, well, it may have been some time,” he looked away.

“That wasn’t a dig at you to be clear. If anything it was a commendation for Lady Danton. I’m happy to see it.”

“I’m glad you approve,” he rolled his eyes.

“You can jest if you like, but we both know you wouldn’t have invited me if you didn’t want me to know about it.”

“Just because I wanted you to know doesn’t mean I wanted to have this conversation.”

“And if you didn’t want to have it, you very easily could have simply not invited me, but we both know that you knew this was coming the second you put my name on that guest list.”

“Then perhaps I have made a mistake by inviting you after all.”

Patrick chuckled. “Perhaps, but unfortunately for you it is now far too late for that sentiment.”

“I don’t know. I could always disinvite you.”

“Perhaps, but that wouldn’t be very polite. What would people say if they heard you disinvited someone for no reason? And with such a small party there would surely be talk.”

“But it wouldn’t be for no reason, and I am rather confident that the second they heard why, the whole town would be on my side.”

“No, if you are set on uninviting me then you would have to cancel the whole thing and we both know you aren’t going to do that.”

“I could. Don’t tempt me.”

“But then you would have to tell lovely Rebecca why you did that,” he grinned.

William groaned, “Speaking of Rebecca. I must be getting home. I want to make sure I am back in time for dinner.”

“Of course. I would have to make you late. I hope you have a good evening.”

“You too. Will I see you again before the party?”

Patrick frowned, thinking for a moment. “I don’t think so, but I can check the calendar if you like.”

He shook his head. “That isn’t necessary.”

“Suit yourself.”

And then his day finally came to a blessed end.

When William came through the door, he frowned.

Everything was dark, as far as he could see not a single room was occupied. Not only that, but the whole place was completely silent.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

Since he had gotten married, he couldn't recall the last time the house was so still.

He made his way inside, eyes scanning the halls for some sign of life, but no matter where he looked, there was no one.

It was strange. He hadn't realized how used to all the sounds and excitement he had gotten.

Finally, he found Mary.

"Mary, where is my wife hiding?" he asked. "I didn't see her in the sitting room."

"She went to lie down. She had a small fall earlier and wanted to rest her ankle.

William frowned. "Is she all right? Why wasn't I called?"

"Her grace said not to disturb you. She said all she needed was some rest."

"If that's what she asked for, I won't interrupt her. I can simply talk to her about it at dinner."

"Of course, would you like me to tell her anything? I was on my way to go see her now."

He shook his head. "That's all right. It won't be long until dinner. I will see her then, but thank you."

She curtsied and he continued to make his way to his study.

In only a few days, he would get his chance to see Solomon once more. The very thought of what he could say caused a smug satisfaction to settle in his stomach.

He would never allow someone to talk to Rebecca cruelly or mistreat her again.

He would do whatever he could, whatever it took to protect her and her happiness.

Less than an hour later, a footman came to the door.

“Dinner is about to be served, your grace,” the man said. “Would you like to come to the dining room or would you prefer to take your meal here this evening?”

“Why would I take my dinner in my study? I always eat with my wife?” he asked with a frown.

“Forgive me. I thought someone had told you already, but the Duchess of Danton isn’t feeling well and will be taking her meal in her room.”

“I thought she was doing all right. Now she can’t come down for dinner.” He got to his feet. “I need to go see her.”

The footman hesitated. “She said she needed some rest and told us to let you know you should enjoy your meal without her.”

“And I will, as soon as I check on her. You can have it set up somewhere in the meantime. I won’t be long.”

He didn’t wait to be told twice, pushing past him and making his way down the hall.

It didn't take him long before he was stopping outside her door. He raised a hand and gave a quick knock.

"I hear you wouldn't be joining me for dinner, so I wanted to check on you."

There was a moment of silence from the other side of the door. "I'm all right. Thank you for your concern."

He frowned. "Do you need anything. What happened?"

"I'm fine. I just need some rest."

William hesitated. "If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

"Of course."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

He spent a moment longer looking at her door before making his way back to his study.

William tried not to take it personally. She had been so busy getting everything ready for the party, she was probably just a bit worn out.

He needed to trust her to tell him if something was wrong. For now, it was best just to give her some space.

It didn't change the next morning either.

William hardly saw Rebecca. If he didn't know any better, he would worry she was avoiding him.

When he did manage to catch her, she rarely had much to say. Her responses were short, clipped, and rarely more than a word or two.

Still, it was understandable that she needed space. He just needed to be patient.

But it was hard when it hurt.

So after the third day of this, William sought her out.

Rebecca wasn't hard to find. She was tucked away in the library, staring out the window with a blank look on her face.

"Rebecca, we need to talk," he said softly.

CHAPTER 18

Rebecca spun to see William standing in the doorway and felt herself pale.

“Wh- what is it?” she asked, hoping to keep her voice even and wincing when she heard how badly she failed.

“Is something wrong? Did I do something to upset you?”

“Of course not!” she shook her head with so much force it made her neck ache. “Why would you think that?”

“You have been avoiding me. I assume there is a reason.”

She looked away, chewing her lip. “I haven’t been avoiding you.”

William shot her a look. “We both know that isn’t true.”

“I haven’t! I’ve just been busy with preparations for the party.”

“I already know the vast majority of them were done days ago. All that should be left are some finishing touches.” he sighed running a hand through his hair. “Look, whatever it is, you know you can tell me. If I did something to upset you, all you need to do is tell me what I did and I will be sure never to make the mistake again.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But there is something wrong.”

She didn’t respond, but she didn’t need to say a word. He knew already.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Tears well in her eyes. “You wouldn’t ask me that if you knew what was going on.”

“I can promise you I will.”

She shook her head. “You can’t know that.”

“Then tell me. I know it can’t be easy, but I’m asking you to take a chance on me and trust me.”

That was the thing that broke her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

Rebecca reached out a trembling hand.

Without hesitating, William took it, holding it firmly in his own. “Whenever you’re ready, I’m listening.”

Rebecca took a deep breath then spoke. “The other day, when we sent out the invitations, something happened.”

“I figured as much. That was the day you started acting different.”

She nodded before she continued. “While you were out, my father came to see me.”

“Did he lay his hands on you?” William said, his hands curling into fists.

“What?” she gasped at the question, eyes wide.”

“I will thrash him myself,” he growled turning to storm from the room.

“Wait!” she called, voice high. “Where are you going?”

He paused, turning to face her. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I need to comfort you right now. I can go confront him when we’re done talking.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered, shaking her head. “What are you saying?”

“He hit you. I know you said you fell that day, but I don’t think that’s the whole story is it?”

Rebecca hesitated.

“It’s all right. You don’t need to tell me anything else if you don’t want to. I know everything I need to know. As soon as we’re done here I’ll go talk to him and make sure he knows he can never lay a finger on you again.”

“There’s no need for that.”

“I won’t let him hit you again, especially not in your own home.”

“No,” she shook her head. “You don’t need to do that. He didn’t lay a finger on me.”

“But then why did you say you fell?”

She sighed. “He didn’t hit me, but did have quite a bit to say. After he left, I sank to the floor because I was upset and I needed an excuse for why I was down there, so I said I fell.”

“What kind of things?”

“First he tried to say that I was lying to you. That I had told you all kinds of lies so I could ensnare you. Then he started to say once you realized that, you would leave me high and dry.”

“I would never do something like that. I care about you and I want you to be happy.”

“I know, and that’s what I told him. I told him you were a good man and you would never do something like that to me. Then he said that it didn’t matter what was true. All he had to do was spread rumors that you mistreated for him to ruin you. He said unless I told you I lied about them before and told you that you should support him that he would ruin you. I didn’t want to let that happen, but I didn’t know what to

do.”

When she finally got the last of her words out, Rebecca broke down, tears streaming down her face, trembling from the stress of it all.

William didn’t hesitate. He darted forward, capturing her in his arms and pulling her to his chest.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. He just held her as she cried, letting out everything she had kept trapped inside for the past few days.

Once she had calmed down, he spoke. “He can’t hurt you anymore. I won’t let that happen.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, but I don’t know what we can do to stop him.”

William frowned. “Rebecca, you’re a duchess now. You outrank him. When I say he can’t hurt you any more, that isn’t only because of me. It’s because of your own power too.”

“But if he says all those things, if he spreads all those rumors, it could hurt your reputation.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

William chuckled. “He’s welcome to try, but he’s hardly the first to say anything against me. I’ve managed just fine up until this point. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“But who knows what he could say? Or who he could say it to?” Rebecca said, chewing her lip.

“Look at me,” he took her face into his hands. Her breath caught in her throat. “His hold over you is over. He will never hurt you again,” William assured her. “Not only because I won’t let him, but also because you have the power to stop him.”

“I do?”

“Yes, I know it might not feel like it, and I’m not saying you have to use it yet if you don’t feel ready, but you out rank him. You can tell him he has to leave you alone and there’s nothing he can do about it.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Then I can do it for you until you feel ready, and if you never feel ready, that’s fine too. I’ll happily defend you forever if I have to.”

“That’s- I-” for a moment, Rebecca struggled to find the words to thank him, but when she realized there were none, that there was nothing she could possibly say to express just how much that had meant to her to hear, she took action.

Without a second thought, Rebecca darted forward. She didn’t give herself a moment

to think, talk herself out of it or worry about the consequences.

Heart pounding, she pressed her lips to his in a small sweet kiss.

It couldn't have lasted more than a second. The same moment. She made contact, Rebecca's courage failed her and she pulled back, apologies already blooming on her lips.

She squeezed her eyes shut, unable to face him as she stammered. "Please forgive me for that. I shouldn't have been so forward."

"Why?" he asked in a carefully even voice.

"Why what?"

"Why are you apologizing? Do you regret it?"

"That isn't the point!"

"It seems to me that in this moment, that is very much the point, so please answer the question."

"No, I don't."

"Then why are you sorry?"

"Because I'm sure that you do."

"And how can you be so sure of such a thing?"

"Because you have to. You can't- you can't have wanted that."

“And you are the expert in what I want, are you?”

She frowned, feeling a fresh round of tears beginning to build behind her eyes. “I don’t understand?” she whispered.

How had she done it? How had she messed things up so badly so fast? This wasn’t how she had wanted it to go.

Then, to her surprise, William reached out, pulling one of her hands away from her face. “Why don’t you ask me what I think?”

She hesitated. Rebecca was no fool. She knew a trap when she saw one. It was hard not to given how she was raised, but this wasn’t her father.

This was William.

And surely by now, he has earned a little trust.

“Rebecca took a shaky breath and forced herself to find her voice. “What did you think of the- of what I did?” she asked, looking away.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I think that it was wonderful, and I sincerely hope you would consider doing it again.”

Her eyes shot to him, wide with shock. “Do you really mean that?”

“Have you known me to lie to you before?”

“I- I- no you haven’t but that would mean that you...” she trailed off.

“I care about you, Rebecca. More than that, I can feel myself falling for you. I would like to take this as a sign you feel the same way.”

“Yes,” she nodded, finally daring to meet his eyes.

What she saw there made her breath catch in her chest.

She had never been faced with such unadulterated admiration and acceptance. Her words stuck inside her mouth.

“Do you believe me now?”

She could barely manage a nod.

He smiled. “Then if you are willing, I would like to kiss you once more.”

“I- I think I would like that too.”

He smiled, then his hand was on her cheek.

Rebecca's eyes drifted shut, leaning into his touch.

Then she felt him shift. Her eyes fluttered open and her heart pounded in her chest.

He was so close. She could feel the warmth of his chest, the touch of his breath. All she could see when she opened her eyes were his own deep blue eyes staring back at her.

He moved very slowly, giving her plenty of time to move or pull away should she so chose, but Rebecca had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

Then, it happens.

William closes the distance between them.

His lips are soft against hers. They moved slowly, gently almost as though he still expected Rebecca to pull away at any moment.

In an effort to encourage him, her hands hesitantly came to wrap around his shoulders. She sighed, savoring the growing closeness between them.

After a few moments, William pulled back, a hesitant smile on his face. "Good?" he asked.

Her lips curved into a tentative smile. "Heavenly."

CHAPTER 19

After the kiss, things changed between them. Not in any massive way or anything that

would be immediately obvious to anyone else, but to them it was everything.

They were moving forward with their life together. They were finding happiness in each other.

Make no mistake, things were still moving rather slowly between them. In part because neither of them quite seemed to have the nerve to try for another kiss, but that wasn't to say it hadn't helped them to feel freer to express affection.

It wasn't anything huge, William pressing a hand to her lower back as they walked, Rebecca leaning against his side as they sat in the parlor in the evenings.

The newfound warmth blossomed between them as the evening of the dinner party drew closer and closer.

It seemed like not time at all before the day of the dinner party arrived. When she dressed that night, Rebecca could hardly hold still.

Page 81

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Are you feeling all right, your grace?” Mary asked as she valiantly attempted to do the fidgety woman’s hair.

“Of course I am. I’m just eager to get down stairs so I can make sure everything is ready.”

“You checked most of it before you came up and everything was on track then, wasn’t it?”

“I suppose, but there is always more that needs done.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure if that’s true.”

“Of course it is.”

“But at a certain point, aren’t you just making work for yourself so you have something to worry about?”

Rebecca frowned. “I think everything I can think of to worry over very much worth worrying about.”

Mary made an odd face. “What ever you say, your grace. I just want you to know I am sure everything will go wonderfully for you.”

“Thank you,” she sighed. “I just hope you’re right.”

Mary just smiled for a moment before stepping back. “There, I’m all done with your

hair. Do you need anything else before you go down?"

"No, I think that should be everything for the moment, but thank you for asking."

"Then I will see you after the party. I can't wait to hear how it went."

"As though you won't hear about everything from the rest of the staff long before you see me."

Mary hid her smirk with a curtsy. "I hope you have a wonderful evening, your grace."

"Thank you. So do I," Rebecca said before making her way down stairs.

She paced from the parlor to the dining room over and over again, making sure everything was perfect. She checked the place settings, the seating cards, parlor's set up, she even went down to the kitchen once to make sure all was well there. She was on her tenth check of the dinning room William came over to her.

"There's nothing to be so nervous about," he assured, placing a hand on her shoulder. You are going to do great."

"I hope you're right," she sighed leaning into his touch.

"Of course I'm right. Do you want to tell me what part in particular has you so worked up."

"I think it's just a bit of everything."

He frowned. "So there's nothing in particular you're worried about."

She hesitated.

“You can tell me, whatever it is, I’m here for you.”

“I know. If I’m honest, I suppose I’m just a bit worried about my family.”

“I can understand that, but you don’t need to be so worried. Things will be different here.”

“I hope you’re right, but what do we do if they try and cause a scene?”

“If they try something like that, then we’ll handle it.”

Rebecca paused, nodding for a moment. A frown creased her face. “It means a lot knowing you have my back in a situation like that, but even if they try, we should do our best to avoid stooping to their level.”

“What do you mean when you say that? They are your family and this is your party so I want to know what you would want if something happens.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She thought for a moment. “I think we should do our best to try and ignore them.”

“How so?”

“If—well, when really—they start trying to stir up trouble, I think we should just do our best to avoid giving them the reaction they want. This is my first dinner party and I don’t want to let them ruin that.”

William hesitated. “I can understand the logic to what they are saying, but I hate the idea of them disrespecting you in your own home.”

“I won’t say I’m wild about it either, but it’s all right. I’m used to it. Their words don’t mean as much as they once did.”

“Still...” he trailed off.

“And,” she squeezed his hand. “If they go too far, I will still step in and stop them.”

“What are you considering too far?”

She shrugged. “I’ll know it if I see it.”

He huffed. “Very well, but if I think they have gone too far, I will step in.”

“I can respect that, but please try and give me some kind of warning before you do.”

“I will agree to that as long as you don’t try to stop me.”

“I won’t. I trust your judgment.”

He smiled. “Thank you for trusting me. Now that that is settled, you should try to relax a bit.”

“How can you expect me to relax at a time like this? There’s only a little over an hour and a half before the party.”

“I know. You look lovely by the way, but that’s all the more reason you should take a moment to relax before the guests start to arrive.”

Rebecca opened her mouth to reply, but before she could she was cut off by a footman.

“The Sutton family has arrived, your grace.”

“Already?” William blinked.

But Rebecca just laughed. “I should have known they would be here early. Please let them know I will be right with them.”

“Of course, your grace.”

“Perhaps it’s a good thing that they came so early,” William mused.

“How so?”

“Well, if you’re busy talking to Penelope, you won’t be able to worry or overthink.”

“I suppose that is a good point,” she frowned. “But what about you?”

“I’ll be joining you of course.”

“Then I’m glad to hear it. Shall we?”

The pair made their way into the Parlor where Penelope and Lady Sutton were waiting.

“Rebecca, or should I say Duchess Danton,” Lady Sutton smiled, pulling her in for a hug. “It’s good to see you doing so well.”

“Thank you, and the same to you. It’s good to see you both. It’s been too long.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I’m sure Penelope feels the same way. It’s been the better part of a whole week since you have last seen each other. There’s no b=doubt you have much to catch up on.”

Rebecca laughed, but knew her friend to know that it was likely quite true.

In fact, given just how long the pair sat talking, there was no doubt about it.

Patrick Monaghan arrived almost exactly on time. He motioned for the woman beside him to step forward.

“Everyone, I would like you to meet my wife, Rosemary,” he said.

Pleasant greetings were exchanged and he continued. “Shall we head into the dinning room then?”

“Not yet,” Rebecca said, chewing her lip. “We’re still waiting for a few more guests.”

Lady Sutton hesitated. “May I ask who?”

Before Rebecca could reply, Penelope nudged her mother and whispered something in her ear.

The woman appeared surprised for a moment before she composed herself.

“Of course. In the meantime why don’t we all sit down for a bit. There’s no need to rush what is sure to be a fine evening.”

Rebecca offered a relived smile. “Indeed. I feel the same way.

So the six of them sat and waited.

Most of them were able to pass the time amicably enough, but Rebecca struggled to focus.

It felt like her family would never arrive, but finally the foot man announced the arrival of the Viscount of Glourshire and the Lady Dorothy Crowton. Rebecca didn’t doubt that their late arrival was precisely calculated to humiliate her without injuring their standing in the ton.

The air in the room seemed to shift when they entered. Dorothy’s eyes darted over every surface as if she were searching for something. After a while she must have found it because a wide grin spread across her face.

Solomon on the other hand seemed to be a completely different person than she was used to. No sooner had they stepped inside, than he was approaching Rebecca.

“It looks like you put in quite a bit of effort for us,” he said with a tight smile.

She hesitated, waiting for the next part of that sentence. The part that would cut her like a knife, humiliate her in front of everyone, but it didn’t come. “Thank you?” she said after a moment.

He nodded then moved to go speak with Lady Sutton.

Rebecca blinked in shock, turning to William. She caught his eye for a moment, but before she could approach him, Dorothy approached her.

“Well, isn’t this all rather quaint,” she scoffed. “It’s easy to see it’s your first time

hosting.”

She looked away, taking a deep breath. “Shall we move to the dinning room for dinner?”

CHAPTER 20

It was taking everything in William to remain calm. From the second Solomon and Dorothy walked through the door, he wanted nothing more than to throw them back out.

It wasn't helped that Solomon seemed intent on trying to play the part of the perfect father and Dorothy taking a shot at Rebecca every chance she got.

Of course his perfect father act didn't extend to stoping his other daughter from mocking Rebecca.

He walked beside Rebecca as they led their guests into the dinning room.

Everyone moved around, taking their seats. Dorothy scoffed, turning to Rebecca.

“Why did you seat me beside Lady Sutton?” she pouted. “What am I supposed to talk about with her?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“I’m sure we will manage just fine,” the older woman smiled, taking her seat.

William saw Rebecca shoot her a grateful smile.

William took his own seat beside Patrick. He hoped it would get easier after that, but it almost seemed like the longer the meal went on the worse her behavior became. He could hardly bring himself to stop glaring at either of them.

After yet another sinde remark towards Rebecca, he was gripping his fork hard enough that the metal was digging into his skin.

Patrick caught his eyes and shot him a look.

William just shook his head.

“But why?” he leaned in and whispered to William.

“I don’t want to ruin Rebecca’s evening by causing a scene. She worked so hard on it.”

“Well, pardon me for saying it, but they seem rather intent on causing a scene.”

“I know,” he sighed. “If they start to go too far, I will step in, but I promised Rebecca I would let her handle this.”

Patrick smirked. “I didn’t promise her anything.”

William shook his head. "This is mine to handle."

"But I can help."

"If you want to worry about something, then worry about your wife. She looks rather stressed."

He nodded and turned back to his wife, agreeing to stay out of it.

So, William was bound to stay out of it unless things went horribly wrong. He had asked Patrick to stay out of it, and his poor wife seemed so uncomfortable she hadn't said a single word since they sat down.

That left Penelope and her mother to try and smooth things over as best as they could.

"This dinner is wonderful," Lady Sutton said. "You did a wonderful job putting it together, Rebecca."

She smiled. "Thank you, I-

"You should make sure not to serve so many carrots next time," Dorothy cut in. "it makes you look low class."

"They are just carrots," Penelope grumbled. "And they are delicious."

"It's such a shame you have such unrefined palates to think so."

William shot her another glare.

They hadn't technically done anything too over the top yet, but hasn't this gone on long enough? He couldn't just sit here in silence and let Rebecca take this. Maybe it

was time he said something.

After all, the rule wasn't that he could never step in, only that he not do so without warning Rebecca.

And so, deciding he couldn't just sit here and watch this happen any longer he caught Rebecca's eyes across the table.

Once again, William found himself regretting signing off on a seating chart that put them on opposite ends of the table.

He remembered when she had brought him the setting chart. William had been sitting in the parlor, wiring to meet with Rebecca when she race in, papers in hand and a bright smile on her face.

"I finished the seating chart!" she declared. "Do you want to look it over?"

He set his book aside. "If you want me to, I would be more than happy to look it over for you and tell you what I think."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

William looked it over and hesitated.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Well, I can tell a lot of thought went into this, but why did you seat us so far apart?”

“Because we’re hosting.”

“But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Mrs. Anderson said hosts don’t sit next to each other.”

“Did she mention why?”

“Because it’s important to give the most attention to our guests and not one another.”

“I don’t see why we can’t do that while sitting near even if not next to one another.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I really want to make sure I do this right.”

He sighed. “I suppose I can understand that, but I don’t know how I feel about you sitting next to your father if I’m so far away.”

“I can understand that, but since we invited them, it important that I sit next to either my sister or my father. They’ll never stop talking about it I do anything else.”

“Can you at least sit next to your sister then?”

“I’m not sure if that would be any better. She can be cruel in her own right when she wants to.”

“I still think she would be easier to handle on your own than your father.”

“I suppose I can agree to that, but you don’t need to worry so much. I might not be physically close to you, but I know I have your support and I put Penelope on my other side just in case I need someone to back me up in a pinch.”

William sighed before nodding in agreement, “I can be content with that I suppose.”

Oh, how foolish William had been then.

He never should have agreed to let her sit so far from him. He should have pushed back more. He should have insisted that she either sit away from them or that she sit near him. If only he had given her an ultimatum perhaps he could have avoided this.

Finally, Rebecca caught his eye.

He gave a pointed look to her sister.

To his disappointment, she shook her head.

William frowned. He wished he was close enough to ask her why. Why she wasn’t stopping her yet, why she was just sitting there and taking it.

It wasn’t right. Rebecca didn’t deserve this. She had put so much work into the evening, she deserved to get to enjoy it.

She had put so much work into it, he reminded himself.

He took a deep breath. This was Rebecca's first time entertaining. She wouldn't want him to make a scene here. He had asked her and she said no. nothing Dorothy had done had crossed a line and Solomon was being too careful to risk saying anything.

Soon they wouldn't be able to do any of this. He would do what he needed to to protect her.

William just needed to be patient.

He had come up with a plan and he needed to stick to it.

After all, there would be plenty of time for him to make his move once dinner was over, he reminded himself again.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

As soon as they adjourn to the sitting room, he could approach Solomon. It was only a shame he wouldn't be able to take Dorothy with them. After seeing her behavior at the table, part of him was considering it anyway, priority be damned.

But he doubted Rebecca would appreciate that. Besides, it wouldn't matter soon enough.

As soon as dinner was over he would make his move. It would be so easy. He would walk up to Solomon and tell him he had some business he wanted to ask him about.

There was no doubt in his mind that the greedy man would eagerly agree, no doubt expecting him to give him money. He would probably assume this conversation was happening as a result of his demand of Rebecca.

And if he didn't trust it right away, if he had noticed that William had been stand offish and aggressive with him, then he could always do a little more persuading.

Once he convinced him to meet with him, Solomon would follow him from the party to the library or his study. When it was just the two of them he would sit down across from him and lay into him.

William would tell him off. He would let out every thought he had to hold back through the dinner. Once he had said his piece, he would give Solomon his marching orders then they would never need to see either of them again.

He had no doubt the man would try and push back. He would get angry, maybe even grovel. There was no doubt he would try to blame Rebecca, but William wouldn't fall

for any of it.

It would only be a matter of time before he would have little choice but to leave, taking Dorothy with him.

Rebecca would be free just as she deserved.

Dorothy's voice pulled him from his thoughts.

"I think you two make such a sweet couple. It's nice to see you with someone of your own kind," she said in a sickly sweet voice.

Rebecca didn't reply, but that didn't seem to do anything to deter Dorothy.

"And it's interesting to see too. After all, it isn't every day you see a married couple made up of two murderers."

CHAPTER 21

Rebecca clenched her hands into fists.

Her sister's words still rang out in the air.

She could hardly believe Dorothy was saying such things! How could she just act like this where everyone could see her? Rebecca had been being as tolerant as she could, had worked so hard, but it still wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

Well, the first part of that wasn't quite true.

She wasn't all that surprised that Dorothy was saying all that. It was nothing she hadn't said a million times before. The only difference was now she had an audience.

Rebecca's eyes darted to William. His face had hardened into a mask of stone, rage building behind his eyes.

Rebecca grit her teeth. She couldn't let this stand. It had been one thing to listen to them insult her, but now Dorothy wanted to involve William, she couldn't just let that go.

Dorothy opened her mouth to speak again, but Rebecca snapped before a single word could pass her lips.

"I think it's high time you and father leave," she said in a deadly even voice.

"Excuse me!"

"After what you said about me and my husband I don't know what you were expecting to hear. Now leave."

"I will do no such thing!" she snapped. "You can't speak to me like this. Father, tell her she can't say things like this to me!"

And of course he was quick to jump to his favorite daughter's defense. "Rebecca," Solomon cut in, voice dripping with disappointment. "How can you say such a thing? You were the one to invite us in the first place and dinner has only just begun."

She snapped her gaze to him. "I know, but it was a mistake inviting you in the first place. In fact, when you leave, I expect you to stay gone."

"Careful, Rebecca," his voice darkened. "Think about the implications of what you're saying."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

“Believe me, I have. That’s why I’m saying it. I never want to see either of you again.”

“Rebecca-”

‘No,” she cut him off. “I refuse to simply sit here and listen to you disrespect me and my husband! I am a Duchess now. I expect you to treat me with the respect that warrants.”

Solomon got to his feet.

He moved to take a step towards rebecca.

Before he can get any closer, William was on his feet, putting himself between them.

“Did you not hear my esteemed wife?” he growled. “She asked you to leave.”

“Rebecca, are you just going to let to him speak to your father like this?”

When she didn’t say anything, he continued.

“What about your sister? Have you no heart?”

That was enough to snap her into speaking once more. “Have I no heart? What about the pair of you? Did you think if you were just cruel enough I would stay loyal to you? I have found someone who treats me kindly, who treats me how you should have been treating me all along. I don’t want to see you again. Get out.”

Solomon gave her one last sharp glare. It was enough to make Rebecca's clenched fists shake. "Make no mistake, you will regret this."

"No, I don't think I will."

"You heard her," William snapped. "Now get out of here before I make you."

For a moment, he was too stunned to speak. Solomon stood there, mouth open, eyes flipping between them. Then his gaze drifted to the others in the room.

Penelope was grinning like she had just gotten the best news in the world. Her mother was eating her meal as though nothing had happened, doing her best to have a normal conversation with Patrick's wife.

She was doing her best to engage with Lady Sutton, but her eyes kept flicking to her husband. Patrick on the other hand had his eyes locked on the situation at hand, ready to come forward and back William up at a moment's notice.

"I can't believe I raised such an ungrateful daughter," he shook his head.

None of them said a word.

After a moment, he spun on his heels. "Come, Dorothy. I think we're done here."

"But father! Are you just going to let her get away with speaking to me like that?" Dorothy whined.

"I said let's go!" he snapped.

"But-"

“Now! We can talk in the carriage.” He stomped off without another word, leaving her to chase after him.

Rebecca’s sister shot her one last glare before following him from the room.

Rebecca let out a shaky breath before falling into her seat. It was strange. She didn’t even remember standing up. She must have done it some time during the confrontation but couldn’t place when.

Her eyes darted to the other guests, checking to see how they had reacted to the confrontation. To her relief, they were all eating and talking as if nothing had ever happened. Most likely by design, none of them were even looking at her or William, focused wholly on the meal and each other’s company.

“Are you all right?” William asked, flying to her side.

“I’m fine. I just- I just need a moment.”

“I want you to know I am so proud of you for standing up for yourself like that, but I’m sure that was a lot.” He leaned in close. “Do you want me to send everyone home?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:40 am

She shook her head. "But could you take them through to the sitting room. I need a moment."

"Of course, but are you sure you don't want me to sit with you?"

"I should be all right. I just want a moment to take in everything that happened."

He hesitated. "Very well, if you're sure, but please remember that if you say the word then I will do whatever I can to help."

"As long as you know that. We'll be in the parlor when you're ready."

"Thank you," she said just because he stood.

"All right everyone," William said, turning to their dinner guests. "That concludes the meal. If you would all follow me through to the parlor."

As they moved to go, Penelope and Lady Sutton hesitated behind her for a moment before slipping from the room.

Alone for a moment, she took a shaky breath. She could hardly believe she had said any of that.

She was almost dizzy with the excitement of it all. A laugh bubbled in her chest.

She was never going to see them again.

It had finally happened.

She was truly free.

A short time later, Rebecca enters the sitting room. The second she stepped through the doors, all eyes turn to her.

For a moment, she thought it was going to be a topic of conversation, but she should have known Penelope would never let something like that happen.

Her friend immediately approached her with a bright smile on her face. "I just wanted to make sure my mother and I told you just how good dinner was."

Rebecca returned the smile. "That's kind of you to say, thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"It was splendid. I can't wait until your next one."

Once the tension was broken, the rest of the evening could not have been more pleasant.

Everyone had a good time talking, playing games and getting to know one another.

It turned out Patrick's wife was a wonderful and witty woman when she wasn't worried about adding fuel to the fire like she was at the dinner table.

They stayed up well into the night, talking, playing games and having an all around wonderful time.

Eventually though, everyone had to go home for the night and William and Rebecca were left alone once more.

He moved to sit beside her, a tender smile on his face. “That went well. How are you feeling?”

She nodded. “Free.”

“Good, you deserve to be free. You did a great job with everything this evening, the dinner, how you handled them. You should be proud.”

“I am, but it means even more to hear you say that. I was so worried about doing right by the Danton name.”

“I think you did amazing by it.”

She didn’t give herself a moment to think. Rebecca had been bold that night, there was no reason not to keep it up.

She leaned forward, pressing her lips to William’s in a short tender kiss.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

When she pulled away, she smiled. “I had a great time to night.”

“So did I.”

She got to her geet. “Good night, William I hope you sleep well.”

“You too, Rebecca. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Then she got to her feet and made her way back to her room. Mary was there waiting in side.

“Welcome back, your grace. Did you have a pleasant evening?” she asked as she got to work, helping her change for bed.

“Yes, I think I did.”

“Good, I’m so glad. Do you want me to let you sleep in in the morning since you were up so late tonight?”

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Are you sure? I doubt anyone would mind if you wanted a little extra rest. Everyone knows how much work you put into tonight.”

“You know what, why not? I think I I will sleep in for an extra hour.”

“Then I will see you in the morning.”

CHAPTER 22

The next morning, Rebecca woke before Mary arrived. She sighed, stretching in the large plush bed.

“I should have known an hour would be far too long to sleep in,” she sighed to herself.

But before she could get up or over think it, the door opened and Mary stepped inside with her breakfast tray.

Rebecca sat up in bed when she came in.

“Good morning, your grace,” Mary said with a smile as she set it in front of her. “I must admit, I’m a bit surprised to see you are already awake this morning.”

“I slept in almost an hour. Of course I’m awake,” she laughed.

“Did you get enough rest after last night?”

“Yes, I rather think I did.”

“That’s good. I’m happy to hear it. Do you have an outfit in mind for today?”

Rebecca thought for a moment as she nibbled on her breakfast. “I think it would be best to go with something simple after last night. I just want a comfortable dress for an easy day at home.”

Mary smiled. “I think I can do that.”

And so a short time later, Rebecca found herself in the library dressed in one of the

simple dresses she had brought with her when she first arrived at Danton house while she waited for her husband to join him.

When he finally stepped into the room, she took in his thick jacket and frowned.

“Are you going somewhere?” she asked.

He sighed. “Sadly, yes. I was hoping to put it off but it seems things just can’t wait. You can come with me if you like. Perhaps we can go for a walk when we’re done.”

She grimaced, shaking her head. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but all I want to do today is stay home and relax.”

“After all the work you went to, I can understand that.”

“Will you be gone long?” she asked.

“I shouldn’t. If you like we can play some chess when I return.”

Rebecca smiled. “I think that sounds lovely.”

“Then it’s a plan.” William turned to go then hesitated. “How are you feeling after last night?”

She thought for a moment before replying. “I feel good. Lighter. Like I finally did something I should have done the second we got married.”

He chuckled. “I’m glad to hear it. I won’t lie, I was a bit worried you might regret some of the things you had said last night.”

“I won’t say I look back on the evening fondly, but it needed to happen and I’m glad it’s over with.”

“I’m only sad you had to be the one to do it.”

“What do you mean?”

He hesitated. “I didn’t want to say anything because I didn’t want to worry you, but the reason I asked you to invite them was because I wanted to speak to your father.”

“My father? But why?”

“Because I was going to tell him that if he couldn’t treat you well then he would no longer be welcome in our lives. However it seems you beat me to the punch.”

“I’m sorry, I-”

“No, Rebecca. You have nothing to apologize for. I’m glad you felt secure enough to stand up for yourself like that. You did amazing.”

“I- I, well, I didn’t do it for myself.”

He frowned. “What do you mean? If you didn’t do it for yourself then why did you do it?”

She flushed, looking away. “I didn’t like hearing her talk that way about you.”

William paused, a look on his face Rebecca couldn’t place. “You didn’t need to do something like that for me. I was more upset about how they were talking about you.”

She smile. “Thankfully, none of that matters any more. We never have to see them again.”

“I’m glad you still feel good about your choice.” He glanced at the clock. “Goodness, I really need to go.”

“Then you should go. I hope you have a good day.”

“I will, but are you sure you will be all right here by yourself?”

“I’m hardly by myself,” she chuckled. “We’ve got a whole staff. If i need some company I can always summon Mrs. Anderson or Mary.”

“Very well. I will try to come back as quick as I can.”

“There’s no need to rush. I’m sure I can manage on my own for a bit.”

William hesitated for another moment.

Before Rebecca could ask him about it, he stepped forward, pulling her into a hug. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he whispered in her ear before pulling away and making his way from the room.

For a long moment after he left, Rebecca just stood there, a growing warmth in her chest. She could hardly believe just how much she missed him already.

She shook the foolish thought from her head. There was no reason to miss him. He would be home once again soon enough.

She picked up a book and spent a little bit of time reading.

Page 91

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

After lunch, she made her way into the parlor, intent on doing a bit of embroidery. She was a little surprised William wasn't back yet.

But it couldn't be much longer now, she thought to herself as she turned her attention back to her embroidery.

A short time later, a footman came to a door with a silver tray.

"I have a letter for you, your grace."

"Is it from William?" she asked. "Maybe he's running behind or wanted to tell me when he would be home."

"I don't believe so, ma'am. I didn't recognize the footman who dropped it off."

When she picked it up, she frowned.

"Thank you, you may return to your work."

He bowed then slipped from the room.

Penelope Sutton, it read in elegant script on the front.

It was strange, she thought to herself. Penelope and her never exchanged letters, they would usually simply call on one another. With growing confusion, she opened the envelope and began to read.

Dear Rebecca,

I'm sorry I couldn't come to you in person, but I hope you receive this letter promptly.

There is something I must tell you urgently, however it is not the kind of thing that should be said in a letter. It is very important that you keep this between us.

If you have ever valued me or our friendship please come to the park later today at two clock sharp. I will be waiting near the duck pond.

I hope I will see you there,

Penelope

When she had finished reading, Rebecca stared down at the letter with a frown.

It didn't make any sense. Why would Penelope send a letter rather than coming to see her if it was so important, and why all the secrecy?

Maybe she shouldn't go, or at least tell someone where she was going, but this was Penelope she was talking about.

They had been friends for so long that if Penelope wanted to meet in secret then she should trust her, shouldn't she?

Rebecca steeled her resolve and glanced at the clock. It was already after one o'clock. She had to move fast. Getting to her feet, she set off in search of Mary.

After what seemed like no time at all, Rebecca found herself wandering through the park.

It was surprisingly empty, at least it felt that way to her. To her surprise she didn't see Penelope waiting for her. Had she already missed her? Or perhaps she was early.

Only a few feet later and she's beside the pond Penelop told her to come to.

But she wasn't there. Time ticked by and she still never arrived.

Frowning in confusion, she turned to go.

But before she made it passed the bushes a few feet away, hands darted out and grabbed her.

She tried to cry out, but someone covered her mouth.

"None of that now," Solomon hissed in her ear.

Page 92

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

She stiffened at the sound of his voice. He shoves a gag into her mouth. He drags her hands behind her back and started to tie them in place.

“You wouldn’t someone to hear us, now would you?”

“Why are you doing this?” she tried to ask around her gag, but the words were lost in the fabric.

“Do you have any idea how much you have humiliated me last night?” he snarled.
“Who do you think you are to treat me like that after everything I’ve done for you?”

She felt herself start to tremble.

“Well, I’m going to get what I deserve from you one way or another, just you wait.”

She shook her head.

“Oh yes, if you’re precious William cares for you half as much as you seem to think he does, then he won’t hesitate to pay out a handsome ransom for you now will he?”

Disgust filled Rebecca. How could she be related, have been raised by such a wretched man?

How could someone be so despret for money that he could seel off his own daughter without hesitation.

Solomon let out a yell, hands releasing Rebecca so fast it was like they were never

there in the first place.

She turned to see who was there and gasped.

CHAPTER 23

William was returning home just as his wife was leaving.

He frowned as he saw her slip from the house. There was something off about the way she was moving.

Not only that, but it didn't seem like she was taking the carriage.

Unsure what else to do or why he had such a bad feeling when he saw her, William slipped into the crowd around her.

He followed her from a distance all the way to the park. As she made her way through the greenery he couldn't help but notice the way her eyes seemed to scan the crowd for someone.

Then she started moving with a purpose. She made her way over to the duck pond.

William thought about approaching her but hesitated. If she was in the middle of something, he didn't want to interrupt her, but he couldn't help the growing sense of wrongness he had as he watched her stand there.

After what felt like an eternity, she turned to go. William let out a sigh of relief, but before it could take root, something pulled her deep into the bushes.

"Rebecca!" he shouted, racing toward her.

The second he was close enough, he reached in, grabbing at whoever had forced her in there.

When he pulled the man out, rage filled him.

“I thought Rebecca told you we never wanted to see you again?” he snarled at Solomon. “Just what were you doing to her?”

Rebecca stumbled out of the bushes, pulling the fabric from her lips. “He was going to try and ransom me back to you,” she said.

“What kind of monster would do something like that to his own daughter?” he snapped before pulling back his fist and slamming it into his face.

The action drew the attention of other park goers.

Solomon was nothing if not resourceful. He took the opportunity to turn to the gathering crowd.

“Did you all see that? All I wanted was to protect my poor daughter from this awful man! I never should have agreed to this match. The way he mistreats her is too much to bear!”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

To William's shock, Rebecca pushed herself in between them. "The way he mistreats me? You have never cared about my treatment before! In fact you have always been the one to mistreat me!"

"He's manipulated her! You all saw him! The Duke of Danton is clearly a violent man!"

"He has never so much as laid a finger on me! The same can not be said of you. How many times have you hit me, slapped me, forced me to go without food or wouldn't give me warm clothes to wear in the winter? And yet you have the audacity to accuse William of being violent? Of being cruel?"

"Do you think anyone will fall for your lies!?"

"Her lies?" William grabbed him by the collar, unable to take this any longer. "If I'm so cruel, if then what does that say about you? You were so eager to marry her off the second you heard I was looking for a wife. You rushed through the engagement before we could even meet. Then you dare to try and kidnap her.!"

"I'm just a concerned father trying to protect my daughter," he finally insists.

But the crowd wasn't quite buying it. They had seen too much.

Rebecca spoke again. "You have never once treated me as your daughter. You don't get to pretend to be concerned about me now.

His face darkened, act breaking. "As if I didn't treat you far better than you deserved.

After everything you did, after they way that you killed your poor mother taking her away from me and your sister, you deserved far worse than anything I have ever done to you.”

Her gaze hardened even further. “What kind of monster holds his wife passing away from childbirth against the baby? I may never have been lucky enough to meet her, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t loose someone too.”

“You have never lost anything in your life! All you have ever done is take what doesn’t belong to you!”

“All you have ever done was show me cruelty and malice!”

William dropped SOlomon, letting him drop to the ground before turning to his wife. “I don’t think he’s with wasting our time on unless you ave some more you want to get off your chest.”

She shook her head. “No, I think I’ve said everything I need to say.”

“Then I’m glad. Now, let’s go home.”

William took her hand and the pair made their way from the part together.

“Are you all right?” William asked when the pair was alone.

“You know what? I think for the first time ever, I truly am.”

The pair made their way back home hand in hand. Rebecca couldn’t help the smile that bloomed on her face.

She didn’t understand how she could be so lucky.

“What are you thinking about?” William asked as they approached the door to their estate.

“Just how glad I am everything worked out the way that it did.”

“I’m glad I found you, but you have to admit the way you ended up here was not fair to you. You never should have been treated the way you were or forced to marry me.”

“I won’t disagree. It was horribly cruel of my father to use me as a bargaining chip like that, but it’s over now, and if it hadn’t happened, I doubt I would have met you. To me that makes all of it worth it.”

For a long moment, William fell silent.

Ordinarily, this would be when Rebecca would start to worry she shouldn’t have said anything or that she spoke out of turn, but not this time. She had meant every word of what she said. Even if he didn’t feel the same way, that was all right, but she couldn’t keep it in. she needed to say it.

William didn’t say another word until they were actually inside, but the second the door was shut behind them, he turned to Rebecca with an intense look on his face.

“You need to be careful about saying such things,” he said, voice thick with unsaid emotions.

“And why not?”

He sighed. “Because, I have rather fallen in love without. While I don’t expect you to feel the same way, it’s hard not to take your words and give myself hope.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

“But what if I want you to hope?” she asked, taking a step towards William.

For a long moment, he didn't say a word, he just stared at her as if afraid to let himself believe what he saw there. “What are you saying?” he finally asked, voice carefully measured.

“I'm saying that I feel the same way, that I have fallen rather in love with you myself.”

“Do you truly mean that?”

“I would never say such a thing if I didn't.”

He didn't hesitate after that. William surged forward, taking his bride in his arms.

For a moment, Rebecca startled, losing her ballance for a moment, she clutched at his sleeve. “What are you-”

Then he was moving in closer. His face was only a breath from hers.

“Before I say anything else, I want to say it properly. I am so lucky to be married to you. I love you, Rebecca.”

“Oh, William, I have never had anyone stand up for me the way you have. You have shown me I can have the kind of life I have never dared to dream about before. You have done so much for me, given so much to me, and I love you for it, but more than that, I love you for the man you are, so kind and considerate and-”

William didn't give her the chance to get another word out. He darted forward, sealing their lips together in a kiss.

It was unlike their previous kisses. Gone was the hesitancy and self consciousness from before.

In its place was only pure love and adoration.

The pair spent far longer than would have been considered proper standing in the foyer kissing before Mary came around the corner.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I'm sorry to interrupt the two of you, I just wanted to ask when you would like to have dinner."

"Yes, of course," Rebecca stepped back, doing her best to ignore the way William's shoulders shook with laughter. "I can go change now. Thank you for asking."

"Are you sure? there's no rush. I would be more than happy to wait for you in your room."

"Give us a moment then she'll be right up," he cut in, regaining his composure.

"Thank you, your grace," she did a quick curtsy then all but ran off.

William started to laugh again as soon as Mary was out of ear shot.

"William!" Rebecca flushed. "You shouldn't laugh about such things. We gave the poor girl quite the scare."

He moved to pull her back into his arms. "I'm sure she will be fine in a moment. It isn't like we were doing anything improper. We are married after all."

“I don’t think that makes kissing in the hall any more proper.”

“Very well then, I will let you go for now, but we should continue this conversation later. How does after dinner sound?”

Rebecca laughed, as she stepped away. “I would hardly call what happened a conversation.”

“That doesn’t mean that there is nothing to continue.”

She shook her head. “I need to go dress for dinner. I will see you shortly.”

She shot William one last look before making her way back to her room.

The second she had stepped inside, Mary was on her.

“It looks like you and Duke Danton have gotten close,” she teases.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

Rebecca flushed. “Well, it’s only natural if we have. We are married after all.”

“Forgive me if that came out as anything other than incredibly happy for you. From what I have heard, I have gathered that you did not chose this match so it makes me happy to see it working out so well for you.” She smiled, leaning in like she was about to tell a secret. “And I hope than means that my position as your lady’s maid is secure.”

“I don’t think I could have anyone else at this point,” Rebecca said with a laugh. “I should thank you.”

“Thank me? Whatever for?”

“For looking after me so well.”

“I never did anything any good lady’s maid would do.”

Rebecca shook her head. “You went a long way to making me feel at home here. It meant a lot.”

“I’m glad I could help. Now, let’s get you dressed for dinner. We wouldn’t want to keep Duke Danton waiting, now would we?” she smiled.

It was strange, the words sounded like something Dorothy would have said as a snide remark, but when Mary said it, it didn’t sound like that at all. It was teasing, gentle, almost affectionate.

Rebecca smiled. “No, I suppose we shouldn’t.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

After that, Rebecca and William grew even closer. Without her family hanging over them, it was easy for the love between them to grow and flourish.

Much like the time they spent to each other after the confrontation over his family paintings so long ago, the couple spent time together several times a day. They started most mornings with a walk, went their separate ways for a bit, took lunch together in the library most days of the week then depending on how much work William had to do that day either spent the time until dinner together or went their separate ways until that evening.

They even shared a room in the evening.

Occasionally, they held small dinner parties for their close friends, usually just Patrick, his wife, Penelope and her mother. Penelope regularly encouraged her to host something larger but the thought gave Rebecca far too much anxiety to ever properly consider the notion.

In a similar vein, though the pair often received invitations, but they had never actually attended any of the events.

The pair preferred to spend most of their time home, just the two of them.

That wasn’t to say they never went out.

At least once a week, the pair would go for a walk in the park and occasionally hop

over to some of the shops.

But they did take care never to go too close to the duck pond.

Every time they got close to it, Rebecca could feel her heart pound and panic wash over her. All she could think about was what could have happened if William hadn't found her and stopped Solomon the day her father tried to take her.

One day, as the pond came into view in the distance, Rebecca chewed on her lip.

"Is something wrong?" William asked.

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"If you hadn't shown up in the park that day, what could have happened."

"Fortunately, we don't need to worry about that, because I was able to get to you in time."

"But if you hadn't, if he had taken me, what would you have done?"

The second the words were out of her mouth, Rebecca regretted it. How could she ask him such a thing? What was she even hoping to hear?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

But before she could over think it or try to take the question back, he spoke.

“If it had happened, though I hate to think of it, I would have done whatever it took to get you home safely.”

“William!”

“I mean it, Rebecca. I love you and any price he could have demanded would have been worth it to have you back by my side. I can’t imagine my life with out you.”

Her eyes burned. She rapidly blinked back the emotions swelling inside her.

“Does that answer your question?” he smiled.

“But why? Why go to all that trouble just for me?”

He chuckled. “I hope someday you understand that there isn’t much I wouldn’t be willing to do for you, but until that day I suppose I will just keep having to tell you just how much I love and care for you.”

“You are too good to me.”

“Ordinarily this is the point when I would tell you that actually you are too good to me, but I know you don’t like when I say such things, so instead I will say that we are as good to each other as we know the other deserves.”

She smiled “I think I like the sound of that.”

The pair continued on their walk, away from the duck pond.

A few days later, Rebecca was in her sitting room one day when Penelope dropped by. She looked up from her book, delighted by the unexpected guest.

“Penelope!” she got to her feet, pulling her long time friend in for a hug. “It’s been too long.”

“That’s supposed to be my line,” she chuckled as they took their seats. “Where’s William?”

“He had to go out of town on business for a few days, but he should be back later tonight, why do you ask?”

“I had a few things I thought you might like to know and I wanted to learn how long we had before he was back.”

Rebecca frowned. “Why? Is it something you don’t want him to hear? Is something wrong?”

“No, no,” she chuckled. “Its nothing like that. I just don’t know if it’s something he would want to hear.”

“Why? What is it?”

“It’s about your family. I thought you might want to know how things have been for them since your little confrontation.”

Rebecca tried not to seem too interested. “It isn’t right to gossip.”

“I wouldn’t need to if you would ever come out to a ball. Everyone would love to see

more of you you know.”

“That might be true, but the pair of us are quite content at home.”

“Then you could always host one.”

“If I agree to think about it, will you tell me what you came here to say?”

“I thought you might want to know how Dorothy is doing. She actually tried to show her face at a ball last night. It went so bad it was almost sad, really.”

“That sounds bad. Why? what happened?”

“Very few people liked her very much before, but your father lost so much standing after that day in the park, so no one wants to be seen associating with her,” Penelope grinned with just a touch too much glee for the occasion.

“I won’t lie, there is something therapeutic about hearing that she is getting a taste of her own medicine.”

“Of course it is. She is awful.”

Rebecca chuckled, “you shouldn’t say such things.”

“Why not? It’s true, isn’t it? Everyone say so.”

“Still, I suppose it is rather cruel to stoop to their level.”

“If they don’t want us to be cruel to them, then they shouldn’t be cruel to others.”

“What about my father? How has he been?”

“Even worse if you can believe it. Everyone who was invested in his businesses has pulled out their funding. No matter where he goes, there isn’t a friendly face to be seen.”

Rebecca gasped. “I must admit, that is far more extreme than I would have expected.”

“It’s no less than they deserve, you must admit.”

She hummed, biting back a smile.

“You shouldn’t feel bad. After everything they put you thought it’s no less than they deserved. You know it’s true.”

Before Rebecca could find her words, a voice called from the doorway, “know what is true?”

The pair turned to see William step inside, still in his riding clothes.

“You’re back!” Rebecca exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting you until later tonight at the earliest.”

“I wanted to see you, so I road a bit faster than usual,” he said moving to sit beside his wife. “It’s good to see you too, Penelope. I hope you don’t mind me interrupting. I can always go if the two of you would rather talk alone.”

“That isn’t necessary, and I’m afraid I can’t stay much longer anyways,” she replied.

“That’s a shame. We would be more than happy to have you for dinner.”

“I might take you up on that next time I stop by, but today I only popped in to give Rebecca an update on how her family is doing.”

“They aren’t my family anymore,” Rebecca said with conviction. “William is my family.”

“That’s very sweet. I will be sure to remember that in the future.” Penelope glance at the clock. “Goodness! I really must be going before my mother sends a search party after me.”

They all said their good byes and Rebecca walked Penelope to the door. Just before her friend left, she turned to Rebecca once more.

“You should think about what I said. I think you would host an amazing ball.”

Rebecca couldn’t help but laugh. “That’s kind of you to say, Penelope, but I think we are more than content on our own.”

“Whatever suits you I suppose,” she laughed as she made her way out the door.

When Rebecca got back to the sitting room, William was still waiting for her.

“You dind’ need to hurry back so fast,” she smiled, coming to sit besides him.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to him. “Of course I had to. I missed you,” William insisted.

“I missed you too, but we don’t need to worry about that anymore.”

“Because I came back early?”

“Because we have our whole lives to be together.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:41 am

“And I intend to savor every second of it,” he saif, leaning in to press a sweet kiss to her lips. “Admit it, you missed me.”

Rebecca laughed. “I must admit, it is nice to have you back so soon.”

“That’s it? Just nice?”

“What would you prefer me to say?”

“Wonderful? Amazing? That you are over the moon to have me back.”

She chuckled. “I think for the moment, you will jus have to settle with me being glad that you’er back.”

“As long as we’re together, I suppose it doesn’t mater any more. After all, I’m home now.”

The End?