



Married to the Earl

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Description: Going from vivacious society belle to widow wallflower can leave a lady wanting... Joanna Lockhart is trapped in a mire of grief and boredom. Still recovering from the sudden death of her husband, the beautiful widow is tired of being treated like a fragile porcelain doll. But when a severe illness nearly claims her life, Joanna finds the perfect outlet for her natural vitality—a charity. Unfortunately, her sudden interest in all things philanthropic is marred by the presence of one Ambrose Creasey. For some unknown reason, this handsome cad has decided to cast aside his reputation as a rake, and take up the mantel of charitable patron. As the Earl of Newhaven, Ambrose has enjoyed his life of delicious debauchery. But recently the earl has hungered for more noble pursuits. A charity seems to be the perfect outlet for his newfound desire to be more than just a rake. And of course, he doesn't mind the aid of a beautiful, well-connected woman like Joanna... Especially when he cannot resist riling her a time or two. After all, she does rise so beautifully to the challenge. Focusing on their work is harder than either of them thought. There's no denying the attraction between them, but is Ambrose truly prepared to cast aside his hedonistic history? And even if he does, is Joanna ready for a new love?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Chapter 1

It was Friday evening, and business was booming at The Arc.

Conor Foster, Earl of Middleborough, looked around his establishment with satisfaction. Every table was full tonight. Gentlemen sipped from glasses of brandy and scotch as they examined the cards in their hands and placed their bets.

This is exactly what I dreamed it would be, Conor thought as he gazed around the club. Ever since the day it first occurred to me to open The Arc, this was the picture I had in my head. He couldn't help feeling a surge of pride and satisfaction now that he had seen it come to life. It was, he imagined, what watching the birth of a child must be like.

"Thirsty?" came a voice from behind.

Conor turned to see the roguish smile of his good friend, Henry Wilson. Henry had a glass of scotch in each hand, and now he pushed one toward Conor.

Conor accepted the drink gratefully and took a sip. "Good scotch."

"Isn't it?" Henry asked, delight manifesting across his face. "I do love a good scotch."

"We're selling this tonight?"

Henry nodded. As Conor's business partner, one of his responsibilities was sourcing

the liquor they served. Henry's stake in the club was small compared to Conor's, but Conor had to admit he was very good at what he did.

He took another sip of the scotch and surveyed the room again. "The gentlemen seem to be enjoying themselves," he remarked.

"Have you made the time to sit down with them?" Henry asked.

Conor shook his head. "You know perfectly well that I don't do that."

"And you know perfectly well that I think you should," Henry persisted.

"Why?" Conor asked. "Why should I, when I have you to do it for me? You're much more sociable than I am, Henry. You're more than capable of checking in with our patrons and ensuring that they're having a good time. You don't need my help."

"Not for the sake of the business," Henry said. "For your own sake. People talk about you, Conor."

"People talk far too much," Conor said.

"Be that as it may. All it would take would be a few smiles, a 'few how do you do's, to show the clientele that you're friendly and happy they've chosen The Arc."

"Don't ask it of me," Conor said. He was happy to be the owner of this club, and he enjoyed spending time here, but surely a man should be permitted a business enterprise without having to put on a public face?

The worst thing about being an earl is being forced to smile and make nice with the public so often. At least here, in my own club, I should be permitted to relax and to be myself.

It wasn't that Conor disliked the patrons of his club, or that he didn't wish to spend time around people. But he was, by his nature, a quiet man, and it wasn't his way to say much to others. Henry was far more skilled at socializing than Conor was.

And so, let it be Henry's responsibility, Conor thought. He'll do a better job of it anyway, and he'll enjoy it besides.

He held up his glass, which he had emptied. "I'm going to go and get another drink," he said. "Can I get you anything?"

"No," Henry said. "I ought to go and make the rounds, if you're not going to."

"Good man," Conor said.

Henry rolled his eyes, but he returned Conor's smile and moved off toward a table full of regular patrons where the card game was usually quite high stakes.

Conor took his glass to the bar and leaned against it, patiently awaiting the attention of his bartender. When the man saw him standing there, he hurried over, dishrag in hand. "Lord Middleborough. My apologies. I didn't notice you."

Conor waved a hand. "Don't worry about it. I've told you, I'm sure, that serving our patrons is more important than rushing to tend to me."

"Yes, My Lord, of course."

Conor set his glass down. "I'd just like another scotch," he said. "Whatever you're serving today, it's quite good. I hope you're letting the patrons know that."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“It’s the usual scotch, My Lord,” the bartender said.

“Is it?”

“Yes,” the bartender said. “Mr. Wilson has been using the same supplier for months now.”

I haven’t given Henry enough credit for everything he does around here, Conor thought as the bartender refilled his glass. Finding such high-quality scotch and keeping it regularly in stock, without my even having to be involved in the decision...perhaps I should increase his stake in the company.

It was something he had thought about every now and again. When The Arc had first been opened, Conor had put up the bulk of the startup capital. He had included Henry with only a very nominal buy-in because he knew his friend was more adept at managing a business than he was.

And because he has more time on his hands. The responsibilities of my title do not leave me free to spend much of my day at The Arc.

The agreement, when they had opened the business, was that Conor would own eighty percent of it, and that Henry would own twenty. They would split the proceeds accordingly. And so, they always had.

But Henry had been doing such a good job with his responsibilities that Conor felt inclined to revisit that old agreement. It wasn’t as though he needed the money, after all.

I will discuss it with my solicitor, he thought to himself. We'll take a look at the books, at how much this club is actually earning from month to month, and make a decision about what is practical going forward. I would love to be able to offer something more to Henry than what he's getting now.

He would be meeting with his solicitor next week. They could discuss it then.

The thought of a meeting with his solicitor gave Conor a pang of dread, though.

It wasn't that he feared receiving bad news about the financial solvency of his business. The Arc was doing well, and Conor knew it. All the evidence he needed was right in front of him. The place was full of happy patrons having a good time, just as it was every night.

And it wasn't even as though Conor depended on the club's success for his own financial wellbeing. He was an earl in his own right, and his title and taxation responsibilities meant that his pockets were never empty. He had started the club not because he needed a business to keep him afloat but because he had thought it might be fun.

So, he didn't fear what his solicitor might say to him about his books when they met tomorrow. It was the man himself that Conor didn't like.

Tobias Dawson had rubbed Conor wrong from the moment the two had first met. He was an unpleasant, weaselly, sycophantic little man, and Conor had the feeling he enjoyed the fact that he was solicitor to an earl more than he cared about doing his job well.

He had thought, on more than one occasion, about firing the man and finding someone else. But a few things always stopped him.

For one thing, no matter how much Conor didn't like him personally, Tobias Dawson was good at his job. He was clever and quick, and he offered good ideas. His suggestions had more than once helped to expand the business. Conor knew enough to know that it would be ill conceived to throw away good help just because the source was such an unpleasant person.

And then there was the fact that it simply wasn't in his nature to terminate anyone's employment. Conor hated confrontation, and the idea of taking Tobias aside and telling him their work together was at an end put a very sour taste in his mouth.

I have no idea how I've gotten a reputation for being cold and unforgiving, he thought, sipping his scotch. He knew that was the way the rest of the town saw him. He had received plenty of intimidated looks in his time. And Henry had told him, too, what guests at the club tended to say about him behind his back.

You need to mingle with them, Henry urged. You need to let them see the real you.

But Conor always declined. Truth be told, he wasn't overly bothered by his reputation. It just didn't make a lot of sense to him. When had he ever been cold to anybody? Was it really just because he didn't go out of his way to socialize?

These people will find anything to gossip about, he thought. There was some disdain in that thought, he recognized, but really. They sat here in his club, drinking his scotch, confiding in his best friend that they found him standoffish. It was just plain rude, wasn't it? And they said he was the socially inept one!

There were some who might think that being social, being friendly, was an inherent part of being an earl. After all, Conor's presence was expected at parties and social events. He did have to mingle with other members of the ton on occasion.

But he also had to collect their taxes. It was incumbent upon him, as Earl of

Middleborough, to collect money from people. And that sort of thing made it difficult to make friends, even if you were naturally inclined to be social.

It's really for the best that I'm able to keep my emotions out of my interactions with others, Conor thought. The last thing anyone needs is a sentimental tax collector. I would fall apart the first time I had to take money from anyone, and that's no way to run things.

In truth, he had been known to waive taxes for people on rare occasions. He had more than once deliberately skipped over a poor, unmarried young mother struggling to make ends meet or a family supporting an elderly parent.

It wasn't the sort of thing that could be done too often, lest the royals above him notice something was amiss. But as long as he made up the missing money from his own coffers, there was no reason not to give people a break every now and again.

And they say I'm cold. Really!

He drained his drink and stood up, ready to leave the club for the day. He didn't generally like to spend a lot of time here. It was a good place to stop in and have a drink, and he liked to see that his project was operating smoothly, but Conor would never be one of those people who spent hours and hours at The Arc. This was a place for socializing.

Perhaps that's why I built it. Perhaps I wanted to fulfill some need to have a social element in my life without actually having to do any socializing myself.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

That was a deep thought, and not one Conor cared to sit and untangle here and now.

He found Henry Wilson seated at a card table with five other men and rested a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm leaving," he said when Henry looked up.

"You're leaving already?" Henry frowned. "You just got here."

"I've had a couple drinks. I've seen that things are going well. I'm ready to head back home." There was a cigar and a newspaper awaiting him there, as well as the privacy and quiet of his own personal library. Conor would always prefer those things to the mad bustle of The Arc.

"Won't you sit in for a hand before you go?" Henry asked, gesturing to the table.

"No, thank you. You know I don't enjoy gambling."

One of the men at the table muttered something under his breath to another man—a pointed comment about Conor's unwillingness to join in, no doubt.

But Conor didn't care. He had given these people a place to drink, a place to sit and play cards, a place to socialize. He didn't owe them anything more. Certainly, he didn't owe them any of his own time.

He inclined his head to the men around the table, hoping they would feel some shame for the way they had spoken about him.

But knowing them, they probably wouldn't.

Chapter 2

Conor's route home took him right past the Angry Boar pub. There was a part of him that would have liked to go out of his way to avoid the sight of the place, but there was another part of him—the more dominant part, as it turned out—that was averse to making any such concession to the Angry Boar or its owner, Killian O'Flannagan.

Why should I go out of my way? he asked himself, unable to keep from descending into moodiness as he passed the establishment that was The Arc's biggest rival. I opened my business first. And I'm not the one trying to sabotage him.

It really was hard to believe the lengths O'Flannagan seemed willing to go to in order to sabotage The Arc. Business rivalries were nothing new, and Conor had expected that sort of thing when he had first opened The Arc. But O'Flannagan had made it personal.

He had nearly made it past the Angry Boar when he heard a door swing open. He closed his eyes, knowing already what he was about to face, wishing he could just get this over with.

"Middleborough!" a shout came from behind him.

Conor steeled himself, then turned slowly. O'Flannagan stood in the road behind him, hands on his hips, eyes narrowed. He was a strong, burly man, and he probably thought himself physically intimidating, but Conor was not afraid of him.

O'Flannagan would never be bold enough to start an actual fight, he thought. He fights with words, and he fights in secret. If he were to confront me physically, he might lose. He'd never take such a chance.

"What is it, O'Flannagan?" he asked.

“What are you doing outside my establishment?” O’Flannagan asked. “Spying?”

“Don’t be a fool. I’m on my way home. It’s nothing more sinister than that. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

“I can’t have men like you lingering around my pub,” O’Flannagan said.

Conor raised his eyebrows. This ought to be rich. “Men like me? And what does that mean, may I ask?”

“Everyone knows about the way you are with women,” O’Flannagan said, his voice gruff. “You make them believe you care for them. You persuade them to come home with you. Then you abandon them.”

“That’s a really sickening thing to say,” Conor said. “I’m almost impressed.”

“How many have you left with child?” O’Flannagan asked.

“I’m going to go now,” Conor said.

“I heard you had at least three bastard children around the city,” O’Flannagan pressed.

“Well, I believe you started that rumor yourself,” Conor said. “And I think you know as well as I do, that it isn’t true. But I don’t have to prove anything to you, O’Flannagan.”

“You do if you’re going to be lurking outside my pub,” O’Flannagan said. “You’ll frighten away my patrons. And frankly, I can’t have violent criminals who pose a risk to my clientele here.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Now I’m a criminal?”

“The prices you charge at that club of yours certainly are.” O’Flannagan said the word club as if it were a poisoned dart. “You’re doubling what your liquor costs before you pass the prices along to your customers. I don’t know how you can sleep at night.”

“You have a nice day, O’Flannagan,” Conor said, turning and heading up the road, away from the Angry Boar and toward his manor.

“Don’t come around here again!” O’Flannagan hollered after him.

It really was exhausting living with a business rival like Killian O’Flannagan. I’d be just as happy never to converse with that man again, Conor thought. He’s certainly the one behind the worst rumors about me.

Like the one about his having inappropriate interactions with women. What a thing to say! What could have caused O’Flannagan to even think of it? Nothing could have been further from the truth, of course. Conor couldn’t even remember the last time he’d spoken to a woman.

And this is almost certainly why, he realized gloomily. Of course, no members of the ton would want to entrust me with their daughters, not if this is the nature of the conversation around my name.

O’Flannagan’s motive had likely had nothing to do with curtailing Conor’s social opportunities. Conor thought it much more likely that his business rival had merely

wanted to make women feel unsafe spending time at The Arc.

It is a rare day that we see a female customer, Conor realized. If that was his plan, it's working. Women looking for a place to go and socialize will skip The Arc entirely. Any man taking his wife out will go to the Angry Boar instead.

It infuriated him that O'Flannagan's underhanded strategy was working.

And it frustrated him, too, to realize what this meant for his own social prospects. Conor was not a man who enjoyed attending balls and parties, and he had no way of knowing how long this rumor about his alleged womanizing ways had been circulating.

But even though he didn't like to attend functions, it had always been his intention to settle down one day. To take a wife, and to raise a family.

How am I going to find someone who wants to pursue a life with me now? he wondered. Any woman I meet will assume I'm after her for nefarious reasons. No one will ever get close enough to me to discover what I'm really like, to actually fall in love.

Would he ever marry?

Right now, walking up the road from his confrontation with Killian O'Flannagan outside the Angry Boar, it seemed unlikely.

So maybe he should try to publicly deny the rumors O'Flannagan was starting. Maybe there would be something to be gained by confronting them head on and letting people know they weren't true.

No. I don't care what people think. If they want to indulge in stupid gossip, if they

want to believe everything they're told about a man with absolutely no evidence so be it. Let that be their problem. I'm above all of this. I'm the Earl of Middleborough, for God's sake.

And besides, The Arc had never been intended as a place for women. O'Flannagan's tactic of scaring them away was virtually meaningless. The Arc was a gentlemen's club. There was a reason Conor had never taken special note of the fact that all their patrons tended to be men.

And some of the things O'Flannagan had said might be considered flattering, if looked at in a certain light. He had claimed that Conor was inflating his prices beyond what was justifiable, which was false, but if Conor's other business rivals got wind of that rumor...well, who knew what might happen?

Maybe they'll raise their own prices to a level that drives down their business, in an attempt to keep up with what they believe I'm doing, Conor thought. Or maybe they'll lower their prices as a means of competing with me. Either way, it could hurt their businesses.

He would never go out of his way to damage anyone else's business prospects. He wasn't Killian O'Flannagan. But if people made the decision to buy into idle gossip and used what they heard to determine their business strategies...well, it wasn't Conor's responsibility to make sure that nobody ever did anything stupid, was it?

Let the people believe whatever they wanted. If Killian O'Flannagan wanted to fit Conor for a black hat, that was just fine. He would wear it happily so long as his business continued to prosper, so long as his Earldom continued to thrive.

Still, he thought as he reached the walkway leading up to his own front door. It's very unpleasant to be yelled at in the street. I wouldn't be sorry to see an end of that.

He made his way inside and up to his library. Closing the door behind him, he took a seat in his favorite old armchair, tipped his head back, and sighed. What a day it's been.

Lately, it seemed there were more and more like this.

Had he taken on too many responsibilities? Was that the problem? Maybe allowing Henry to take over a greater share of The Arc would solve that for him. He would be able to spend more time alone with his books.

At least they never let me down. At least they never accuse me of being something I'm not.

But maybe Henry was right about one thing. Maybe Conor would have to start socializing a little more with the patrons at his club. Let them see, even if he didn't care about proving anything to the general public, that he wasn't the monster Killian O'Flannagan was so obviously trying to paint him as.

No. I shouldn't have to do that. I don't care what they think either.

Was that true? Conor examined his thoughts, searching for hurt feelings, for wounded pride.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

He found none. He didn't care about the way others perceived him. He noted that fact with some defiance. O'Flannagan had probably intended for his rumors to be hurtful, but Conor hadn't been hurt by them. Not on a personal level, at any rate.

No, all he cared about were the practical effects.

So. What were the practical effects, then?

The Arc relied on the repeat business of members of the ton. It was a place for upper class gentlemen. And Conor knew all too well that nobles could have delicate sensibilities. If they learned something about Conor that they didn't like, it might drive them to abandon The Arc as a place to spend their time.

And if they did like The Arc's owner, they would be very likely to continue giving him their patronage.

I don't care what they think, Conor thought in frustration, but I need them to like me. What a situation.

He didn't want to waste his time trying to earn the approval of shallow people. I wish my clients could just be people who choose The Arc because they like its atmosphere, he thought. I wish they could just prefer it as a place to drink and a place to spend time, without needing to be impressed by my character. Isn't that the more logical approach?

But there was nothing logical about some people. Some people would follow rumors, follow crowds, make decisions in flighty and senseless ways that had nothing at all to

do with fact.

Infuriating.

The answer came to him, suddenly and crystal clearly, perhaps because it was what he had already been thinking about all day long. Henry. Of course. Henry is the solution to everything.

People loved Henry already. The Arc's regulars were always thrilled to see him. Henry put people at their ease. He was likable. He was unthreatening.

Nobody will ever accuse Henry of being caught up in anything nefarious. The idea was laughable. It's so simple. We'll make him the public face of The Arc in my place.

Let Killian O'Flannagan try to start a vicious rumor about Henry Wilson. Just let him try! Nobody would believe a word of it. Henry was too nice.

It's perfect, Conor thought. I'll be able to spend less time at the club. Henry can have a greater financial stake as compensation for taking on this extra work. And O'Flannagan will have his legs cut out from under him.

All that remained was to discuss the practicalities of the matter with his solicitor.

Very pleased with the solution he'd devised, Conor sat back, picked up his cigar, and lit it.

I can't wait to tell Henry, he thought as he took a puff. He's going to love this.

Chapter 3

Astrid Dawson sat in the window of her bedroom, gazing down at the city street

below and wishing desperately to be out among the people.

The house she lived in with her father had seemed so big when she was a child. Back then, she could spend days running around, engrossed in her own imagination, without ever getting bored.

She had pretended to be a princess, dressing in her finest clothes and dancing in her father's library, envisioning a beautifully appointed ballroom.

At other times, she had pretended to be a knight, inventing valorous quests that had taken her throughout the house.

But now she was older, twenty-one years of age, and her imagination was no longer enough. She needed more.

If only Father would let me out of the house, she thought despairingly. If only I could attend a party...perhaps meet an interesting man...

But it was a daydream, nothing more. Astrid's father was nothing if not protective. One day, she supposed, he would allow men to come over and seek her hand in marriage. Without my input, most likely. Without my even getting to meet them or develop feelings for them.

As protective as he was, she had no doubt that her father would marry her off to somebody safe. But would he be interesting? Would she be able to like him?

There was no telling.

A pair of young women, about Astrid's own age, made their way down the road, giggling together about something. Astrid ached to join them. If only I could have a friend, someone to laugh and gossip with...

It wasn't as though she had never been invited to parties before. Astrid herself held no rank or title, nor did her father, but as a solicitor he served plenty of noble families, and on occasion had been included on guest lists. And sometimes those invitations included his daughter as well.

But even on the rare occasion that Tobias Dawson attended a party, he never, never brought Astrid along. He seemed to think that something regrettable might happen if she were allowed out.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Astrid supposed it was the loss of her mother that had made Tobias so uptight. Caroline Dawson had died years ago, in childbirth. Astrid had never known her, but she knew her father grieved the loss still.

A knock came at the door, bringing Astrid to her feet. She crossed the room and opened it.

Her father stood there in his finest suit. "Astrid."

She embraced him. "You're home. How was your day?"

"Tiring," he said, leading her from her bedroom and toward the dining room. "Exhausting, to be true. Why do people employ a solicitor, I wonder, if they're not willing to listen to advice?"

"Who did you see today?" She loved hearing stories of her father's work.

"Today it was Lord Chauncey Farnsworth," he said. "You remember who he is?"

"A baron, isn't he?" The name sounded familiar, but Astrid had trouble placing exactly why she knew it.

"That's right," her father said. "The man can't keep his financial affairs in order, and of course he blames me." He sighed. "He wouldn't have problems if he had done as I suggested in the first place. But now he says it's my fault he's lost money, and that he's going to hold me legally responsible for his losses."

Astrid gasped. “He can’t do that!”

“I’m afraid he can,” Tobias said. “He may only be a baron, but he’s a member of theton, and I’m just a commoner. My word won’t stand against his in court.”

“This is going to court?” Astrid couldn’t believe it.

“It will, unless I agree to pay what he’s demanding,” Tobias said. “And I haven’t got the amount he’s asking for, so of course he’ll have to pursue court filings if he hopes to get anything from me at all.”

“But I don’t understand,” Astrid protested, feeling dizzy. “How can he come after you for money you don’t even have?”

“He doesn’t see it that way,” Tobias says. “All he sees is that he entrusted his finances to me, and now his accounts are failing. He hasn’t thought about the fact that I don’t have the money to bail him out. He hasn’t even connected his own actions with his losses.”

They had reached the dining room. Astrid sat down at the table. Ordinarily she would have gone to the kitchen to get the soup she’d had simmering for the past hour so that she could serve herself and her father, but she was too distracted and upset by the story he was telling. “What’s going to happen?” she asked.

“I may have to sell my business to get the money,” Tobias said. “I may have to sell our home.”

“But where will we live?” Astrid’s whole world felt as though it was crashing down around her. She had never been in financial trouble before. Her father was not a wealthy man, to be sure, but they had always had more than they needed thanks to his hard work. To think that one baron could ruin them like this over a foolish

misunderstanding—it was nauseating.

She thought of her mother, who had once lived in this house too. Even though Astrid had never had the chance to know her mother, she had always felt connected to her through their shared home.

Her mother had decorated this place, Astrid knew. She had chosen the furnishings. She had hung the curtains herself. There was a burn on the wood floor in the kitchen that Tobias told her had been caused when Astrid's mother had spilled boiling water.

Everything here was a connection to a past Astrid would never know, to a mother who would never embrace her and tell her she was proud.

They couldn't allow Lord Farnsworth to take that away. Especially when her father hadn't done anything wrong.

"Father," she said. "What are we going to do?"

"If we could get the money together somehow, we could pay him off," Tobias said. His voice was thoughtful, but Astrid heard the undercurrent of anxiety below the careful consideration. He was worried.

It was her job to ease his worry. That was what a dutiful daughter ought to do. "I can sell my jewelry," she suggested. The jewels she had were inherited from her mother, and Astrid was loath to part with them, but keeping the house was more important.

Her father nodded slowly. "That's a possibility," he said. "Though, of course, I would prefer it if you didn't have to. Perhaps we could get a good price for Bartholomew."

Their horse. "You need him," Astrid pointed out. "How will you get to work without Bartholomew?"

She did not add that it would break her heart to sell the horse, that she loved him as a member of the family. Now was not the time to be sentimental. She knew better. They had to be practical. It was the only way out of this mess.

“Besides,” she added instead, “I don’t think we’d get very much money for old Bart, do you? He’s not exactly a prize stallion.” It hurt her to speak ill of her beloved horse, but if it kept him from being sold...

Her father sighed. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said. “I’m sure it wouldn’t be enough money to sway Lord Farnsworth, in any case.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“How much will he want?” Astrid asked.

Her father named a sum. Astrid felt lightheaded. It was more money than she’d ever seen in one place in her life. She doubted her father had such a quantity, even with his various assets taken into consideration. They could sell everything they had and still not raise the funds.

Her father must have understood the look on her face. “I believe he’ll accept it in installments,” he said. “I just need to get enough together to make a payment, for now. To show good faith.”

“I’ll sell the jewelry, then,” Astrid said faintly. She would have sold everything she owned to get her father out of this mess. The trouble was that she hardly owned anything at all. Her mother’s jewelry was the only thing of value she possessed.

“Don’t do that just yet,” her father said.

“It’s no trouble,” Astrid said. “Truly. I can take it to market. I’m sure I’ll find a buyer there.” Her heart beat a little faster at the prospect of going to market. She had only been a few times in her life, and always with her father for company. To make the journey on her own would be exciting.

But Tobias was shaking his head. “You aren’t going to market,” he said firmly. “If the jewelry is to be sold, I will do the selling.”

Frustration boiled her blood. “I can manage perfectly well, Father.”

“I’m sure you can,” he said with a smile. “But the market is a dangerous place for a young girl. You can understand that, surely.”

“I’m not really a young girl,” she pointed out. “I’m a young woman.”

“The market is dangerous for them too.”

Astrid sighed. He’s never going to let me out of the house, she thought. It felt strange that she could still be bothered by that old complaint when something so much worse, so much more dramatic, had arisen to worry her, and yet she was bothered. She wanted to keep her mother’s house, yes, and she wanted her father out of trouble. But she also craved freedom and adventure.

Perhaps I will go to the market, she thought rebelliously. After all, Father leaves home for several hours every day to conduct business. Maybe tomorrow while he’s away, I’ll sneak out and sell the jewelry. He won’t like it, but I’ll be back before he ever knows what I’ve done.

But she wouldn’t do it. She knew she wouldn’t. Her father had enough to be worrying about right now without having to contend with an errant daughter sneaking out of the house.

He needs to know he can trust me. He needs me to be the one thing in his life he doesn’t have to worry about.

She could be that. She could do that for him. That would be far more valuable than any money she might get for her jewelry.

“Don’t worry, Father,” she said. “I won’t go to the market. I’ll give you my jewelry, and you can decide whether or not to try to sell it.”

“It still won’t fetch the price we need,” her father said.

“It will help, at least,” Astrid persisted.

Tobias allowed a smile to creep across his face. “Your mother would be very proud if she could see you today, Astrid,” he said. “She would be pleased to know what a comfort you’ve grown to be.”

That was what was most important to Astrid—the knowledge that she was a comfort to her father. She hated that he was going through what he was, but she would do whatever was necessary to make things easier for him.

“Everything will be all right,” she assured him. “Whatever the Baron does to us, whatever we have to give up, we’ll be all right. We’ll have each other, and that’s what really matters.”

“That’s very wise,” her father said.

“It doesn’t matter if we have to sell the house,” she said, even though it did. She couldn’t quite keep her voice from breaking as she said it. “It doesn’t matter where we live. We can find another place, someplace not quite as nice.”

But Tobias shook his head. “It won’t come to that,” he said, and there was a fierceness in his voice that Astrid had never seen before. “This was your mother’s house, Astrid. Whatever else happens, I won’t let us be forced out of it. I promise you that. No matter what I have to do, I will keep our home.”

Chapter 4

“Can I get you a drink while you work?” Conor asked.

Tobias Dawson hunched low over the books, spread out on one of The Arc's empty tables. "That would be welcome," he said.

"You must try the scotch," Conor said, making his way behind the bar and searching for the bottle. "It's really something."

"Is it?" Dawson seemed not to be paying attention. Conor supposed he was distracting the man from his work by making conversation. He had looked over the books himself, several times, and knew all too well how difficult they were to understand.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Dawson was an expert at accounting and numbers. But still, Conor had no desire to make his job harder by distracting him. He poured two glasses of scotch and carried them to the table, where he set one down before his solicitor.

Dawson picked up the scotch and took a sip but said nothing.

Well, that was fine. I don't hire a solicitor in order to receive compliments on my liquor offerings, Conor reminded himself. I have my clientele for that. He is here to manage the books, nothing more.

Conor took a seat at the table. He had been thinking for days now about his plan to give Henry a larger stake in the club, and he was very excited to get things underway. As soon as he had verified with Dawson that his finances were in order, he would be able to move forward.

They sat in silence for some time. Conor drained his glass of scotch and tried to keep from fidgeting, from letting Dawson see how eager he was to discuss things.

Finally, Dawson looked up from his figuring. He turned the book to face Conor and pointed to a circled number. "There. Your profits for this month."

Conor blinked.

He was no accountant, but he was smart enough to recognize patterns. The Arc usually brought in half again above the number he was looking at now. It was as if a third of his usual profits were just...gone.

What happened? He thought back over the last month. Did we do less business? He didn't think so. He had been questioning that very thing since his confrontation with Killian O'Flannagan, trying to determine whether his rival's tactics had worked. But The Arc seemed to be doing just as well as always.

Perhaps we spent more money than usual? He would have to discuss that with Henry in order to be sure. But that didn't feel right either. After all, his bartender had told him that they were serving the same scotch as they always had, and nothing else had so much as seemed new to Conor.

Where did all my profits go?

"I don't understand," he managed, looking up at Dawson. "This is much less than I've come to expect from a typical month at The Arc. Why is it so low?"

"Some months are slower than others," Dawson said, examining the grain of the table. "It's a normal part of doing business, My Lord. Surely you've encountered a slow month before?"

Conor had. But never anything like this. And always before, he had been expecting the drop in profits. Always before there had been some change in the business itself that had hinted at what he could expect when his books were balanced.

This month there had been nothing.

"Let me see." He pulled the book toward him. Dawson let it go somewhat unwillingly.

The columns of numbers were nearly indecipherable. "Where is my income?" Conor asked.

Dawson pointed to a row of numbers. “Here, My Lord. This is broken down by day, you see?”

Conor examined the numbers carefully. They were all comparable—no one day had been much slower than any of the others—and the total number at the bottom of the column was similar to others he was used to seeing in these discussions. “It looks as though I brought in the same amount of money as last month, and the month before,” he commented.

“Does it?” Dawson swallowed anxiously. “I’m afraid I can’t remember those figures, My Lord.”

Conor flipped back a page in the book, to the previous month’s numbers. “Here we are,” he said. “Look, I actually brought in a little bit more than last month.”

“So then the difference must be in—in expenses.” Dawson definitely looked nervous, Conor thought. Perhaps he was beginning to realize he had made a mistake?

“Show me the expenses,” Conor suggested.

Dawson pointed to another column of numbers. “Operating costs. You had to pay your employees, as ever, and you had to keep your supply stocked...it’s the same thing from month to month.”

“But this is higher than last month.” Conor frowned and flipped back to the prior month. “There’s a huge deduction. Right here.” He tapped the number with his finger. It’s the exact amount that seems to be missing, he realized. “What was this for?”

“I...I’m afraid I’m not sure, My Lord.” Dawson was definitely sweating now. He loosened his shirt collar and refused to make eye contact with Conor.

Conor frowned. He was, admittedly, not a very good accountant, but something was clearly wrong here. And he was good at recognizing suspicious behavior. “Tell the truth, Dawson,” he said. “I think you know something about this number. What did I pay for this month that I didn't pay for last month?”

“I don't know what it is,” Dawson said. He got to his feet, sending his chair toppling over backward in the process. “My Lord, if you'll forgive me, I have other clients to see today.”

“Stay where you are,” Conor said sharply.

Dawson froze.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“There are a couple of things we could do,” Conor said. “I could call my business partner, Henry Wilson, down here, and see if he knows anything about this mysterious expense. I suspect he will say he doesn’t. Don’t you?”

Dawson didn’t say a word. He was trembling.

“No one else is authorized to spend money on behalf of The Arc other than Henry and myself,” Conor said. “So if neither one of us knows what that expenditure is, it means that we’ve been robbed. The police will need to be called.”

“The police?” Dawson was very pale now. “Surely that isn’t necessary. I’m sure it’s just an oversight.”

“Are you?” Conor asked. “Because I’ll tell you what I think, Dawson. “I think you diverted the money into your own account. And when I tell the police of my suspicions, your account is the first place they’re going to look. So, tell me, what are they going to find?”

Dawson made a raspy, choking sort of noise.

“I think it’s best if you sit back down at the table,” Conor said. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Dawson said nothing but made his way slowly back over to the table where he had sat working on The Arc’s books. He lowered himself carefully into a chair.

“Tell the truth,” Conor said. “Did you divert funds from my business? Did you steal

from me?”

Dawson swallowed hard.

“I can summon the police here right now,” Conor said. “You can tell your story to them, or you can tell it to me. It’s entirely up to you.”

“Yes,” Dawson whispered.

Conor was staggered. He had known, by Dawson’s behavior and by the discrepancy in the books, what must have happened. But hearing it confessed aloud like this was something else. He had trusted this man. Dawson had been helping him balance his books for years.

And now he had stolen from him.

Was there no one he could trust?

“Why?” he managed, overcoming his initial shock. “Why would you do such a thing? I pay you well, don’t I? You earn enough to live comfortably.”

“I have a daughter,” Dawson whispered. “I have a daughter, My Lord.”

“What of it?” Conor didn’t wish to be insensitive to the man’s suffering, but he knew how much a solicitor earned. He had all the money he needed to provide for himself and his daughter.

Dawson sighed and studied his hands. “Lord Farnsworth—the Baron—he believes my bad advice is to blame for his business woes. It isn’t true, My Lord. I gave him good advice, and he didn’t follow it. But now he intends to take me to court to recoup his losses. He’ll take everything I have.”

Conor frowned.

“I have to look out for the best interests of my daughter,” Dawson said. “Don’t you understand?”

“But I can’t allow you to do that by stealing from my business,” Conor said. “You must return the money.”

“I can’t.” Dawson cringed. “I’ve given it to Lord Farnsworth already. Please don’t turn me over to the law, My Lord.”

“You stole from me to pay off Lord Farnsworth.” Conor shook his head. “Why didn’t you simply tell me you were in trouble? I could have helped you.”

“You wouldn’t have helped me,” Dawson said bleakly. “Not you.”

“What do you mean, not me?”

“I hear the rumors about you,” Dawson said. “You must have heard them too. You must know what people say.”

“Tell me what they say.” He knew, but he was going to make the man say it. He was angry, furious that he had been robbed. And although he had no real intention of summoning the police, he wanted to see Dawson squirm a bit.

“You’re cold,” Dawson said. “You’re unfeeling. You don’t care for anyone or anything. You couldn’t possibly understand what it’s like to be on the verge of losing everything you’ve worked your whole life for, to know that your only daughter is depending on you and that you may not be able to provide for her.”

Conor could concede that that much was true. He did not know what it was like to

have to provide for a daughter. But still. “This justifies stealing from me?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“I don’t say it was justified,” Dawson said. “Merely that I didn’t know what else to do.”

Conor took a seat at the table. His heart was heavy. The truth was that although it was an inconvenience to lose the money that had been taken from him, it would not hurt him much over the long term. He wouldn’t be able to give Henry the share of the club he had hoped to this month, but perhaps next month he could manage it.

“Please,” Dawson said. “Please don’t summon the law. I’ll pay you back every cent.”

“You can’t pay me back,” Conor said absently. He was still thinking about Henry. “You just said that you couldn’t. You already gave the money to Lord Farnsworth.

“If you summon the police, it will be the end of me,” Dawson said. “Stealing from an Earl...they’ll throw the book at me, My Lord. They’ll take everything I own. They’ll lock me away.”

“And you didn’t think of that before you acted?” Conor asked.

“My Lord, I’m begging you,” Dawson said. “I have a daughter to think of. Her mother is gone. Without me, she’ll be alone in the world. She doesn’t know how to fend for herself. I’m all she has. I deserve to be punished, yes, but my Astrid has done nothing wrong.”

Conor rubbed his temples. He wished, at times like this, that the rumors about him were true. He wished that he was cold and unfeeling, that he could bring himself to call the law on this man and to let someone else deal with him.

If he stole from me, he might steal from his other clients. Maybe he should be locked up, or at the very least, have his practice taken away from him.

But Conor couldn't bring himself to do it.

The man was a father. He had been trying to protect his daughter.

"Perhaps we can work something out," he said.

"Yes," Dawson said, desperation etched across his face. "I'll do anything. I'll give you anything."

"You don't have anything that I need," Conor said.

"I do," Dawson countered.

"What, then?"

"You're going to have trouble finding a wife," Dawson said. "I've heard the rumors that are circulating about you, My Lord. About the way you are with women."

"Those rumors aren't true," Conor said shortly.

"I didn't think they were. They didn't make sense, not alongside tales of your coldness. And I see the way you are. You aren't charming. You don't have the character that would be necessary to seduce women."

"You steal from me, and you insult me."

"It's not an insult, My Lord," Dawson said quickly. "It takes a special kind of arrogance and posturing to swindle a woman like that, and you don't have it. I'm

saying...I'm saying you're honest. But I'm also saying that most people don't believe that of you."

"Where are you going with this?"

"I have a daughter."

"So you've mentioned."

"She's twenty-one years old," Dawson said. "She's ready to marry."

Conor blinked. "You're offering me your daughter's hand?"

"All that matters to me is that she's well cared for," Dawson said. "In the hands of an earl, she would never want for anything."

His daughter. Conor had never imagined an offer like this.

He got to his feet and collected their glasses. "This calls for another scotch," he said. "You and I have much to talk about."

Chapter 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Although there was no way Tobias Dawson could have known it, Conor had admired his daughter Astrid for some time now.

The girl was irritatingly difficult to catch a glimpse of, though. Conor had seen her for the first time when he'd paid a visit to Dawson at his home, dropping off a book his solicitor had left behind at The Arc.

He had only seen her briefly, passing through the foyer on her way from one room to another. They hadn't spoken. But he had been drawn in by her bright blue eyes and curly, dark hair, and by the little smile she had flashed his way before disappearing down the hall.

He had thought of her more than once since that day. Whenever he passed Dawson's home, he had always looked up at the upstairs window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He had seen her there once, gazing out toward the water. He didn't think she had seen him.

She was lovely. She was a distraction who had taken up residence in his head. But she had always been a fantasy, nothing more. An idle thought. He had never even seen her out of the house. And Dawson had been driven to try to steal to provide for her.

He's a very protective man, Conor thought. A caring, protective father. Not at all the sort to use his daughter as a bargaining chip to get himself out of trouble.

And yet, here he was. Offering her up.

He refilled the scotch glasses and returned to the table, setting them down before taking his seat. Dawson took his glass in both hands and pulled it to him. He looked absolutely miserable as he drank.

“Why are you doing this?” Conor asked, after allowing him a moment to collect himself.

“Doing what?”

“Offering your daughter to me.”

“The law—”

“Don’t expect me to believe it’s because of the law. I could call them right now, but I haven’t.”

“But you will. You’re willing to do it. You said as much yourself,” Dawson said.

Conor felt a mixture of pity and contempt for the man. He was such a coward. “I know you care for your daughter,” he said. “I know you aren’t simply using her to buy your way out of trouble.”

“I don’t think you are what people say you are,” Dawson admitted. “Not truly.”

“You thought that I wouldn’t loan you money if you asked me, though.”

“I feared you wouldn’t. I couldn’t take the chance.”

“You’ll take the chance with your daughter?”

Dawson looked down at his hands.

“What kind of man are you?”

“She’ll have what she needs,” Dawson said. “She’ll have a good life. She’ll be married to an earl. She’ll have money and fine things, servants to tend to her. And I’ll know that whatever becomes of me, she’ll be all right.”

He’s right, Conor thought. About that, at least, he’s right. I have enough money to provide a good life for any woman. If his concern is ensuring that his daughter marries well and is cared for...well, she’s a commoner, and I’m an earl. She could certainly do worse.

Was it thoughts like that that made people think he was a cruel man? He didn’t mean it as arrogance. It was simply the truth. A commoner, a girl, might find herself married to any sort of terrible man, particularly if her father had been disgraced. To marry an earl would be a coup.

And it would definitely serve as a punishment for Tobias Dawson. Conor could see the anguish twisting the other man’s face already. He cherishes her, he thought. That’s why he keeps her at home all the time. It will torment him to lose her, even to a good marriage.

Conor couldn’t deny that a part of him did want to see Dawson suffer for what he had done. He didn’t want to destroy the man, to call in the law and take away his business and his home. But he was angry. Dawson had tried to steal Conor’s hard-earned money.

And even setting that aside, there was the matter of the girl.

She really is uncommonly lovely. She would make a good wife, he thought. And it would be good to have a wife. Dawson was right in saying that the many rumors about Conor would make it difficult for him to find someone to marry.

For a moment, he thought about what Killian O'Flannagan would say if Conor announced an engagement. He would really feel like an idiot then, Conor thought, with some satisfaction. He would have to acknowledge that his rumormongering did him no good.

He sipped his scotch, pondering the options.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“My Lord?” Dawson said, looking frightened. “Will you accept? Will you marry my daughter?”

“I’ll have to think about it,” Conor said.

Dawson had the audacity to look wounded. “She’s a good girl,” he said. “She will make a fine wife; I promise you that.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Conor said. “But I can’t agree to a marriage without thinking about it, and certainly not one that was only proposed because you wish to get yourself out of trouble.”

He was pleased to see some color in Dawson’s cheeks at that accusation. Perhaps the man did have a sense of shame.

“Go home,” he said. “Go and talk to your daughter, and I will think about what you’ve offered.”

“How will I know when you’ve made a decision?”

“I’ll send for you.”

“My Lord, please consider—”

“I’ve told you that I’ll consider it,” Conor said sharply. “And now I’ve asked you to go. If you insist on remaining here, I will call for the police, and we’ll be having a very different conversation.”

Tobias Dawson jumped to his feet, nearly upsetting his glass of scotch, and fled the club.

It was a relief to be alone. Conor slumped in his chair and did his best to collect his thoughts, but it wasn't easy. His mind was racing, and it seemed impossible to catch up.

Dawson doesn't believe the rumors about me. That was nice, Conor supposed, but he knew that most people still did. And even though the girl's financial future would be secure if she were to marry Conor, what would happen to her reputation?

What will people think of her if she announces a sudden engagement to a man who's known to be a womanizer and a philanderer?

Conor knew exactly what they would think. He had heard the whispers before about other, unfortunate women.

They'll think she's having my baby. That I'm marrying her because decency forced my hand. They'll think we're trying to present ourselves as honest, but that it's a ruse.

And she was a commoner, at that. A girl who found her way into the ton under those circumstances would never be accepted. She would always be a joke, always on the fringes, always mocked and derided in corners and shadows. That treatment would become her whole life.

Could he really allow such a thing?

He was angry with her father, yes. But he didn't want any harm to befall the daughter. If anything, it was the opposite he wanted. He admired her. If he could have courted her in more traditional circumstances, he might have done so.

But she could be mine, he thought. The offer has been made. Do I really want to turn it down just because I'm afraid of rumors? I've never worried about rumors in my life!

Tormented by indecision, Conor got up and carried the scotch glasses back to the bar to wash them. Having something to do with his hands would help, he knew.

Tobias Dawson couldn't possibly have had any idea what he was doing when he had made his offer. He couldn't have known the rush of adrenaline Conor felt every time he thought of Dawson's daughter. He couldn't have known how the few glimpses Conor had ever had of the girl replayed over and over in his mind.

Astrid. Even her name was beautiful.

"What am I going to do?" he murmured aloud as he soaked the glasses in water and began to scrub. "What's the right decision?"

And as he considered, it came to him.

He would ask for help.

He would turn, as he always did when things grew too complicated, to a trusted friend.

Henry Wilson was much better than anyone Conor knew at navigating muddy social waters. He was a commoner himself, so he would have the perspective to help Conor understand what a noble marriage would mean to the girl.

He was also much more in touch than Conor himself was with the gossip of the town. He had heard all the rumors about Conor. He would very likely be able to predict what the reaction would be if Conor announced he was getting married to Tobias

Dawson's daughter.

Conor permitted himself a small smile. He was incredibly fortunate to have a friend like Henry, he knew. As antisocial as he tended to be, he was sometimes surprised he had any friends at all, much less one of such quality.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Henry would be here at The Arc tonight. It was their custom to have a drink together in the evening, before the club's main rush of business began. I'll ask him then, Conor said. And I must commit myself to following his advice. If he says it would be wrong to pursue this marriage, that I must decline the offer and leave the girl alone, that's what I'll do.

He was surprised, though, by the pang of regret he felt at the thought. He hadn't realized he had any strong feelings about the matter, but suddenly the thought of passing up an opportunity to spend time with Astrid seemed unthinkable.

Strange. I knew I found her appealing, but perhaps it took an offer of marriage to make me realize how much I truly wanted her.

There was still the fact that he had never spoken to the girl before. Perhaps, upon meeting her, he would find her company repellent. Perhaps he would no longer want to marry her. That would make this dilemma much easier to resolve.

But it seemed unlikely.

Keep a level head, Conor admonished himself as he dried the scotch glasses and put them away. Whatever happens, don't get carried away with your emotions. She's a very sheltered girl.

He would have to be very careful not to do any damage to her in the course of whatever came next.

Astrid was slicing a loaf of bread to serve with the stew she had made for dinner when her father came through the door.

Immediately, it was clear that something was wrong, and for a moment she almost thought he had been accosted on the street by bandits. He walked as though he carried a massive weight on his shoulders. He stumbled across the kitchen and fell into a chair, resting his head on his arms.

“Father?” Astrid asked, alarmed. She hurried to his side and rested a hand on his shoulder. “Father, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Astrid.” To her horror, he sounded like he might be about to cry.

“Have you been drinking?” she asked him, hoping that the answer was yes. As much as she didn’t like to see her father overindulge, she would have preferred to think that he was falling apart because he was intoxicated, rather than because something terrible had happened.

“Only a little,” he said.

She trembled. “Let me get you some stew,” she suggested.

“That would be welcome. It smells wonderful,” he said, but the sadness in his voice remained.

Astrid busied herself ladling the stew into two bowls. She brought them to the table, along with the bread, and set a portion down in front of her father. “Eat,” she encouraged him. “You’ll feel better if you do.”

He nodded. “You’re right,” he agreed. “I know you’re right. You’re young, Astrid, but you’re smart. So smart.”

How smart was it to suggest that eating would make a man feel better? Astrid frowned, but she didn't say anything. She took her seat at the table and waited for her father to explain what was going on.

After a long time, he drew a breath. "I went to the Earl of Middleborough today," he said.

"Did you?" Astrid didn't know what to make of that. Had her father thought the Earl might help him out of his predicament with the Baron? "What happened?"

"I offered Lord Middleborough your hand in marriage."

Astrid felt as if her blood had frozen. "What?" she choked.

"I offered the Earl your hand," her father repeated. He made a study of his bowl of stew, and Astrid got the feeling he was afraid to look at her.

"Father, I'm not ready to marry," she whispered.

"You're twenty-one years old," her father said. "You're certainly old enough. You're more than old enough."

"I've never even..." she trailed off. What could she say that would adequately make her point? What hadn't she done that a woman ought to do before she became a man's wife? I've never done anything. That's the end of the sentence.

She had never been courted by a man. She had never danced with a man. She had never had a conversation with a man, not really. She had spent her life in this house, only stepping outside on a few rare occasions, and always in the company of her father.

And now she was to be married.Married!

She forced herself to draw a breath, to slow her thoughts. “What did Lord Middleborough say?” she asked.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“He said he would consider the offer,” her father said.

A reprieve, then. The Earl was not sure he wanted her. Perhaps Astrid ought to have felt offended, affronted, but the only thing she could bring herself to feel was relief. Maybe I won't have to do it, she thought. Maybe he'll tell Father no, and I'll be able to stay here for a few more years.

The thought steadied her just enough that she was able to recover her composure and take a bite of her stew. The liquid warmed her from within, centering her even more. She took another bite and felt more like herself.

“Why?” she asked. There were a thousand questions on her mind right now, but this was the one that kept rising to the top. “Why would you offer him that?”

“You've got to marry at some point, Astrid,” her father said.

She knew he was right. But that wasn't the point. “I'm not asking why you would offer my hand to a man,” she said. “I'm asking why you would offer it to him, and why now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Has Lord Middleborough ever shown any interest in me before?” Astrid asked.

“You're a lovely young woman,” her father hedged.

“That's not my question and you know it,” she said. “He's a nobleman, and

I'm...well..."

"Beautiful, charming, clever—"

"Common, Father. Men like him don't marry girls like me. Why should he even consider what you're offering? What would make him want to choose me, when he could almost certainly have a high-ranking lady?"

"There are..." her father swallowed hard, "there are rumors about him. Rumors that will make it hard for him to find a wife."

Astrid frowned. "What kinds of rumors?"

"Unpleasant ones." Her father's cheeks colored, and Astrid realized he felt uncomfortable with what he was about to say. "They say he uses women for his own pleasure and discards them without a care when he's finished with them."

She gasped. "This is the man you offer me to?"

"The stories aren't true," her father said quickly. "He isn't what people say he is. But rumors grow, and he will have a hard time living them down. Most members of the ton will have nothing to do with the poor man."

Astrid felt short of breath. "How do you know the rumors aren't true?" she asked.

"I know the man," her father said. "I've worked with him for many years. I know the sort of man he is. He's quiet, yes, and he's standoffish, and many find him unlikeable for those reasons. But he isn't a cruel man." He looked up at Astrid, meeting her eyes for the first time. "I would never send you to the home of a cruel man, Astrid. I love you too much to allow that to happen."

“So...” Astrid struggled to comprehend, “you offered me to him because you pitied his plight.”

“I suppose that’s right,” her father said. He was looking away from her again. “I knew you would be a bright spot in what was otherwise a sad life. You always have been for me.”

“And you didn’t think of asking me first?”

“I’m your father, Astrid,” he said. “I don’t need your permission to make a marital arrangement for you.”

“No,” she said quietly. “You don’t. But I thought...Father, I always thought that you would care how I felt about it.”

Look at me, she begged silently. Look at me, Father.

But he didn’t.

“I can see that I was wrong,” she whispered. “I suppose I should have known better.”

“I do care, Astrid,” he said quietly.

“May I be excused to my bedroom?” Suddenly she couldn’t stand to be in his presence for even another moment.

“You haven’t finished your stew,” her father pointed out.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“I’ll bring it with me,” she said. “I was reading a book, and I’d like to return to it, if you have no objection.”

“No,” he said. “No, Astrid, I have no objection.”

Astrid got to her feet, picking up her bowl in one hand and her piece of bread in the other, and walked away. A part of her wanted to look over her shoulder at her father as she left, but she resisted the temptation to do so. She was sure he would be just sitting there, looking miserably down at the table.

He knows, she thought, suddenly furious. He knows there’s something about the way he’s gone about this that’s hurtful and wrong. And he did it anyway. He expects me to believe he cares for me—he claims to care for me—but he makes arrangements for my future without even including me in the discussion.

Perhaps Lord Middleborough would say no to her father’s offer. Astrid would have to hold on to that hope.

But as she climbed the stairs to her room, she had to acknowledge that a rejection of her father’s offer seemed very unlikely. If what she had learned about Lord Middleborough was true, surely, he would jump at any opportunity to find a wife.

None of the noblewomen will have him, she thought. No fathers will let their daughters anywhere near a man with a reputation like that, not if they have any better options. That’s why he’ll have to marry beneath his station.

But that doesn’t mean he’ll have to choose me.

Maybe he won't like me. Father says I'm a prize, but he's biased. Maybe Lord Middleborough will find me ugly and dull.

A girl could dream.

Astrid made it to her room and tucked herself into her window seat. This was her favorite place in all the world. She had a marvelous view of the city from here, and she liked to spend her days watching people coming and going, on their way to places she could only imagine.

Her appetite had deserted her. She set her bowl down on the floor and picked at the bread, forcing herself to tear off little pieces and eat them as she thought about what the future might hold.

If Lord Middleborough did accept her father's offer, Astrid would have to leave her home—her mother's home—behind. She would have to leave her bedroom and her window seat and her lovely view, and she would have to go live with the Earl in his manor.

She would have to leave her father.

She was angry with him right now. Right now, she didn't want to be around him at all. But underneath that anger, he was still her father, and she loved him very much.

The two of them had been together all her life. They had lost the third member of their family—Astrid's mother—when she had been born, so they had always been a pair. And now she was facing down the idea of marriage and leaving her father's house forever.

How could he do this? she wondered. How could he give me up? If the situation were reversed, I could never have done it to him.

She had always known that she would be leaving someday. It was only natural for a girl to leave her father's house and become a man's wife. It was something she had expected, something she had anticipated.

At times, it was even something she had looked forward to. There was adventure there, certainly. Learning to live with a man as his wife, beginning a new phase of her own life, perhaps even embarking on the journey of motherhood—it was all very exciting.

She just hadn't expected it to happen so fast.

And what would happen if Lord Middleborough said no? Would her father abandon the idea for a while? Or would he simply move on to the next man? Why had he done this now? Would he keep going until he had made her a match?

Twenty-one was old enough to marry. He was right about that. But it certainly wasn't so old that one had to marry, or risk missing the chance. So, what was his hurry all of a sudden?

Maybe he's tired of my presence here in the house. Maybe he wants to have the place to himself. Maybe he's just tired of being a father, of worrying about a daughter all the time.

No. That couldn't be. She couldn't believe that of the father she loved, the father who had always been so protective of her.

But what other reason could there be?

She abandoned her bread on the window seat, crossed to her bed, and lay down, tears finally beginning to flow. She curled up and allowed herself to cry until she was exhausted.

It wasn't until she was on the verge of slipping from consciousness that she remembered her father's financial trouble with Lord Farnsworth, but the thought flitted away before she could grasp it.

Chapter 7

By the time Henry arrived at The Arc for their evening drink, Conor felt as if he was losing his mind. He had thought through so many different scenarios that he no longer felt in control of his imagination.

Futures spiraled out before him as if he had already chosen them. In one, he was married to Astrid Dawson, and her reputation was in tatters. She was ashamed of him, ashamed of herself. She refused to leave her bedroom. Their children were raised by servants, and people in town spoke of her only in hushed whispers.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

In time, Conor thought, everyone would forget why they had judged her in the first place. The new rumor about her would become that she was reclusive, painfully shy or perhaps bitter and unlikeable. Maybe she was disfigured, people would say. After all, her father had always kept her hidden away too...

Conor would shake off those thoughts, only to be overtaken by another possibility. What if he chosenotto marry Astrid Dawson, and no one else would have him? What if he died alone and without an heir, having passed up his one opportunity at marriage?

Was it too soon to fear such a thing? Maybe. He was young yet.

But Killian O'Flannagan was out there. He was out there, propagating rumors and spreading lies. He would do everything in his power to ensure that no one thought well of Conor.

I don't know, Conor thought, feeling as tired as if he had worked a full day, although he had done very little physical labor. I don't know what the right choice is here. I don't know what I ought to do.

He was wiping down tables when Henry walked in the door. His friend raised his eyebrows, surveying the scene. "Cleaning up?"

"Someone's got to do it," Conor pointed out.

"But notyou, usually," Henry said. "Don't we hire people for this sort of thing?"

“I need to talk to you,” Conor said.

“If we don’t, we really should,” Henry went on as if Conor hadn’t spoken. “I’m sure we could get more staff in here. You can afford it, right?”

This was the one thing about working with Henry that always bothered Conor. Conor did his best to separate the club’s finances from his personal wealth, but Henry always seemed to feel that Conor could invest more money and make the club better. It was probably true, so Conor knew he couldn’t be too angry about it. But he would have appreciated Henry asking instead of assuming.

“I’m not going to hire anyone new this month,” he said.

“Why not?” Henry asked.

“We took a hit, financially,” Conor said. “Come and look at the books.”

He led Henry over to the table and placed the ledger in front of him, open to the past month’s finances. Then he walked away to get them each a drink. He wanted Henry to have time to peruse the book on his own.

He wanted to see if his friend reached the same conclusion he had.

He took his time preparing the glasses of scotch. I’ve had more than my share of scotch today, he thought ruefully. If I don’t slow down, we’re going to take another financial loss just in the amount I’m drinking on the side.

That would be all right, though. It didn’t count as stealing when he was taking it from himself.

He returned to the table. Henry was frowning down at the book in front of him. As

Conor placed the glasses on the table and took his seat, Henry pointed to the offending figure in the book. "I don't know what this expense is."

Conor sighed. "Do you remember Tobias Dawson?"

"The solicitor? What about him?"

Conor explained what had happened and his confrontation with Dawson. By the time he was finished, Henry was red in the face.

"He thought to steal from us?" Henry exclaimed. "Who does he think he is? And I can't believe you let him walk out of here, Conor."

"What should I have done?"

"Summoned the authorities, of course. The man belongs in a cell."

"He has a daughter."

"What of it! What do we care for the daughters of criminals?"

"He was in dire straits, Henry. You don't need to be so heartless."

"Me, heartless?" Henry shook his head in disbelief. "He's the one who stole from you, Conor."

"I know. I know that," Conor said. "Believe me, I've been through it with him already today. You don't have to remind me."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Then why did you let him go?” Henry hesitated. “He offered you something, didn’t he?”

He had gotten there much more quickly than Conor had anticipated. Henry always seems to know things. In a way, it was nice, and it was certainly useful on occasions like this. Conor was happy to be spared breaking that part of the news. He nodded.

“What did he offer?” Henry demanded. “Is he going to pay us back the money?”

“He can’t,” Conor said. “He already used it to pay down a debt he owes. That’s the only reason he took it from us in the first place, Henry. He was in debt, and he was desperate.”

“That doesn’t excuse stealing,” Henry said.

And people say I’m cold. Right now, Henry looked as though he was about to march out the front door of The Arc and down to the police station, whether Conor approved of his actions or not. Conor would have to do something to rein his friend in, before this got out of control.

Fortunately, he had the perfect distraction at hand. “He offered me his daughter,” he said.

“I don’t understand.” Henry shook his head. “He offered her for what?”

“For marriage.”

Henry stared at him. “You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not.”

“I was thinking perhaps you meant he offered to let his daughter work here.” He hooted. “Marriage! He’s going to let you marry his daughter!”

“Is that a bad idea, do you think?”

“Are you kidding? It’s a great idea! I’ve been worried about you finding someone to marry for ages.”

“Oh, thanks very much.”

“What’s the girl like?” Henry asked. “Is she pretty?”

“Yes.”

“And is she good company?”

“I don’t know,” Conor admitted. “We’ve never been officially introduced. I suppose if I agree to the proposal, I’ll have the opportunity to meet her in person.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” Henry said. “You’ve every right to meet with the girl before you make a decision, Conor. I think you should tell Dawson you want to meet her, and then you’ll make a decision.”

“What if he refuses?”

“He can’t refuse,” Henry said. “He’s trying to stay out of trouble with the law, and he knows you can turn him in if he makes things difficult for you.” He smiled, and

Conor was reminded how conniving his friend could be when there was something he wanted. “You get to set the terms of this agreement.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea,” Conor said.

“How could it not be a good idea?” Henry laughed. “Can you imagine the look on O’Flannagan’s face when he realizes you found yourself a wife in the midst of all his slander?”

“My taking a wife isn’t going to stop him from trying to besmirch my name,” Conor said. “He’ll just find new things to say about me. And he’ll probably find things to say about her, too.”

“And that worries you?”

“The girl hasn’t done anything wrong,” Conor said. “Her father stole from me, but she did nothing to offend. I wouldn’t want to see her reputation ruined by association with me.”

“You really are too soft hearted,” Henry said. “It’s ironic, given the gossip about you.”

“What’s wrong with being soft hearted?”

“In this instance? It’s going to stop you from doing what’s best for you,” Henry said. “You need to take a wife. Is there any woman you could marry who wouldn’t face gossip?”

“But—”

“This girl is a commoner,” Henry pointed out. “She’ll be marrying above her station. Anyone with a lick of sense will know why she’s marrying you. They won’t have to search for another reason. She’s doing it for the money and for the title.”

That was a good point. Conor hadn’t thought about that.

“You assume she doesn’t know what she’s getting herself into,” Henry said. “Perhaps she does. Perhaps she truly wants to marry you.”

“I don’t see why any woman would.”

“Do you think so little of yourself?”

“No, I just think my reputation is that bad.”

“Well, maybe she doesn’t care about that. It’s possible for people not to care about their reputation, you know. I would have thought you’d know that better than anyone.”

Conor laughed. “You make a reasonable point.”

“I know I do. That’s why you brought me in to talk sense into you about this.”

“But I can’t be sure,” Conor said. “I can’t just assume that the girl is interested in marrying me.”

“You don’t have to assume anything,” Henry said. “Haven’t you been listening? Talk to her. Ask her what she wants. Tell Dawson you can’t make a decision about his offer until you’ve had the opportunity to get to know his daughter personally. It’s more than sensible.”

“Do you think so?”

“I think he’d be mad to refuse you. And once you’ve met her, you’ll be able to figure out whether she’s afraid of your scary, scary reputation.” Henry laughed. “I very much doubt it, by the way.”

“It would be nice to have all the information,” Conor admitted. “I’d feel much more comfortable making this decision if I didn’t feel like I was deciding for someone else, someone I’ve never met. If she seems frightened of me, I can always decline the offer. And if she seems to like me, I’ll feel much better about saying yes.”

Henry nodded, as if everything he had said was no more than obvious. “And it’ll give you a chance to see if you actually want to marry her, too,” he said. “I think you should, but I guess if she’s awful to look at—”

“She’s not, I told you.”

“Or if she has an unpleasant personality, then you might want to rethink your options and make another choice.” He grinned. “Either way, a meeting is exactly what you need.”

“You’re right,” Conor decided. He swallowed the last of his scotch. It warmed him on the way down, and he smiled. He was already feeling better, more sure of himself. He knew what he needed to do now, and that was more than he had been able to say an hour ago.

“Good,” Henry said. “Are we done with this, then? Because I’d like to open the club for the night, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead.” Conor waved a hand in the direction of the door, indicating that Henry should begin admitting the evening’s clientele.

“Are you going to go talk to Dawson right now?” Henry asked.

“No,” Conor said. “I think I’ll wait until morning before I speak to him.”

Henry nodded. “Good idea. Let him fret about it for a while before you put him out of his misery.”

Conor nodded, uninterested in correcting his friend, but the truth was that Henry had it wrong. He wasn’t trying to cause Dawson any further anguish. Now that he had decided on his course, he was ready to carry it out.

But if he went to give his answer in the morning, he felt there was probably a better chance that he would get to see Astrid right away.

And, he found, he wanted to see her as soon as possible.

Now that he had set aside his worries about which course of action was the right one, all he could think about was the lovely young woman who had been offered as a wife.

He couldn’t wait to get to know her better.

Chapter 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Conor had thought things would be easier once he had settled on a course of action. He had thought he would know exactly what he needed to do, and that it would just be a matter of doing it.

And yet here he stood, staring at his wardrobe and trying to decide how to dress for this afternoon's occasion.

The problem, he thought as he flicked through his clothing in frustration, was that he couldn't be sure whether or not he would be spending time with Astrid today. Was he going over to her father's house to talk to Tobias Dawson, and then to leave? Or, once he was there, would he be permitted an opportunity to sit down with Astrid?

If he was going to be spending time with her, he wanted to make a first impression that would leave her in no doubt that the man seeking her hand was stylish and classy.

He shook his head, irritated with himself. When had this turned into him seeking her hand. He didn't need her approval. She had been offered to him, by her father. All he had to say was yes, and she would be his.

But I don't want it to happen that way, he realized. I want her to want me too. If she doesn't, if she resents the offer, I don't know that I'll be able to say yes to it at all.

Hence the need for a good first impression. He would have to win her over after all.

I'm overthinking things. He selected an array of clothing at random. All of his things were fine. He didn't own any clothes that would make him look shabby or careless.

Whatever else you could say about the Earl of Middleborough, you couldn't say that he wasn't a well-dressed man.

It had occurred to him that when he arrived on Dawson's doorstep today, the man would be expecting an answer to his offer. Conor thought that Henry was probably correct in saying that he had every right to want to meet the girl before answering. But Dawson might be taken aback.

And that might make him difficult to reason with.

I will have to be patient, Conor said to himself. Even if I know that I'm in the right and he's in the wrong, I'll have to give him time to consider and to decide that accommodating my request serves his best interests—which it does. He wants this marriage more even than I do. As far as he knows, it's his only hope for remaining a free man.

At some point, they would probably have to sign contracts to that effect—stating that in exchange for the marriage of Dawson's daughter, Conor pledged not to pursue any legal action against the man. Maybe we can simply include that detail in the standard marriage contract, he thought wryly. That would be romantic!

Once dressed, he made his way down the stairs to the main foyer of his manor. His butler, DuBois, was waiting for him.

"Has the carriage been called around?" Conor asked.

"Yes indeed, My Lord," DuBois said. "And may I say, you look excellent. The young lady is sure to be pleased."

"Thank you, DuBois," Conor said. "I hope you're right about that."

DuBois inclined his head.

“Tell me something,” Conor said. “As a commoner yourself, if you had a daughter and she had a chance to marry a member of theton, would you want to see her do it?”

“Certainly,” DuBois said. “Such a marriage would provide social opportunities for her, as well as guaranteeing a life of comfort and luxury. Any father would want such an outcome for his daughter.”

“But what if the man in question was...less than admirable?” Conor pressed.

“I don’t know what you mean, My Lord.”

“Suppose he was a scoundrel?”

DuBois hesitated. “As a father, I would judge a man’s character for myself before allowing my daughter to marry him. I would not make any decision based on the opinions of others.”

“That’s a wise answer,” Conor murmured.

“I think any sensible father would do the same thing,” DuBois said. “And if a man decided to permit a marriage for his daughter, it would be because he had examined the man in question and approved of what he had seen.”

Conor sighed. “You’re very wise, DuBois. But not all fathers are good men. Some wouldn’t hesitate to trade away their daughters for selfish reasons.”

DuBois hesitated. “If you’ll permit me, My Lord...Tobias Dawson cherishes his daughter. This is well known. He wouldn’t trade her away for any reason unless he felt safe in doing so.”

“You think not?”

“The girl is well known,” DuBois said. “I don’t know her personally, but she is talked about. The maiden who never leaves her home. The watcher in the window. Everyone in town has seen her up there, looking down from her bedroom. She never leaves the house.”

“Her father is protective.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Yes. Ever since the death of her poor mother, he dotes on the girl. She is all he has left in the world. He would never do anything to jeopardize her safety, nor would he give her away cavalierly to a man he didn’t trust.”

Conor felt a little better. I suppose DuBois is right, he thought. Dawson must think I’m worthy of Astrid, or else he would never have made the offer. And if he thinks I’m worthy, perhaps she will think so too.

There was a rattling noise on the cobblestones outside. “That will be the carriage,” DuBois said. “I wish you luck today, My Lord. We’ll be waiting to hear how it went.”

Conor nodded, feeling lucky, not for the first time, to have such a kind and supportive staff. He had inherited DuBois from his own father. If left to his own devices, he thought, he probably would have been incapable of making such a good hire.

He crossed the foyer and went out into the open air. It was a warm day, and the breeze felt nice on his face. Conor usually enjoyed walking, when he needed to get somewhere—the manor wasn’t too far away from any point of interest in town—but today was an occasion, and it seemed only appropriate to arrive in style.

He settled himself into the carriage and closed his eyes as it sprang to life beneath him, bearing him off toward Tobias and Astrid Dawson and whatever future awaited him. He would use this time to compose himself, to put his thoughts in order so that he would know what he wanted to say when he arrived.

But he couldn’t seem to focus. Images of the beautiful Miss Dawson swam behind his

closed lids. Could he possibly be remembering her accurately? Could anybody truly be as lovely as the girl in his imagination? It was hard to believe, and yet Conor didn't think himself capable of dreaming up such beauty either. He must be remembering her as she was, mustn't he? He couldn't possibly have come up with this vision on his own.

So lost was he in his daydream that he failed to notice the passage of time. It was only the sudden stop of the carriage that alerted him to the fact that he had arrived at Dawson's home.

He exited the carriage and stood looking up at the house. He had been here before, of course, had seen this place, and he had known what to expect on this visit. But he had never really thought about it. He had never thought about what this house said about the people who lived inside.

It was a modest enough home compared with Conor's own manor, and yet he could see that Dawson and his daughter had never wondered where their next meal was coming from. The building had two stories—that window on the upper floor belonged to Astrid, he knew—and was built of stone. It would have been warm all year long inside.

It must have come as a real shock for Dawson to find himself facing severe financial difficulties, he realized. He's never had serious money problems in his life before. No wonder he panicked.

He tried again to clear his head. It would do no good to go into this meeting feeling sorry for Dawson. He needed to be firm, to insist on the things he wanted if this marriage was going to work out.

I need to meet Astrid. That's step one. And if everything people say about this man is true, he's not going to be eager to expose his daughter to me without an agreement

firmly in place.

Well, he would just have to find a way to deal with that. If he wanted Conor to marry Astrid, at some point the two would have to meet. And surely, it's better that we have our first meeting in Dawson's presence, before any paperwork has been signed?

Who could say? There was no telling how another man would feel.

He turned to the footman driving his carriage. "Return for me in one hour," he said. "If I'm not standing here when you get back, you can go on to the manor." If I need to leave before the hour's up, I'll just walk home.

The footman nodded. "Yes, My Lord." He cracked the whip and drove off, leaving Conor standing in front of Tobias Dawson's home with his nerves twanging.

Trying to appear as if he were the very soul of composition, Conor strode up the path to the front door and knocked.

There was no answer.

He waited a suitable period of time, then knocked again.

This time, the door opened. There stood Dawson, his hair in disarray and his eyes wide. He looked as though he hadn't slept a minute since the last time Conor had seen him. For a moment, Conor felt sorry for the man.

That was a habit he really needed to break himself of.

"Lord Middleborough!" Dawson said, his voice practically a gasp. "You've come! I was beginning to think—but you've come after all. Are you here to give your answer?"

“I’m here to discuss your offer,” Conor said.

“I thought you had planned to send for me,” Dawson said. “I had assumed we would be discussing the matter at The Arc.”

“I decided it made more sense to come to your home,” Conor said, noting that the man had yet to invite him in. “Is that acceptable to you?”

“I...of course, but...”

“But what?”

“My daughter is here,” Dawson said. “And this is a matter best discussed between men, without her presence. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Conor said. “If I am to marry your daughter, I’ll have to meet her.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Dawson paled. “You want to meet her here? Now?”

“That’s what I want to discuss with you,” Conor said. “Perhaps we could go inside?”

“Oh,” Dawson said. “Oh, yes. Of course. I apologize, My Lord.” He stepped back, admitting Conor into the house. “I’m afraid it’s a bit untidy. Had I known you were coming, I would have—” He trailed off, perhaps unsure of exactly what he would have done to prepare for the arrival of an earl in his home.

“Not to worry,” Conor said easily. “Is there a place we might sit down and discuss the matter at hand?”

“Come into my study,” Dawson suggested.

Conor followed Dawson down a dimly lit hall and into a small room lined with bookshelves. Dawson lit several candles, then took a seat at a large oak desk, indicating that Conor should sit opposite him. He shifted several books out of the way, then leaned across the desk.

“I assume you are considering taking me up on my offer,” he said. “Or you would have had no need to come here.”

Conor nodded. “I am considering it,” he said. “But I have some stipulations.”

Dawson nodded wearily. “You’d better tell me,” he said. “Let’s see whether or not we can come to an agreement.”

Chapter 9

Astrid knew she ought to stay in her room and wait for her father to let her know what was going on. That was what he would have told her to do, if she had asked him.

But she wasn't about to ask.

She crept from her room at the sound of the knock on the door and stood on the landing, listening as her father addressed the visitor. The name, when he spoke it, struck her like a slap.

Lord Middleborough.

He's here. He's come to give Father his answer. Suddenly, it all felt so real. What would happen? Would he be taking her away with him this very day?

That couldn't be how it worked. Surely, she would be given some time, at least, before being sent to his home. Some time to prepare. Some time to say goodbye to her old life.

And there will have to be a wedding, she reminded herself. We'll need time to plan that. Her racing heart began to slow. No, she probably was not going to be taken away today. She would probably have some time.

Or maybe he came here to refuse Father's offer. That was certainly possible. Her father hadn't exactly sounded happy to see the man. Maybe his machinations were about to be thwarted. Maybe Lord Middleborough was telling him no.

I need to know more. I need to find out what's going on down there.

She heard the two of them moving toward her father's study and crept down the stairs, careful not to make a sound. She was able to catch a glimpse of them as they disappeared down the hall and into the study.

Lord Middleborough was tall, several inches taller than her father. He had a shock of red hair, and she could tell by his build that he was probably very strong. A little thrill ran through her, and Astrid wasn't sure if the feeling was fear or something else.

The door to the study closed behind the two men.

But Astrid wouldn't be so easily thwarted. She pulled on her shoes and left the house through the back door, the one that opened onto their private garden.

The garden had been her father's idea—a way for Astrid to spend time out of doors without having to risk being seen by the public. The high walls around the little patch of land protected her from prying eyes. As a child she had explored here, gathering wildflowers and collecting pretty rocks. Now it served as a quiet place to read, a place of reflection and sanctuary when she wanted to get out of the house.

But the garden had another purpose too, one Astrid felt sure her father had never considered the fact that she could see through the window of his study from here. Ordinarily, she never peeked—she had no reason to—but today she wanted to know exactly what was going on in that room.

She crept to the window, trying to stay quiet, and crouched down below it. Then, slowly and carefully, she raised her eyes above the level of the sill to see through the glass.

The first thing that caught her attention was Lord Middleborough's face.

He was almost impossibly handsome. To begin with, he was young. She had

envisioned an older man, someone near her father's age, but this man couldn't have been much older than she was. His skin was clear, and his eyes shone, a bright green color that seemed to sparkle even through the window. A smattering of freckles lay across his cheeks like a constellation.

He was leaning in toward her father and speaking, and Astrid could tell, even without hearing what was being said, that Lord Middleborough had command of the conversation. His face was set. Her father, meanwhile, was shrinking away in his chair as though frightened or intimidated.

Whatever the Earl wants is what's going to happen, Astrid realized. My father can't stand up to him. She loved her father, but she knew that he was a weak man. Lord Middleborough would be able to get what he wanted, and probably without much effort.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Still she watched, waiting for a signal that would let her know what was being decided, what was being agreed upon.

Her greatest fear was that contracts would be signed, that when the men emerged from the study her fate would be sealed. But as time went on and no papers emerged, Astrid felt herself begin to relax. They're not ready, she thought. Whatever else is going on, they aren't ready to sign an agreement.

Which meant that nothing they said in there was permanent.

Astrid was momentarily relieved at the thought that she would have, at the very least, another chance to talk to her father before he signed her life away to this man. Lord Middleborough may have been stunning to look at, but the commanding expression on his face frightened her a little.

But before she could feel too much relief, her father reached a hand across the table to Lord Middleborough. The Earl took it, and the two men shook.

So, they did agree on something. Astrid felt chilled despite the warmth in the garden. What were they shaking on? Was the marriage contract just a formality at this point, then? Had they already settled all the terms?

A part of her ached to climb the garden wall and run away.

But that wouldn't solve anything, she reminded herself. I would still be leaving my home and my life behind me forever if I were to do that. And perhaps I wouldn't have to learn how to be a wife to an Earl, but I would have to live alone, without a home or

a source of income. That would be the harder road.

So then. She would wait.

And in the meantime, she would speak to her father. Maybe there was something she could yet do, some way to sway him. Some way to show him how wrong this decision was for her and how very afraid she was of its outcome.

Maybe.

She waited until the men left the study, then went back into the house, moving quietly toward the stairs that led back up to her bedroom, hoping that she wouldn't be caught.

But that hope was in vain. "Astrid," her father called to her.

She turned. He stood in the foyer, Lord Middleborough still by his side.

"Come here," he said.

She obeyed him unthinkingly, walking toward him and Lord Middleborough. "Father."

"Where have you been, Astrid?"

"I was in the garden," she answered honestly. She didn't believe he would suspect her of spying, and sure enough, his face remained undisturbed at her confession. He merely smiled, and then turned to Lord Middleborough.

"You must see Astrid's garden, My Lord," he said. "It's truly something to behold."

"Perhaps, on my return." The Earl searched Astrid's face as if he were looking for a

clue to something. She stared back at him and tried to keep the sudden anger she felt from showing. What right did he have to look atherlike that, as if she owed him some kind of answer? He was going to get everything he wanted from her without even trying.

“Astrid,” her father said, “This is Conor Foster, Earl of Middleborough.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, My Lord.” Even in the midst of this turmoil, Astrid wasn’t about to dishonor her father by forgetting her manners.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too,” the Earl said. “I look forward to getting to know you better.”

That raised a lot more questions than it answered, but Astrid couldn’t think what to say. She didn’t even know whether it would be appropriate to ask.

“I believe I hear my carriage,” the Earl said. “I’ll show myself out, Mr. Dawson.”

“Good day, My Lord,” Astrid’s father said.

Lord Middleborough disappeared through the front door. Astrid stood listening as the sound of his carriage on the cobblestones outside receded into the distance. Only when she was sure he was gone did she turn to face her father.

“You did it, then,” she said. “You made the agreement.”

But he surprised her. “No,” he said. “Not just yet. He’s expressed interest in you, Astrid, but he wants to get to know you better first, before making his decision.”

That made sense to Astrid. He was, after all, a nobleman, and she only a commoner. “I suppose he’s not that worried about the rumors surrounding him, then?” she

guessed.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“I’m not sure,” her father admitted. “He does seem to acknowledge that his reputation is a barrier to his being able to find a wife. But perhaps it doesn’t bother him as much as I thought it might.”

“What’s going to happen now?” she asked, feeling anxious.

“He’ll come for supper,” her father said. “The evening after tomorrow. He’ll dine with us, and you’ll do what you can to make a good impression. If he finds your company favorable, we’ll proceed with the arrangements.”

Astrid nodded slowly. She understood what her father wanted of her.

She also understood that she had a choice.

She could go along with his plan—be welcoming and charming when the Earl arrived and show him that she would make a good wife.

Or she could challenge him and give him cause to question her suitability.

She could behave badly at the supper her father had arranged.

To do so would go against her nature. All she wanted was to show respect for her father’s wishes, to bring him happiness. And if she thwarted his ambition, she knew that he would be displeased.

But she did have that choice available to her. She could not pretend it wasn’t there.

There's still a way out, she told herself, trying to feel some measure of calm. I don't have to marry him. I can still get myself out of it, if that's what I want to do.

What did she want to do?

She didn't know. The situation had become so complicated so quickly. And for some reason, she couldn't seem to get the vision of the Earl's handsome face and figure out of her mind. If I am to marry, there are far worse men out there than him, she thought. At least to look at.

But she knew nothing about who he was. All she knew was that he had a bad reputation. Her father thought that reputation was unearned. But what if he was wrong?

I suppose it's a good thing we're meeting face to face before a decision is made, she thought. I can get to know him while he's getting to know me. I can make a decision about him while he's making one about me.

But before she could consider going against what her father wanted, she needed more information.

"Father," she said.

"Yes?"

"Why do you want me to marry him?"

"Astrid, I've told you already," he said. "It's time for you to marry. You're a young lady of proper age, and a marriage with an Earl will help you ascend in society. You must trust me, as your father. This is what's best for you."

“But you’ve never said anything about marriage before,” she pointed out. “And you’ve certainly never said anything about marrying me to a nobleman. Something changed.”

“Astrid.”

“Tell me,” she pressed. “Tell me what’s changed. Tell me what’s different. I want to go into this with clear eyes, Father, and I deserve to know what’s motivating it.”

He sighed.

For a moment, she thought he was going to refuse.

Then he nodded. “I suppose you do have a right to know,” he said. “Come and sit with me in the study. I’ll tell you everything.”

Chapter 10

Astrid took her usual seat in her father’s study and watched him with wide eyes. She hadn’t been wrong to question things. There really was more to the story than she had initially been told.

But what could it be?

Her father loved her. He would never do anything that he didn’t think was in her best interests. Had something about her own best interests changed recently?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

She didn't think so. But Astrid had to admit that she was so rarely out of the house that it was impossible to realistically evaluate her own place in society. Maybe he was worried about the possibility of her never finding a husband. Maybe he had felt compelled to leap at the first opportunity that came along.

Was that something Astrid ought to worry about? She suddenly wondered. She had always taken for granted that she would marry someday. She felt taken aback by how quickly it was happening now, but she had assumed that at some point, it would happen.

But what if I was wrong in that assumption? she thought suddenly, anxiously. What if I'm not the sort of girl people want to marry? How could I know? I know nothing of the world, nothing of affairs between men and women. Perhaps the Earl is the only man who would be willing to consider me as a wife.

If that were true, Astrid would have to show him courtesy and charm when he came to supper. She wouldn't be able to afford the luxury of choice.

But...could that be true? Astrid had seen other women. She knew that she was pleasant enough to look at. She knew that she could be caring and kind. She could think of nothing about herself that would make a man resist marrying her on principle.

There's no point in trying to guess, she told herself firmly. I'll simply have to wait for Father to tell me what's going on.

And so, she sat back, regarded him, and waited.

It took a long time for her father to find words. He looked anxious and upset. She wanted to go to his side, to rest her hands on his shoulders and tell him not to fret. But she stayed where she was, afraid of breaking his concentration.

Finally, he looked up at her. “Do you remember what I told you about Lord Farnsworth?”

“The Baron,” she recalled. In truth, she had neglected to think about him for the past day or so. Even though she knew that her father’s financial standing was in jeopardy, and that whatever happened would affect her too, the impending marriage had seemed the more pressing of the two issues.

But now, for the first time, she connected them in her mind. Her father owed money to a Baron, and her hand had been promised to an Earl. “Did Lord Middleborough promise to pay Lord Farnsworth?” she asked. “Is he going to make the Baron go away?”

If that’s what’s going on here, she told herself. Then I’ll marry Lord Middleborough with no complaints. I’ll marry him with gratitude. If he saves my father from this awful predicament, I’ll never say a word against the man.

Her father sighed. “It’s something like that.”

“What is it exactly?” Astrid asked.

“Lord Middleborough runs a club in town,” her father said. “I’m in charge of his books. The club does good business, and of course, Lord Middleborough is an earl to boot. And so, when I was his monthly figures, I thought...”

Astrid frowned. What did this have to do with a marriage? “You thought what, Father?”

“You must try not to judge me too harshly,” he pleaded. “I did what I did for you, Astrid. I couldn’t bear the thought of you losing your home, being forced to live on the street or go to work as a servant.”

“What did you do, Father?” She was suddenly, inexplicably, frightened.

“I transferred a sum of money from Lord Middleborough’s accounts to my own,” her father said. “I used the money to pay off the Baron, so that he wouldn’t trouble us any further.”

It took Astrid a moment to understand what her father had said. The idea was so strange, so counter to the rigid, controlled nature of the man she knew. “Are you saying...did you steal from Lord Middleborough?”

Her father’s face colored. “It was the only way forward I could see,” he said quietly. “I needed the money.”

“I know you needed the money, but...” She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “I thought you were going to tell me he had given you a loan in exchange for my hand.”

Her father blinked. “That’s clever, Astrid. I should have thought of that. I should have asked for that.”

“You must not have thought very much about it at all,” she accused. “How could you steal from a nobleman, Father? Are you no better than a common bandit? Was that truly the best plan you could come up with?”

“It would have worked,” he pointed out. “If he hadn’t discovered the discrepancy in his books—”

“But you couldn’t possibly have believed he wouldn’t discover it,” she protested.

“After getting yourself into trouble with the Baron, your idea of a solution was to invite even more trouble, and this time with an Earl?”

“What happened with Lord Farnsworth was not my fault, Astrid.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said. “You were innocent. And I understood your reluctance to take your chances with the courts, knowing that they were likely to favor a nobleman’s testimony over yours. But to steal from Lord Middleborough...Father, you were innocent when this began, but now you’re guilty. You’ve committed a crime, and you would deserve to go to prison, if it came to that.”

“Don’t you speak to me that way,” he said, a bit sharply. “I’m still your father, Astrid.”

She bit back a retort. She had never felt angrier in her life. She had feared for him, pitied him, when she had learned what he was going through with Lord Farnsworth. But this was different. This was trouble he had brought upon himself.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

The original topic of conversation nudged its way back into her mind. She was afraid to ask the question, but she had to know. “Father,” she said. “What does this have to do with my marriage?”

He sighed. “Lord Middleborough promised not to involve the law when I offered him your hand in exchange.”

“What?” She was horrified.

“The Baron is satisfied,” he said hastily. “He has the payout he wanted. He’ll leave us alone now. And once you are wed to Lord Middleborough, he’ll forgive my theft. So everything will be all right.”

“You traded me,” she said. “You used me as a pawn to get yourself out of trouble with the law.”

“Astrid, you said yourself that it would have been a good idea to offer the man your hand in exchange for a loan. This is no different, really, is it?”

“It’s completely different!” How could he not see that? “It’s the difference between a bargain between equal parties, where terms can be negotiated, and the act of a desperate man trying to keep himself out of trouble. You sacrificed me to stay out of prison.”

“I didn’t sacrifice you,” he protested. “I would never do something like that. Lord Middleborough is a good man and a good match, and you’ll be happy and taken care of married to him. He’s someone I might have considered for you even if

circumstances were different.”

“But it wouldn’t be rushed like this if circumstances were different,” she said. “Would it? You would have given us the chance to get to know each other before coming to an agreement. You would have asked me. You would have cared how I felt about it.”

“I’m your father,” he said again, but the sentiment sounded weaker than before. “I have the right to make these decisions on your behalf, Astrid.”

She sighed. “I shouldn’t be surprised, should I? This is what you’ve done all my life.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve always kept me locked up in this house. You’ve always felt you knew best and refused to consider what I might want if it contradicted what you felt I should do. I don’t know why I thought my marriage would be any different. I don’t know why I let myself believe that this was the one decision in my life that I would be permitted to be involved in.”

“He’s a good man, Astrid.”

“There are terrible rumors about him. You said so yourself.”

“The rumors about him are untrue.”

“You don’t know that. If people are saying things, there must be a reason for it.” Astrid wasn’t sure whether or not she truly believed that, but she had to admit that the idea of a man with a bad reputation frightened her a little.

“When he comes to supper,” her father said. “You’re to be kind and welcoming to

him. I don't want to hear any of this nonsense on that occasion."

Astrid got to her feet. "I'd like to be excused to my room, please."

"Did you hear what I said, Astrid?"

"Of course I heard what you said," Astrid said. "And now I'd like to be excused. I have quite a lot to think about."

"I'll expect to see you down here in a few hours for our evening meal," her father said.

She gave him no reply, merely turned and walked away toward the stairs that led to her bedroom.

Once she had reached her private sanctuary, she lay back on her bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to untangle her thoughts.

She was furious with her father for stooping to steal from the Earl. She was outraged that he would even consider trading her to keep himself out of trouble. She had thought so much better of him, and she was appalled to see this flaw in him.

But he was still her father. She loved him. She was devoted to him. And, as angry as she was, she knew she would do whatever it took to protect him from the terrible fate he would no doubt face if she refused to marry the Earl.

I can't let that man set the law on my father, she thought. If this is the only way I have of keeping him safe, then this is what I'm going to have to do.

She wondered what kind of man the Earl was. Was his nature forgiving, that he was willing to overlook her father's crime? Or was he an opportunist, someone who had

taken advantage of her father's vulnerability to get something for himself?

I'll have to try to learn that about him when he comes to supper, she thought.

She knew now that there was no way she could be cruel or hostile when Lord Middleborough came to dine with them. That choice had been stripped from her. She couldn't afford to run him off like that. She had to try to charm him, as her father had said.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

But she would still consider the meal an opportunity. It wasn't just a chance for the Earl to get to know her and to decide whether or not he wished to marry her. It was a chance for her to get to know him.

Maybe I can't choose not to marry him. But I can take the time to learn more about him, so at least I won't be going into the marriage blind.

Feeling somewhat reassured, she went to her window seat and pressed her hands to the glass, looking out at the city below.

This room had been her cage. But it had also been her place of safety. It had been her home.

Was she ready to leave that safety behind?

She had no idea.

Chapter 11

By the following evening, Astrid had organized her thoughts. She had spent the day studiously reminding herself of the consequences that would befall her father if she failed to cooperate tonight, telling herself over and over that she couldn't do anything to make the Earl withdraw whatever interest he might have had in her.

This was a game, and she had to play it.

The knock at the door came precisely at the hour. He's punctual. That could be a

feature or a flaw. It could mean he respected his hosts' time, or it could simply mean that he was so strict and exacting that even one minute either way seemed an unpardonable infraction to him.

She realized that even though she had no options here, she wasn't going to be able to help passing judgment on him. By the end of the night, she was sure, she would have come to some sort of conclusion as to whether or not he was the right man for her.

Not that she had anything to compare him to. This would be so much easier if I had had the chance to meet other men in my life, she thought ruefully. I would feel more prepared if I knew what else was out there.

Maybe she wouldn't like him, but he would be a kind person.

More frightening still, maybe she would decide she did like him without realizing that he was cruel.

No. I can tell the difference between kindness and cruelty. It doesn't matter that I have no experience with other men, that I've never been courted. I know when someone is treating me well and when they aren't.

She stood in the foyer and waited as her father answered the door and ushered Lord Middleborough into their home. "Welcome, My Lord," he said, bowing so low that Astrid was surprised he didn't fall over. She hated to see her father be so obsequious.

"Thank you for inviting me, Mr. Dawson," Lord Middleborough said. "I appreciate your hospitality."

"Not at all."

"And of course, I've met your lovely daughter," the Earl said, turning a searching

gaze on Astrid.

All thought of what she ought to say or do fled Astrid's head. Her breath left her. Had she forgotten how handsome he was? It wasn't as if she hadn't thought of his angular face and bright green eyes since the last time she had seen him. In fact, her mind had returned several times to that image.

But seeing him in person was different.

He was breathtaking. Captivating. He was like a piece of artwork. And the way he stared at Astrid, his eyes drinking her in, made her feel like a piece of artwork. It was enough to make her forget all her reservations about what was to follow.

And then he turned away from her.

"I suppose we should begin our supper?" he asked.

Astrid's father nodded. "Please, come with me." He turned and led the way into the dining room. "We're having pheasant," he said, speaking over his shoulder. "I hope that appeals to you, Lord Middleborough?"

"Pheasant is fine," the Earl said indifferently.

Astrid took her seat at the table, and her father sat at the head. Lord Middleborough sat across from Astrid. His back was absolutely straight, his hands tucked neatly in his lap. He looked as if he had been carved from stone.

Is he feeling uncomfortable? Astrid wondered. Or is this how members of the ton sit at mealtimes? As his wife, will I be expected to sit like a tin soldier too? She didn't know if she could do it. She had been raised with proper table manners, of course, and she was mindful of them, but she had never been afraid to move while at the table

before.

Perhaps he just feels awkward, she thought. It must be a frightening thing for him too, sitting down with the man whose daughter he might eventually marry.

What if he was so uncomfortable that he decided to leave?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Did you have a pleasant journey from your manor, Lord Middleborough?” she forced herself to ask. She had promised herself that she would do this—try hard, make an effort, be charming so that her father would stay out of trouble.

He glanced at her as though surprised she was still in the room. “Fine,” he said stiffly.

Astrid blinked. That was kind of rude. She’d been trying to make conversation, and she would have expected him to respond in kind. But he seemed only to want to brush her off.

Astrid’s father removed the cover from the dish of pheasant on the table and carefully set about serving the others. “This is a fine bird,” he said. “Astrid’s favorite, as a matter of fact.”

“Hmm,” the Earl said.

Astrid’s father glanced at her uncertainly and said no more.

They ate in silence for several minutes. Astrid glanced up from time to time and noticed that the Earl was watching her. Actually, he was staring more than watching, conducting a study of her as if she were a fascinating subject.

She felt like a piece of artwork again.

But this time, it didn’t make her feel beautiful and magnificent, the way it had in the foyer. This time, it made her feel like an object.

What is wrong with him?she thought suddenly.I thought he was coming here to talk to me. I thought we were going to get to know each other. He's hardly said two words to me since he arrived. Is he just going to stare at me all night?

Maybe he thought he was better than she was. Her stomach turned over at the thought. It was true that he was a lord and she was a commoner, but she was still a person. If she married him and went to his house, would she always be treated as though she didn't matter?

She remembered, then, what her father had said about him. He had a bad reputation.Well, it's not very hard to see why. He doesn't seem to have any social skills. Or if he does, he's clearly decided not to waste them on the likes of me.

She set down her fork and met his gaze. "What did you come here to talk about, Lord Middleborough?"

"Astrid!" her father said.

The Earl looked surprised. "I beg your pardon?" he asked, setting his own fork down on his plate.

Astrid ignored his response and looked over at her father instead. "He's here to decide whether he finds my company favorable. That's what you told me. You said he was here to decide whether or not he wanted to marry me."

"Astrid, please, your manners," her father hissed, as if hoping he could communicate the message to her without Lord Middleborough noticing somehow. The Earl himself was still watching her bemusedly.

But Astrid didn't think she had done anything that reflected poor manners.The Earl came here wanting to talk. If he wants to discuss something, we should do it. If he

wants to know what I am like as a conversationalist, he should make conversation with me. And if he isn't going to start us off, I'll have to do it. That's just logic.

She turned from her father back to Lord Middleborough. "I was intrigued by the opportunity to get to know you as well, My Lord," she told him. "I think that was a wise decision on your part, and one we should take advantage of."

"Well."

"Well, what?" she pressed him.

"Well, that's why I'm here."

"And yet you hardly speak to me?"

"Astrid!" her father moaned.

He raised his eyebrows. "You dare speak to me so?"

He didn't sound offended, merely surprised, and Astrid allowed that to bolster her. "Should I fear speaking to you?" she asked. "If we marry, will I need to fear conversation with my husband?"

Her father made a choking noise. Astrid felt sorry—she knew she was upsetting him. But she felt somehow unable to stop now that she had started. And that strange, magnetic twinkle had returned to the Earl's eye. I don't think he's offended by my words. I think he might actually find this amusing.

When he spoke again, his voice was quiet, measured. Thoughtful. "No," he said. "If we marry, Miss Dawson, you will never have to fear me for any reason."

“Then why are you surprised?” she asked. “Why do you question the way I spoke to you?”

“There are few people who would do so,” he said. “Few members of the ton would confront me that way, and fewer commoners.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Do you think I should hold my tongue because I wasn’t born with a title, My Lord?” she asked him.

“No,” he said. “I’m merely surprised that you chose not to.”

“Well, I’m surprised that you’re sitting there as if you have nothing to say to me, when we both know the reason you came was so that you and I could learn more about each other. What did you want to know?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose it’s best we get down to business. And I’m sure you’d appreciate that too, Mr. Dawson.” He threw a sideways glance toward Astrid’s father, who seemed to shrink under his gaze.

Astrid’s words died in her mouth. Was he threatening her father? He had just said that she would never have anything to fear from him...but he’d said nothing about her father. Was it possible, even now, that Lord Middleborough would change his mind and would choose to send Tobias Dawson to prison for stealing?

Get down to business. As if the only thing they were doing here was conducting negotiations. Making a deal for Astrid’s life, for her future.

And really, wasn’t that the case?

My life for my father’s. That was the deal. That was the agreement. He would go free, and she would sign herself over to Lord Middleborough. Except that she wouldn’t be the one doing the signing. Her father was signing her life away in order to reclaim his own.

He had committed a crime. She had done nothing.

For just a moment, she allowed the anger to flare up inside her again.

Then she suppressed the feeling. Her father, if this went the wrong way, would spend his life behind bars. She would spend her life in the manor of a wealthy Earl. The two things could not be compared.

Besides, she was his daughter. She owed him everything. Of course, she would be the one to make the sacrifice, no matter what the stakes.

“What did you come here to learn about me, My Lord?” she asked the Earl now. “I know there was something you wanted to know. Something that would make a difference to you, one way or the other. What was it?”

He shook his head slowly. “You continue to astound me, Astrid Dawson,” he said. “You’re so forward. Do you even want to marry me?”

Astrid felt as if her throat was closing.

No.

I wasn’t going to do this. I wasn’t going to be temperamental. I wasn’t going to scare him off. I told myself over and over that I was going to be charming, easy to get along with, a pleasure to talk to. I meant to delight him.

I failed.

He’s going to withdraw his interest. He’s going to punish my father, and I’ll have failed my family.

Both men were looking at her, waiting for her to say something. And Astrid remembered there had been a question.

“Yes,” she said faintly. “Yes, My Lord, I want to marry you. Of course, I do. I beg your forgiveness. I’m only a commoner, and not well educated in cordialities. But I learn quickly, My Lord. Forgive my impulsiveness. It’s a big day for me, and I confess I’m nervous. Please do not let me bring disgrace upon my father.”

With bated breath, she waited for his answer.

Chapter 12

He was captivated by her. Stunned.

She wasn’t frightened of him at all. That much was obvious. He felt ridiculous, now, for ever having worried about it. She had shown no fear at all from the moment he had walked in the door, and only now could he see any hesitation on her face.

She was worried she had offended him.

But even when she had explicitly asked him whether she ought to be afraid of him, she hadn’t meant it. There had been no hesitation in her.

She was bold.

He liked that.

Or perhaps it’s just that I liked her already, he thought. Perhaps it’s just that I’ve admired her for so long. Maybe anything she did would have seemed charming. Maybe if another young woman had acted the way she has today, I would have been offended.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

She was staring at her hands now, away from him. It was as if she was afraid to look at him.

But somehow, Conor didn't think she was afraid even now.

He turned to Tobias Dawson. "Your daughter is unusual," he said, trying hard not to give anything away. He was enjoying seeing the man squirm. After all, Dawson had stolen from him. Conor didn't want to punish him too severely, but neither did he want him to escape with no consequences at all.

"My Lord," Dawson said. "I promise you, my daughter has impeccable manners. She's being difficult tonight to punish me. When I am removed from the picture, she will be much easier to tame."

Conor shook his head. "I'm not sure a tame wife is what I want," he said.

Astrid's head jerked up.

She was worried. Conor felt bad, now, for teasing out the truth. He decided to end their suspense. "Miss Dawson," he said, "I find you lovely and well spoken. It would be my honor to take you as my wife."

Dawson's whole body deflated with obvious relief, but Astrid didn't say a word. She inclined her head slightly. Conor couldn't tell if the gesture was intended as a nod or a bow.

"Shall we sign the paperwork, then?" Dawson asked, suddenly all business. He got to

his feet.

“Perhaps we ought to finish our meal first,” Conor suggested. “I would hate to see fine pheasant go to waste. And Miss Dawson, you’ve hardly touched yours.” In truth, he was concerned that her failure to eat represented a case of nerves. He would have felt better if she had finished her dinner.

But Astrid shook her head. “I’m finished,” she said quietly. “Might I be excused, Father? You and Lord Middleborough don’t need me anymore tonight, I believe?”

“Is that all right with you, My Lord?” Dawson asked.

Something twisted Astrid’s face. Conor got the feeling she was wishing her father hadn’t asked his permission.

It made what he had to do next that much more difficult.

“I’d like it if you would stay,” he said quietly. It was a hard thing to say, knowing that he would be obeyed, knowing that his request would cause friction between Astrid and her father. A part of him wished he could just allow her to be sent away, when it was so clearly what she wanted.

But why was that what she wanted?

Her whole demeanor had changed when he had suggested they might not marry. She hadn’t simply clarified that she would like to marry him, as he had expected. She had shut down. She had ceased to be the bold girl who had captivated him with the way she spoke.

It was the only time in the entire evening, thus far, that he had actually believed she was frightened.

She was afraid, but not of marrying him. Of displeasing him. Why?

The answer was obvious. She's afraid of what will become of her father if I don't find favor with her. She's afraid he will be punished for his crime.

Conor felt terribly about that. He had wanted Tobias Dawson to feel fear, but he had never wanted that for Astrid. If only there was a way to communicate to her that her father wasn't at any risk and wouldn't be punished if the marriage didn't go forward.

The only thing he could think of was to keep her at the table, to continue the meal they'd been having together. Maybe her comfort with him would increase, given a little more time.

Astrid sat slowly back down in her chair. She looked edgy now, uncomfortable, as if she had been caught trying to escape, and Conor felt worse. I keep making her feel badly.

He cleared his throat and tried to find something helpful to say. "I enjoy your company, Miss Dawson," he said at last.

"Yes, My Lord," she murmured.

What was wrong with her? Had he frightened her after all? He felt his stomach drop. He had been trying so hard not to intimidate the poor girl, knowing as he did that she was at a disadvantage.

Then her gaze darted up to him.

It was the briefest of glances, but it was full of meaning. There was fire in her eyes. Anger. She resented being ordered to stay, and she wasn't afraid to let him know it.

He definitely should have felt insulted. He was very unused to commoners standing up to him, even to this degree. And though women tended to keep their distance, they were always respectful of him.

But Astrid was different.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

She doesn't like me, he thought. And to his surprise, that didn't offend him at all. It impressed him.

He could hardly tear his eyes away from her as he returned to his pheasant. He felt as though he was studying the most intricate painting he had ever seen, picking out the most minute details rendered by the artist. She was a masterpiece.

The moment the food was finished, Astrid got abruptly to her feet and began to gather the plates. Conor allowed her to take his away without a struggle, even though he had a few bites remaining. He looked over his shoulder, watching her as she left.

She didn't look back at him.

There was something so powerful and decisive about her body language. Even when she shied away from him, it was obvious that it was an act. She was fearless.

How could he ever have thought she might be afraid of him?

Tobias Dawson now got to his feet. "Shall we retire to my office?" he asked. He couldn't disguise the eagerness on his face, and Conor felt momentarily disgusted with the man. The sooner he signed away his daughter, the sooner he would be assured of his own safety from the law.

He always wanted this marriage, Conor thought. For him, this was never about making sure his daughter was comfortable or ensuring that I would treat her well once we were wed.

It was an appalling thought. How could he care so little about his own daughter's happiness? How could he put his own well-being first to such an extravagant degree?

He hardly knows me. He's getting lucky, because I know I'll treat her well. But he can't know that for sure. How can he be so eager to sign this contract?

It was shocking, and yet somehow, he wasn't even surprised.

Tobias Dawson was a greedy, self-centered man. It took a greedy, self-centered man to attempt to solve his problems, no matter how serious they were, by stealing from another. He had known Dawson was like this as soon as he had discovered the problem with his books.

But he couldn't believe Dawson's cold heartedness extended to his daughter.

He was so protective of her. That was widely known. Astrid Dawson never left her father's house. She knew few people, and few people knew her.

Conor had assumed it had something to do with the death of Dawson's wife. It made sense to him that a man would keep his daughter close after losing her mother.

But now he wondered. Maybe the man was just controlling. Maybe he wanted to rule over his daughter's life, manage all her decisions, keep her from doing anything independently.

That would explain why he's not hesitating to hand her over to me. He probably always assumed that one day he would marry her off without taking her input under consideration.

No. Probably it was some combination of both factors. Tobias Dawson certainly loved his daughter. One had only to look at the way he had broken down when trying

to explain his theft. He had resorted to extreme action for her sake.

But at the same time, he wasn't acting thoughtfully or judiciously. He is a controlling man, Conor thought. He's exercising such tight control because he thinks he knows best and because he wants the best for her. But he is a controlling man.

With one last glance over his shoulder at Astrid, he turned and followed Dawson into the study where they had met just the previous day. Conor took the same seat he'd occupied then. Dawson pattered around the room a little before finding his own seat, and Conor suspected he was trying to establish a dominant role in the upcoming negotiations.

I'm right about him. He's an extremely controlling person.

Finally, Dawson sat, and the paperwork was produced. Both men signed.

"This clause here," Dawson said as Conor scrawled his name. "Indicates that no legal action will be pursued regarding the unfortunate incident with your ledger."

Conor raised an eyebrow. "Unfortunate incident? Is that what we're calling it now?"

"I don't wish to have this held over my head for the rest of my life, My Lord," Dawson said, his voice tight. "We made an agreement as gentlemen. My daughter for your pardon. I have held up my end of the bargain."

Conor nodded slowly. "So you have. Well, you needn't worry. I'm as good as my word. I won't be pursuing any legal action against you, just as we discussed."

Dawson relaxed visibly. "I'm very glad to hear you don't intend to go back on your promise," he said. "I knew you were an honorable man, Lord Middleborough. I knew it when I offered you my daughter's hand. She's a lucky young woman."

“Should we discuss the wedding?” Conor asked.

“I leave it to you to make the arrangements,” Dawson said. He spoke as though he was being generous, but Conor heard the implication—I leave it to you to pay for the wedding.

He would have paid for it anyway. He was Earl of Middleborough, and Astrid was a commoner. But he was offended, nonetheless. He got to his feet. “I suppose we’re done here, then.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Dawson extended his hand, and Conor shook it. “A pleasure doing business with you, My Lord,” Dawson said.

“I’ll show myself out,” Conor said.

On the way to the foyer, he passed the kitchen. Astrid was still in there, up to her elbows in dishwater, and as she heard him pass, she turned to look at him.

“It’s done then, My Lord?” she asked, her voice inscrutable.

He nodded. “It is.”

She nodded back and returned to her dishes.

He regarded her quietly for a few moments, wishing he knew what was going on in her head. She wasn’t afraid of him. That concern had been laid to rest by today’s meeting. And he no longer felt he would be doing something wrong by marrying her.

But did she actually want to be his wife?

He couldn’t say.

She had said she did. But her body language seemed to be saying something different.

He wouldn’t see her again until the wedding. He would have to hope that on that life-changing day, he would be able to understand her a little better.

Chapter 13

“Astrid?” a soft voice said from behind her.

Astrid turned. The girl entering the room was a few years younger than she herself was, probably eighteen or nineteen. She was whip thin, with dull brown hair pinned up under a bonnet, and she wore a patterned dress of simple cotton.

Standing next to her, Astrid felt a little ridiculous.

Her own dress was so over the top that Astrid couldn't believe it. She was afraid to rest her hands on the bodice, for fear of staining it or causing damage to it in some way. She had been standing for what felt like hours with her arms held slightly away from her body, waiting for someone to come and get her.

The girl flitted across the room. “I'm Betsy, My Lady,” she said. “Lord Middleborough has hired me to be your lady's maid when you move to the manor, and he sent me along to help you prepare now.”

“Oh,” Astrid said, not sure what she was supposed to say to that. She had never had a maid before. “I'm not a lady,” she told Betsy. “You can call me Astrid.”

“Oh, no, My Lady, I really couldn't.”

“Please, I'd prefer it.”

But Betsy was shaking her head fearfully, and Astrid realized she was getting them off on the wrong foot. “All right,” she conceded. “I suppose I'll be a lady soon enough.”

Relief crossed Betsy's face. “Yes, My Lady,” she agreed. “How can I help you

prepare?”

“I...can you tie the back of my dress?” Astrid asked. She had been struggling for the past several minutes with the ties, trying to figure out how she was going to manage them by herself. She had no gowns in her own wardrobe that tied like this. All her garments were simple and could slip over her head.

For a moment, she felt envious of Betsy’s plain cotton dress.

“It’s a lovely wedding gown,” Betsy said, stepping behind Astrid. Astrid felt nimble fingers begin to tighten the bodice of her gown. “I assume it was custom made for you, My Lady?”

“It was,” Astrid agreed. “Although Lord Middleborough and the seamstresses did most of the work. I just stood there like a dummy while they fitted cloth to me.”

“Well, you look lovely.” Betsy stepped back. “There. You’re a picture, My Lady.”

“How many wedding guests are out there?” Astrid asked. She was feeling nervous. She woke up that way, butterflies clamoring in her stomach. Today was the day she would leave her father’s house. Today was the day she would move to a place she had never seen before.

Middleborough Manor.

She thought it sounded like a very cold, intimidating place. She pictured empty stone halls that produced echoes when she walked through them. She imagined whole days going by without the sight of another person.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

She had not expected to have a lady's maid, though, and focusing on Betsy made her feel a little more relaxed. Perhaps she would have a friend in her frightening new home.

"It's not a very big party," Betsy said. "Lord Middleborough and some of his friends. Your father, of course. And some other members of the ton from around the region. But it looks as though Lord Middleborough wanted to keep things small."

That's a blessing. It was exactly what Astrid would have wanted too, if anybody had asked her.

Of course, nobody had asked her.

Hardly anybody's asked me what I want since this whole mess began.

And yet, would she have changed anything? If everything had stopped in its tracks right now and Lord Middleborough had come to her and asked her exactly what she wanted, would she have made any alterations to what was about to happen?

I do want to marry him. I want to keep his attention away from my father, and from the crime my father committed. If a wedding is the way to do that, then that's what I want, and I'm happy to be his wife.

And I want the wedding to be small. I don't want too many people to witness what's happening. Because I'm no fool. I know there will be questions. Why is the Earl marrying the solicitor's daughter?

Some people—the kinder, more generous ones—might assume that the Earl had merely taken a fancy to her. She supposed even these would see her as an opportunist, a social climber—but that probably couldn't be avoided. She could live with that.

But others would see her differently.

Her father had told her about the rumors that circulated about Lord Middleborough. Noblewomen stay away from him, he had said. Men don't trust him with their daughters.

People might think something untoward had taken place between Astrid and Lord Middleborough, and that she was now expecting his child.

And that would be a shameful thing.

It doesn't matter, she reminded herself. It will become obvious all too quickly that I'm not expecting any child at all. Any gossip about her that was started by today's wedding would be put to rest when she didn't give birth in nine months' time. Her virtue would once again be above reproach.

There was another possibility, and that was that people would guess the true reason for today's wedding. She wouldn't have been surprised if some of the guests at least came close to figuring it out.

I'm sure some of them know my father, she thought. I love him more than anything, but he is not a strong man, and I'm sure some of the wedding guests know it. And what if Lord Farnsworth has told the rest of them about his dealings with Father?

If that had happened, people would know that her father had been in financial trouble.

It wouldn't take very much to put the pieces together. He had been in financial trouble, and now his daughter was marrying an earl.

If anyone figured out what the true story was, Astrid's sacrifice might end up being of no help at all to her father. She would keep him out of prison, it was true, but his reputation would be ruined. People would know that he had committed some manner of infraction and traded away his daughter's hand to exonerate himself.

What if this is all for nothing? What if I spend my life in Middleborough Manor, and it doesn't help Father at all?

"My Lady?" Betsy asked.

Astrid shook her head, trying to clear it. "I apologize, Betsy," she said. "I have a lot on my mind today."

"It must be a very exciting day for you," Betsy said with a smile. "If it please you, My Lady, I'm to take you to the ceremony now. Lord Middleborough is waiting."

My whole new life is waiting, in other words.

For a moment, Astrid wanted to sit down and cry. Once she left this room, she would never be the same again. She would stop being her father's daughter, and she would become Lord Middleborough's wife.

She steeled herself. "All right," she said to Betsy. "Let's go."

* * *

The ceremony itself passed in a blur. Astrid felt as though she was sleepwalking, although she came back to herself a bit in the moment when she was pronounced

Lord Middleborough's wife. The kiss they shared was chaste, hardly more than a performance for the onlookers, and for that Astrid was thankful.

Lord Middleborough was an attractive man. That much could not be denied. And she found herself weak kneed and cotton headed in his presence. But she was far from comfortable with him, and she didn't feel ready to share a kiss with the man.

Of course, we'll soon be sharing much more than that. The thought was dark and anxiety inducing. She didn't want to imagine the duties she would be called upon to fulfill as his wife when they returned to the manor. She wasn't ready for that.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

So, she lost herself in the details of the party that had been arranged to celebrate their wedding. It, too, was small, and Astrid found that the small guest list worked against her in a way she had not anticipated. It was impossible to get lost in the crowd.

Wherever she went, whatever she did, she felt scrutinized.

Groups of ladies clustered together, heads bent toward each other, eyes on Astrid. What are they saying about me? she wondered nervously, shuffling through the fears she'd had about what people would think of her at her wedding. Do they think I'm with child? Do they know I'm buying my father out of legal trouble?

There was no way of knowing, and it tormented her.

Her one comfort was that Lord Middleborough seemed to be the object of just as much gossip as Astrid was. There were clusters of people looking at him as they talked, too.

But Lord Middleborough seemed not to care. Astrid thought it was possible he might not even have noticed.

He led her onto the dance floor for a turn, keeping his eyes fixed on something far above her head as they danced. Astrid did her job, going through the motions of the dance with him, but she felt bereft. She had imagined this moment in her life, her wedding day, her first dance in the arms of her husband.

It had never been like this.

She felt as though he didn't care who he danced with, or even that he danced. He was doing what was expected of him, nothing more. When the song came to an end, he kissed her hand and accepted that of a lady in a yellow gown, leaving Astrid alone on the dance floor.

A tap came on her shoulder. She turned and found herself face to face with a well-dressed man of about her own age with thick dark hair and smiling eyes.

"May I have this dance?" the man asked.

"Certainly, My Lord." Anything was better than standing here alone on the dance floor.

He swept her into his arms as the song began. "Oh, I'm not a lord," he said with a little laugh. "I'm a commoner, like yourself. Well, like you were until today, I mean!"

"What brings you to the wedding?" She was surprised. She had thought that she and her father were the only commoners here, apart from the servants.

"I own a stake in Lord Middleborough's gentlemen's club," the man said. "My name is Henry Wilson."

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

"And you. He speaks quite highly of you, you know."

"Does he?" Astrid wasn't sure what to make of that. "I'm surprised he speaks of me at all," she managed.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Wilson said with a laugh. "He admires you quite a lot, My Lady. He speaks of your beauty and wit."

I'm not a lady, she itched to say again, but she held herself back. She didn't want to change the subject. "When did he speak to you of me?" she asked, curiosity overwhelming her.

"Many times!" Mr. Wilson said. "He said you were lovely, and I must say, he had that exactly right. You may not be of noble birth, Lady Middleborough, but you will fit right in among them, I have no doubt."

Lady Middleborough. It was the first time anyone had referred to Astrid by her new name, and it sent a shiver down her spine. That's who I am now.

And her husband had told his business partner that she was lovely? And witty?

Astrid couldn't believe it. It was hard to imagine Lord Middleborough speaking that way of anybody, to anybody. He simply wasn't the kind of man to rhapsodize.

Mr. Wilson is just being polite.

But she couldn't help glancing over her shoulder toward her new husband, still dancing with the lady in the yellow gown.

Was it possible that Mr. Wilson was reporting the truth?

Could Lord Middleborough really think those things of her? Was it possible he had a genuine interest in Astrid Dawson?

Chapter 14

It was surreal to be the wife of an earl.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Only a day had passed since the wedding, and already Astrid had lost count of the My Ladys. It still felt wrong to hear herself addressed that way, and she still had to suppress the instinct to correct people who used her title. But she was training herself, doing her best to break the habit.

Betsy had been an absolute godsend. She had spent the morning at the Dawson residence, helping Astrid to pack up all her things so that they could be transported to the manor. Lord Middleborough had offered to send his servants to do the whole job, but Astrid had declined.

She wanted a hand in this. She wanted to touch all of her possessions as she moved them from their old home to their new one. There was something significant about that, although she couldn't have articulated what it was.

She unwrapped her hand mirror carefully in a length of fabric and placed it on her new vanity. "You don't need to do that," she called to Betsy.

The girl was dusting the bedposts. "I should do something to help, My Lady," she protested. "You said you didn't want me to unpack."

"Perhaps you could just talk to me," Astrid suggested. "That would be helpful."

"That's all?" Betsy asked. "Just talk?"

"I've never had anyone clean up for me before," Astrid explained. "I suppose I'll get comfortable with it, but right now it feels strange. And so much about my life is strange right now. What I really need is someone to help me get used to it all."

Betsy nodded solemnly. "I can do that."

"I was surprised to get my own chambers in Middleborough Manor," Astrid confessed. "I had assumed I would be expected to share the Earl's bed."

"You don't wish to do that?" Betsy asked.

"I don't know," Astrid said. "Not right away, anyway."

"But he's your husband."

Astrid sighed and crossed the room to sit on the bed. The mattress was incredibly soft, and the blankets were thick and warm. She had never had anything like this at home. "Betsy," she said. "As my lady's maid, you're loyal to me, right?"

"Ofcourse," Betsy breathed.

"You wouldn't repeat anything I told you in confidence to Lord Middleborough?"

"I'd never do that."

She nodded. "The truth is that Lord Middleborough and I have hardly even had a conversation," she admitted. "I don't even know the man, and he doesn't know me. I know that he's my husband, but...well, this isn't what I always imagined having a husband would feel like. Do you know what I mean?"

"I suppose it's always hard in the beginning, My Lady," Betsy said sympathetically.

"I think you probably know him better than I do," Astrid admitted. "I only met him twice before the wedding, and one of those times hardly counted."

“Maybe you would feel better if you got to know him a little better,” Betsy suggested.

“Maybe,” Astrid sighed. “I don’t really know how to do that, though.”

“Sit with him,” Betsy said. “Talk to him. Ask him to tell you about his day.”

Astrid shook her head. “He’s not exactly a big talker.”

“Will you forgive me if I say something, My Lady?”

“Of course,” Astrid said. “I want us to be friends, Betsy. Friends are honest with each other.”

Betsy nodded, then took a breath. She looked as if she were steeling herself to talk. “You sound as though you’ve given up before you’ve begun,” she said. “You sound like you’re not going to try.”

“Given up!” Astrid shook her head vigorously. “I haven’t given up anything! I married the man, didn’t I? I moved into his manor, didn’t I?”

“Forgive me, My Lady. I shouldn’t have said anything. I was out of line.”

“No, no,” Astrid said. “I’m not angry with you, Betsy. Not at all. I just...can’t see what you’re getting at. How can you think I’ve given up on making this work when I’ve sacrificed everything I’ve ever known to be here?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Did you ever consider what would happen next?” Betsy asked. “Did you ever think about what would come after the wedding, after you had left your father’s house and moved in here?”

Astrid shook her head. “To be perfectly candid, I tried not to think about that,” she admitted. “It was a frightening thought, and I didn’t like to dwell on it.”

“But now that time has come,” Betsy said. “I know you’ve given up much to be here, My Lady. I know because I did the same thing, in a sense. I too left my father’s house to come to Middleborough Manor.”

Astrid felt a wave of shame. She had never considered that she wasn’t the only one whose life had changed recently. “That must have been very hard for you,” she said.

“My family needed the money, and I could provide it,” Betsy said. “And Lord Middleborough treats me well and pays me fairly. He is not an unkind man. You’re right that he doesn’t often share his thoughts and feelings, but that doesn’t make him cruel.”

Astrid nodded. “You’re right. You’re very wise for someone so young, you know.”

“I know,” the girl agreed with an impish grin. “That’s something my father used to tell me. I keep a part of him with me simply by remembering who I am.”

“My husband made a good choice when he hired you,” Astrid said. “As long as I am the Lady of Middleborough Manor, you have a place here. I hope you know that.”

“Thank you, My Lady.” Betsy inclined her head.

“And I will think on what you’ve said,” Astrid told her. “But if you don’t mind, I’d like a little time to myself now.”

Betsy nodded and retreated from the room.

Astrid lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. It was much higher than the ceiling of her room in her father’s house, which only added to the strangeness of this place.

I can’t believe I’m here. Middleborough Manor.

It seemed like a place a person might go to visit, to attend a party, and then only if she was extremely lucky. Astrid had never thought to find herself here at all, for any reason. The fact that this odd place was nowhere made it stranger still.

She looked around the room, her gaze falling on her familiar possessions—the hand mirror she had just unpacked, her dresses hanging in the wardrobe, her collection of books on the shelf.

These things didn’t belong here anymore than Astrid herself did.

Why was this room so big? Surely one person could have no need for such a large room.

She wondered again why Lord Middleborough had given her chambers of her own within his manor. It was a question that seemed to float to the top of her mind, pestering her, clamoring for an answer, and she had no answer to provide.

Does he want us to be husband and wife in name only? That was a possibility. If it was true that his reputation had driven women away from him in the past, he might

be more concerned with the appearance of having a wife than with the practice of having one.

But he was still a man, wasn't he? She knew enough of the world to know that men had needs and wives had duties to fulfill. Could Lord Middleborough really intend that the two of them never lay hands on one another?

Perhaps there was more truth to the rumors about him than she had realized. Perhaps he was involved with other women. She would be his trophy, his escort at social functions, and under cover of darkness he would sneak out—or sneak others in.

Well, so what if he does? That isn't my worry. I don't want to go to his bed, and I certainly don't plan to waste my time fretting about who else might be going there.

And yet, she did worry. She didn't want to be made a fool of, and this was a man whose behavior was already scrutinized. This was a man who people already believed they knew things about.

If he's caught with another woman, that would spell social disaster for me.

She had to smile to herself. A week ago, she had been sequestered in her father's house. Now here she was in the manor of an earl worrying about her social prospects. How had life changed so fast?

She steadied her thoughts. Lord Middleborough couldn't possibly be seeing other women, she reminded herself. Women fear and avoid him. Besides, that would be no reason for him to keep a distance between the two of us. It doesn't explain anything.

Was it possible he was just being kind to her?

Was it possible he had guessed that coming to a strange place, being wedded to a man

she hardly knew, would be a frightening experience? Maybe he had given her this room as a place of sanctuary.

Could that be?

That would be an unbelievable kindness, she thought. It would mean he's spent time thinking about what I want and how I feel. It would mean that my happiness is actually a priority for him.

She had never expected that.

And yet...some of the things she had been told did seem to point in that direction, didn't they? She thought about Betsy, who had claimed to be treated fairly by the Earl. There was no help for his reputation in being kind to his maid. If he had done that, it could only mean that he cared how she felt about being in his household.

And there was Mr. Wilson, his friend from the wedding. Mr. Wilson had shared a different picture of Lord Middleborough than any Astrid had seen. He had described a man who was almost romantic in nature, who brooded on the qualities of the woman he admired.

And Mr. Wilson was plain about the fact that Lord Middleborough admires me.

Perhaps it was true. Maybe she had been given this room for no other reason than that her new husband felt she would be most comfortable here while they got to know each other better.

I certainly would like to believe that of him.

It would help, it would make this all much easier, if she could allow herself to believe that her new husband was a kind man.

But she couldn't be sure. After all, he was so cold to her. She had moved into his manor today, and he hadn't even come to check on her. He hadn't shown her around the place. He hadn't introduced her to the staff, not even to her own maids.

And the way he'd danced with her at the wedding, as though it didn't really matter to him who he held in his arms...she had never felt less important to anyone in her life. And it had been her wedding day.

How could she reconcile that feeling with this new suspicion that maybe he did care about her after all?

There was only one solution that Astrid could think of.

Betsy really is wise, she thought to herself. She came to the right conclusion much more quickly than I did. Were all lady's maids so helpful to the ladies they served? Astrid couldn't imagine it. Surely the job usually had more to do with garments and hair.

But Betsy had provided the answer.

He was her husband now, whatever kind of man he was, and it was time for Astrid to get to know him better. It was time for her to discover whether or not she could learn to care for him.

Chapter 15

Conor hesitated outside of Astrid's door. She had been in there all day. He had thought that once she'd gotten a look at her chambers, she might come and find him, that she might ask to see the rest of the manor. But she hadn't done so.

Perhaps she didn't want to see him. Perhaps she didn't want to talk to him.

I shouldn't be surprised, he reminded himself. She isn't here out of any genuine desire to be married to me. She's here because of her father, and for no other reason.

In her mind, it was probably more like being a prisoner than it was like being somebody's wife.

He sighed and turned away from the door. I should really just leave her alone, he thought to himself. She'll come and find me when she wants to talk. If she ever does.

I shouldn't have agreed to this marriage.

Suddenly, the door flew open, startling Conor so badly that he spun around on the spot, almost tripping over his own feet.

Astrid stood there in a pale-lavender dress that looked as if it had seen better days. The fabric was worn and faded. Still, the fit was very becoming, and for a moment he forgot to speak. He merely took her in.

Lovely, he thought. She's lovely.

"My Lord?" Astrid said curiously.

"Yes?"

"I didn't expect to find you here."

"Oh. Yes." Of course. It wasn't normal, the fact that he was standing outside her door like this. Of course she had been taken by surprise. "I was just on my way to let you know that supper was ready," he said. "But if you'd prefer to take your meals in your chambers for now, that can certainly be arranged."

Astrid frowned. "Do you want me to eat here?" she asked.

"I'd prefer it if you came down to the dining room," Conor said.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Then I’ll do so.” She stepped out into the hall.

“Don’t you want to change first?” he asked her.

Astrid frowned and her face colored. “Is there something wrong with my dress?” she asked.

Conor realized his mistake. Of course she doesn’t have anything fine to wear, he berated himself. Her father is a commoner. What did you expect? “No,” he said quickly. “The dress is fine. Everything’s fine.”

Well, now you just sound like a fool.

So that he wouldn’t have to face her, he turned and led the way down the stairs to the dining room, listening for her footsteps behind him to make sure she hadn’t retreated to her chambers after his gaffe. No wonder she feels uncomfortable here, he thought. Her husband is an idiot.

In honor of the new Lady of the house, the serving staff had lit large candles around the dining room. Conor watched as Astrid stopped to examine one of them, wrapping both her hands around it to feel its circumference. He couldn’t help wondering whether she had ever seen a candle so large before.

“Please,” he said, gesturing to one of the two chairs at the table. “Have a seat.”

She did so, looking very uncertain, as if she thought she might be doing it incorrectly somehow.

DuBois appeared, a platter in each hand. “Lord Middleborough,” he said, placing one dish before Conor and whisking away the cover. It was a meat pie—a simple enough dish, but one of Conor’s favorites. He smiled his thanks at his butler.

DuBois carried the other dish to Astrid. “Lady Middleborough,” he said.

Astrid jumped as DuBois removed the cover from her dish. She looked down at the pie on her plate, then up at DuBois. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

“Enjoy, My Lady.” DuBois withdrew quietly.

Conor watched her, waiting for a clue as to what she was thinking.

“It’s strange,” she murmured.

“What’s strange?” he asked.

“This. Having servants waiting on me,” she said. “It feels like I’m doing something wrong.”

“You aren’t doing anything wrong,” Conor said. “You handled that appropriately.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Astrid said. “I don’t think I’m violating societal standards. I just mean...it doesn’t feel right. Why should he be waiting on me, and not me on him?”

“Because you’re the Lady of the Manor,” Conor said, bemused.

“I know that,” Astrid said. “But a week ago, I was just Astrid.” She sighed. “I apologize, My Lord. It must seem as if I’m not grateful for your generosity and hospitality.”

“It doesn’t seem like that,” Conor said. “And...you don’t have to call me My Lord anymore, either. We’re husband and wife.”

“But you are a lord,” she protested. “Everyone has been calling me My Lady, even when I tell them it isn’t necessary to do so.”

“That’s different,” Conor said. “It’s different for you and me, because we’re married.”

“It doesn’t feel different,” she said. “It feels as though you’re the Lord of Middleborough Manor, and I’m a solicitor’s daughter who lives in your home.”

“Well,” Conor said. “I would like it if you’d call me by my name.”

She bit her lip and looked down.

“And may I call you Astrid?”

“Whatever you’d like,” she said.

This wasn’t going the way he’d hoped. He had meant to make her feel more welcome, more as if she belonged here. Instead it seemed he was making her more uncomfortable than ever.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Oh, this is hopeless. I'm terrible with people. It's too bad Henry can't do this job for me too. He'd have her relaxed and laughing in no time, just like he does with the customers at the club.

Astrid took a bite of her pie. "This is quite good, My Lord," she said. Then her eyes widened. "I mean, Conor."

He pretended not to notice the slip. "It is, isn't it?" he said. "Our cook here at Middleborough Manor makes some of the finest food I've ever tasted. I was lucky to inherit most of my staff from my father. I'm not very skilled at hiring people."

"You made a good hire in Betsy," Astrid said.

"The lady's maid?" He had met with a dozen candidates before selecting her. With her exuberant personality and youthful energy, Conor had imagined she would be a good match for what he already knew of Astrid. She would need someone to talk to here at the manor, and Conor knew he wasn't very good at that sort of thing.

Astrid nodded. "I like her a lot," she said. "Not that I'm exactly comfortable with having a lady's maid. And I don't really know what I'm supposed to do with her. But she's a good person to have around."

"I'm glad you approve of my choice," Conor said.

"Is there a reason you chose?" Astrid asked. "What I mean is...is there a reason you made the choice and not me? Is that what's normal?"

Conor blinked. “It never occurred to me that you would want to.”

“No?”

“Did you want to?”

“I don’t know,” Astrid admitted. “It never would have occurred to me either. I just wondered if maybe you thought I couldn’t handle it, because I’d never had a maid before.”

“No,” Conor said. “I didn’t think that. I suppose I just wanted to have someone in place, ready for you when you arrived. If you didn’t like her—”

“I do like her,” Astrid said quickly.

“I’m glad. But if you didn’t, we could always make a change, send her away and find someone else.”

Astrid nodded slowly, considering his words, and returned to her pie.

A long silence stretched between them, and Conor waited to see if she would speak again, but she didn’t. The quiet seemed to grow until it was almost a noise of its own, ringing in his ears, filling the room.

It’s got to be me. It’s my turn to say something.

He fumbled for a topic. “How are you liking your chambers?” he asked finally. That was innocuous enough.

But Astrid looked up sharply, as if he had said something telling in some way. “They’re fine,” she said warily.

“Everything there is comfortable for you?”

“Yes.”

He frowned. “You seem like there’s something you’re not saying. Is it the bed? Is it not comfortable?”

“No, the bed is fine.”

“Then what? The view?”

“It’s a view of the grounds.”

“Did you want something different?”

“Do you have any rooms that don’t look out on the grounds?” she asked.

That was a fair point. “The furniture, then? Or do you need more closet space?”

Astrid laughed. It wasn’t a big laugh—it was small and a little forced, and he could still hear her discomfort. But she was laughing. That had to be a good sign, right?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“If anything,” she said, “I need less closet space. What did you imagine I would put in a wardrobe that size? I haven’t filled up half of it.”

“We’ll have the seamstress measure you in the morning,” Conor said. “You’ll have to be fitted for new clothes.”

Astrid looked down. “I knew it. I knew something was wrong with my dress.”

“It isn’t that,” Conor protested. “The dress is very nice, Astrid. But you’re a countess now. You’ll be attending balls and social functions. You’ll need to have appropriate gowns for those things.”

Astrid nodded slowly. “And what about here?” she asked. “What about when I’m in the manor? Are you going to want me to dress appropriately at home, too?”

This is the first real test, Conor realized. She’s not asking this because she cares what she wears. She’s asking because she wants to know how restrictive her life is going to be, how much freedom she’s going to have as my wife.

And there was only one answer he could give her.

“No,” he said. “While we’re alone in the manor, not entertaining anybody, you’re free to wear whatever you’d like.” He smiled at her. “I quite like the dress you’re wearing now. If you prefer it, you should hold on to it.”

Surprise registered on Astrid’s face, and Conor could see that she had expected a different answer. She had thought he would tell her to get rid of her old things and

embrace her new life.

“Don’t you worry that someone will see me dressed like this?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I don’t worry about that.”

“The servants could talk. Even if no one ever visits and sees that I’m wearing my common clothes, the servants could whisper about it at the market. Word could get out. People might speculate about what it means.”

Conor shook his head. “People are going to speculate no matter what we do,” he said. “We might as well make ourselves happy and comfortable, since there’s no avoiding gossip. Don’t you think so?”

“I never thought about it that way,” Astrid admitted.

She was looking at him now, not warily, as she had when she’d first sat down, but shrewdly. As if she was coming to some sort of conclusion about him. Conor was curious, but at the same time, he was afraid to ask. What sort of impression had he just made on his wife?

Whatever it was, a little of the tension seemed to disappear from her body as she picked up her fork and resumed eating. “All right,” she said. “I’ll meet with the seamstress tomorrow and see about appropriate gowns.”

And a wicked little smile crossed her face.

Conor’s heart soared at the sight of that smile. She was teasing him. She had let go of some of her discomfort and made an actual joke.

Maybe she was on her way to calling this place home.

He couldn't fool himself. He knew the two of them had a long way to go before they trusted each other as husband and wife. But the first day had gone better than he had expected, and that was saying something.

And maybe tomorrow will be even better, he thought, returning to his own meal. At any rate, there's reason to hope.

Chapter 16

Astrid had feared that the days would drag once she was established in Middleborough Manor, but to her surprise, time seemed to fly by. There was so much for her to do here, and so much to see and discover.

On her first full day in the manor, as Conor had promised, she was seen to by a seamstress. The woman measured her quickly and efficiently, talking rapidly as she did so, and then asked Astrid to choose some of her favorite fabrics. Astrid selected bright colors, wondering as she did so whether she had been given this choice because of the question she'd asked at supper the night before.

Maybe he realizes, after speaking with me, that I want more choice in the things I do, she thought.

That was a scary idea. Astrid was used to fighting for choices, pushing back against her father's restrictive rules. But she was not used to being listened to. How many times had she begged her father to let her out of the house, and how many times had she been told no?

She had thought she'd hated how protective he was. But now she wondered. If Conor was going to give in to her, would she still be safe?

Don't get carried away, she told herself sternly. There's nothing unsafe about choosing

your own fabrics for gowns, for God's sake.

But it had shown her something, a fact she hadn't realized. At home, she had known exactly how much rope she had tying her to her father and her life. She had known how far she could run before being brought up short.

That was gone now.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

If she pushed against Conor's rules, whatever they might be, it was possible he would allow her to keep running until she ran right off the edge of a cliff and destroyed herself.

She shivered at the thought.

Every night, Conor came to her room and asked her whether she would like to have her evening meal with him or alone in her chambers. She had several times considered asking to eat alone, just to see what he would do about it, but the truth was that she was beginning to enjoy their evenings together.

Conor had been right about his cook. Every meal was a delight. There was boiled partridge with herbs one night, freshly caught fish another. It was always a surprise.

She had begun trying to guess, each night before the covers were whisked off the plates, what would be under them. So far, she hadn't been right once.

"Pork," she said, settling into her chair at the end of her first week in the manor. "I could smell it the whole way down the stairs. I know I'm right this time."

DuBois removed the lid from her plate. Astrid stared. A bowl of hearty stew sat before her.

"If it helps," Conor said, smiling at her from across the table. "I believe there is pork in the stew."

She lifted her spoon and tasted it carefully. "I can't be certain," she admitted. "I was

so sure I smelled pork, but now that I'm tasting it...there are a lot of wonderful flavors here."

"You'll have to meet our cook," Conor said. "You haven't yet, have you?"

He knew perfectly well that she hadn't. She had been spending the majority of each day in her chambers, reading books she had borrowed from the Earl's personal library with his permission.

A week ago, she would have taken that comment as a reprimand, a reminder that she ought to get out of her room more and get to know the staff. But now, after having lived with the man, she didn't think that was right. Conor kept to himself too. He wasn't criticizing her.

If anything, he was reaching out to her. Trying to help her feel at home.

"No," she said. "I haven't met the cook."

She heard the softness in her own voice. She had been so brusque the first few times she had spoken with him. She had felt defensive, and she had handled that fact by challenging him. Questioning his motives. And later, by making light of things that were serious and deserved serious responses.

But something had shifted, she realized. She was able to talk to her husband without looking for traps and hidden attacks. She no longer thought he was trying to trick her or force her into something she didn't want to do.

How can this be the same man who threatened to lock up my father?she wondered.Now that I'm here, in the manor with him, he seems so thoughtful and kind. He seems like the kind of man who would forgive an offense against him.

He seems like someone I could learn to love.

That impression was reinforced the next day, when he came to her room at midday.

Astrid was sitting at her vanity and pinning up her hair when she heard his knock at the door. “Come in,” she called, expecting to see Betsy, and she was surprised when Conor’s face appeared in the doorway.

“Are you busy?” he asked her.

Astrid secured the last pin in her hair. “I’m not,” she said, and got to her feet quickly. “What can I do for you, My Lord? I mean, Conor.” Inwardly, she chastised herself. It was hard work breaking the habit of referring to an earl by his title, even though she knew it was what he wanted.

“I thought you might join me for a tour of the manor,” he said solicitously.

“Really?” That was something Astrid had been wanting since her first day here, but she hadn’t known how to ask, or even if it was proper to do so.

“Of course,” Conor said with a smile. “And, if you’d like, we can begin in the kitchen. I believe the cook is baking bread.”

Conor’s cook turned out to be a plump woman in her forties with dark hair that was just starting to go grey, and kind eyes. She bustled happily around the kitchen, quietly going about her work and allowing Conor and Astrid to share a loaf that had just come out of the oven. The bread cracked pleasingly when Astrid broke it between her hands and tasted delicious.

From the kitchen, they went out onto the grounds, a place Astrid had only seen from her bedroom window so far. Conor walked her down to a large outbuilding. “This is

the stable,” he said, waving a hand at it. “Do you like horses?”

“I don’t know,” Astrid admitted. Living in the city with her father, she had never had any great need to associate with horses. Most people walked wherever they went. And Astrid had never gone very many places to begin with.

Conor hesitated, as if he was thinking carefully about something. Then he held out a hand to her. “Come on,” he said. “I’ll take you to meet them.”

She was surprised. He hadn’t grabbed her hand or wrapped an arm around her shoulders to propel her forward, as she might have expected. Instead, he stood, hand outstretched, patiently waiting for Astrid to decide.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

She placed her hand in his. “All right,” she said. “Let’s go.”

He opened the wide double doors at the end of the stable and led her inside. The narrow building was lined with stalls on either side of a small corridor, and as Astrid stepped inside, she felt hay crunch under her feet.

Conor led her to one of the stalls. “This is Valor,” he said, and stroked a mammoth brown nose as it poked out.

“Valor?”

Conor nodded. “I raised him from a foal. He was a gift to me from my father when I was young and the first horse I ever called my own. He’s starting to get a bit old now, of course,” he added, scooping a handful of oats from a bag that hung on Valor’s stall and cupping his hand below the horse’s mouth. “I don’t ride him anymore.”

“But you still keep him?” Astrid was impressed. She didn’t know much about horses, but she imagined there was a cost associated with stabling and feeding a horse. It impressed her that Conor was the type of man to continue providing for an animal that couldn’t serve him.

Conor nodded. “We have a long history together,” he said. “He reminds me of my childhood, and of my father.”

Astrid stroked the horse cautiously. “What was your childhood like?” she asked.

“Normal, I suppose,” he said.

She laughed. “Well, it wasn’t normal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your father was an earl. There’s not anything normal about that. And you grew up in this big manor, with servants tending to your every need. You can’t really believe that’s normal.”

He glanced at her, his eyes showing some reservation again. “Maybe not,” he agreed slowly.

“Definitely not.”

Conor was quiet for a long moment. Waiting for him to speak again, Astrid suddenly felt nervous. Had she offended him? Did he feel as though she was criticizing his childhood, his upbringing?

Maybe he even thinks I’m criticizing his father.

That was a terrible thought. For as difficult as things had been for her at times since she had come to Middleborough Manor, she would never have thought to criticize her husband’s late parents.

Besides, I know how it would feel to have my own father spoken ill of. I would hate it. And it’s not as though he’s a perfect person.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I spoke out of turn.”

“No, you didn’t,” he said.

“Why did you go quiet?” she asked.

“I was thinking about my parents,” he said. “I was wondering what they would have thought of a woman like you.”

“A commoner, you mean?”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about,” he said. “You are of lower birth than me, of course, and that might have...interested them. But I don’t think it would have mattered to them any more than it matters to me, in the long run.”

“Then what do you mean? What would they have thought of a woman like me?”

“They would have thought you had courage,” he said. “You say what’s on your mind.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Would it stop you if it was?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I couldn’t seem to stop myself at our first supper together at Father’s house. That doesn’t speak well for my restraint.”

“It fascinates me,” he admitted. “Your ideas are so different from mine. Your background, the way you see the world—it’s all so different from the things I’ve always thought. In many ways, I’m glad you weren’t born noble. It makes me think about things differently.”

“Is that a bad thing?” she asked, grinning.

“It’s anewthing,” he said.

She fell into step beside him as they walked out of the stables and across the grounds, back up toward the manor. Amazing, she thought, glancing sideways at him. He’s actually starting to open up to me.

And Astrid was liking what she saw.

He was more than the cold, uncomplicated, opportunistic man she thought she had gotten to know at her father’s house. He was more than the distant stranger who had held her in her arms at their wedding while seeming to be a thousand miles away.

He was a man who had loved his parents, who kept and cared for animals, who inspired loyalty in those who served him and gave them happiness in their work.

He’s a good husband.

The thought came to her suddenly, like a breath of fresh air, and she knew it was true. The rumors about him weren’t just false, they were insane. There was no reason for anyone to think badly of him. He was a good man, through and through.

And as she followed him back into the manor, a new worry suddenly took root in her mind—I wonder if he likes me too?

After two weeks, it had become clear to Conor that living with Astrid was going to be more complicated than he had anticipated.

It had always been his plan to leave her alone at first, to allow her to settle in and adjust to life at Middleborough Manor. He had known that it would be difficult for her to live here. She was so used to the familiarity of her father's house, and to the structure of life that went with being a commoner. He knew there would be an adjustment period.

But did she have to challenge him on absolutely everything?

"When do the servants eat?" she asked him over breakfast one morning. "I can't get anything out of Betsy on the subject. It's almost as if she's been ordered not to tell me."

"I've given her no such order," Conor said. "But it's not typical for servants to talk to their masters about their personal lives. I'm sure she feels uncomfortable with the question and would rather you let it go."

"Why?" Astrid pressed. "She's my lady's maid, isn't she? Why shouldn't I know about her life? Besides, it isn't a very personal question. I was just wondering why I never see her eating meals."

"The servants don't eat in the same part of the manor as you and I do," Conor said. "They take their meals in the kitchen."

"In the kitchen? Is there even a table in there?"

"There's a small one, back in the corner."

Astrid shook her head. "But there's a huge table right here," she pointed out. "And

there are only two of us. Why don't the servants eat here?"

"You want the servants to dine with us?"

"Notwithus, necessarily," Astrid allowed. "But I don't see why they couldn't eat at the table when we're finished. What would be wrong with that?"

He hadn't been able to come up with an answer for her. Now, hours later, he was still thinking about the question. He knew what the response would have been from most people, of course—allowing the servants to eat in the dining room wasn't what was done. The two classes just weren't supposed to mix like that.

Butwhywasn't it done?

After all, he had married a commoner.

The question was still running through his mind when DuBois entered knocked on the open door to the study and stuck his head in. "My Lord, Mr. Wilson is here."

"Henry?" That was a surprise. Conor hadn't been expecting a visit from his friend. But it was certainly welcome. He hadn't seen Henry since the wedding. "Show him in, DuBois."

Henry came storming through the door like a force of nature. "Show me in," he scoffed. "As if I don't know the way to your study!"

Conor raised his eyebrows. "You could be a little more respectful of my home, Wilson. Youare a guest here, you know." He gave DuBois a nod, dismissing him, and DuBois nodded back and retreated. "What brings you here?"

"What brings me here is the fact that I haven't seen you since your wedding," Henry

said, taking a seat without being asked. “I know you’ve been preoccupied with your new wife, Conor, but really, you do have a responsibility to our business, you know.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Conor sighed. “I know,” he agreed. “I’m sorry.” If only I’d had the opportunity to give Henry a larger stake in the club before everything happened with Tobias Dawson, he thought ruefully. Then he could take over the responsibilities I’ve been neglecting lately, and he would probably be happy to do so. As things stood, Henry only saw that he was being asked to do extra work with no compensation. Of course that seemed unfair.

“I don’t mind covering for you for a while,” Henry said. “But it’s been two weeks. Do you think you might be coming in anytime soon?”

“I have to make sure Astrid is settled in well before I leave her alone in the manor,” Conor explained. “I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable.”

“I don’t understand,” Henry said. “Doesn’t she have a lady’s maid?”

“She does, yes.”

“And your Mr. DuBois would be here.”

“Yes. Astrid would be well taken care of. I have no doubt of that.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Henry asked.

Conor hesitated, struggling to put words to the feelings that had been troubling him. “The problem is that...well, I don’t want to leave her alone. She’s more curious than I’d anticipated when I first brought her to live here. She spends most of her time up in her chambers, but if I were to leave the manor—”

“Ah,” Henry said. “You’re afraid she would go exploring and learn something about you that you don’t want her to know, is that it?”

“Not exactly.” How could he put this in terms that his gregarious friend would understand? How could he explain how tentative the relationship he had with his wife seemed to be, as if it were built on sand? It felt as though being away from her might give her the opportunity to realize she didn’t like him after all.

He couldn’t allow the progress they’d made to be undone. Every inch of ground he gained with her felt so hard won.

“She’s different than I expected her to be,” he said finally, because Henry was still watching him, still waiting for an explanation.

“Different in what way?” Henry asked.

“It’s hard to describe. I thought she would be more intimidated,” he said. “By my reputation, by my title...but she’s not like that. She’s not afraid to confront me. To disagree with me.”

“I see,” Henry said. “You’re still working to bring her to heel.”

Conor felt a frown take over his face. That wasn’t right at all. The last thing he wanted was to bring Astrid under his control. He loved that she wasn’t afraid to question him. It had made his days interesting in a way they never had been before.

But he supposed Henry would probably interpret that as a weakness.

Maybe it was a weakness. Maybe a strong man wouldn’t allow his wife to challenge him the way Astrid did. Maybe a strong man would have silenced her when she voiced disagreement, ordered her to his bed instead of giving her her own

chambers...

He couldn't very well do that, though.

Of course you can, he reminded himself. It's your right as her husband. And she's had two weeks to herself to prepare for the idea.

But it still didn't sit well with him. He couldn't force her, even if it was a sign of weakness to hold himself back. It seemed too callous, too cruel.

"It's no surprise that she doesn't know the right way to behave, really," Henry said mused. "She's a commoner, after all."

Conor felt himself bristle. You're a commoner too, he wanted to remind his friend. Being a commoner didn't mean somebody didn't know the right way to behave.

Then he remembered that he had been thinking the very same thing about Astrid just that morning, when she had asked why the servants couldn't eat in the dining room.

But I'm her husband. It's different when I think those things. And besides, I would never say them out loud.

"I'll tell you what," Henry said. "Why don't I stay for supper tonight?"

"You're inviting yourself to supper? Weren't you just criticizing my wife's decorum?"

"No," Henry said, frowning. "You're the one who criticized her decorum. You're the one who was complaining about how she talks back to you and challenges your authority. I just said it wasn't surprising. Or did I miss something?"

You missed the fact that I wasn't complaining.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“I suppose you’re right,” Conor said, not wanting to explain further and take the risk that Henry would think him weak. “All right, you can stay for supper. We’ll make it a working supper.” Astrid can dine in her room for once. I don’t think she’ll mind when I explain the reason to her.

“A working supper?” Henry asked. “Why?”

“I thought you were upset that I hadn’t been involving myself in the work of running The Arc,” Conor said. “Isn’t that why you came here? I assumed you had something you wanted to consult with me about.”

“No, no,” Henry laughed. “I want you to come back to work because I’m tired of holding down the fort on your behalf, but that doesn’t mean I can’t handle it. I’m perfectly capable of managing the books by myself.”

“I know you are,” Conor agreed.

“In fact,” Henry said slowly, “All I really ever needed you for was startup capital...My Lord.”

Conor hesitated, examining his friend’s face. Could Henry have guessed that Conor wanted to give him a more prominent place in The Arc’s management? Was this his way of indicating that he was interested in that?

I haven’t spent enough time with Henry lately, he realized. It’s not just work that I’ve been neglecting, it’s my friendship too. Henry was really the only friend Conor had thanks to his unpleasant reputation among members of the ton, and Conor couldn’t

afford to be too cavalier about it.

“All right,” he said. “A social supper then.”

“And your wife will join us, of course?”

“If that’s what you’d like,” Conor said, at a loss to see why that mattered to Henry but he was eager to make his friend happy.

“Of course,” Henry said. “She’s your wife. I’ve only met her once, and I’d like to get to know her better now that she’s going to be a regular figure in our lives.”

“Oh,” Conor said, surprised. “I didn’t realize you felt that way.”

“I do. You’re my best friend.”

Conor felt a warm flood of gratitude fill him. “Thank you, Henry. Truly.” It was difficult for him to convey such a sincere emotion—it felt awkward and embarrassing. But Henry was going out of his way, trying to be a part of the new life Conor and Astrid were building. Conor could make an effort to include him.

Henry’s eyebrows lifted. “Don’t get all sentimental on me.”

“It’s just that I really appreciate you taking the trouble,” Conor said.

Henry laughed. “I guess the wife is bringing out a softer side in you already, isn’t she?”

“Maybe,” Conor murmured, slightly embarrassed. He cast about for a change of subject. “We’re having chicken for dinner,” he said. “It’s Astrid’s favorite.”

“Your cook makes good chicken,” Henry remembered.

“My cook is good at everything.” This was a topic with which Conor was more comfortable. “If you came over to eat more often, you would know that.”

“Well, now that you have a woman in the house, maybe I will,” Henry said with a grin.

“Be careful,” Conor warned. “I won’t have you making her uncomfortable with your jokes and your flirtations. She’s a sheltered girl.”

“Oh, I’m not going to do anything to her,” Henry laughed. “Go and get her, why don’t you? This is going to be a fun evening.”

Conor nodded. “Go and ask DuBois to escort you into the dining room. Astrid and I will meet you there,” he said. “And let DuBois know that you’re staying for supper, so that he can inform the kitchen.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Henry said.

Conor rolled his eyes. His friend never used his title except to mock him. Conor was used to that. They were too close for formalities. But now, on the verge of spending an evening with Henry and Astrid together, he wondered what they would think of each other’s quirks.

For a moment, he thought about trying to get out of the meal. Astrid had seen quite a bit of him over the past two weeks. She knew intimate things about him that he had never revealed to anyone else. Would she know to keep her mouth shut?

She knows my weaknesses, he thought. And I can’t have those getting out, not even to my business associates.

He would just have to hope that Astrid had learned enough of the ways of the noble class to behave herself at supper with a guest.

Chapter 18

“Astrid?”

She turned to face her husband, who was standing in the doorway. Was it her imagination, or did he look nervous? “Conor?”

“We have a guest for dinner tonight,” he said.

“Oh.” Anxiety spiked through her. A guest. She had known that soon enough she would be expected to face the members of the ton, to show that she was capable of fitting into this new world she had joined. But she had expected to have a little bit longer. “Who is it?”

“It’s my friend and business associate, Mr. Henry Wilson,” Conor said. “I believe you may have met him at the wedding.”

“Oh,” Astrid said. “I think I remember him.” The man who had told her all the kind things Conor had been saying about her. She had had trouble believing his words at the time. Now, after having lived with Conor, she could see that Mr. Wilson had almost certainly been telling her the truth.

It would be nice to see him again. He had gone out of his way to make her feel comfortable on what had otherwise been a very frightening day for her.

And he’s a commoner, she reminded herself. I’ll still have to act like the wife of an Earl, of course, but the stakes feel a bit lower with Mr. Wilson. Perhaps Conor had

even set it up this way on purpose.

Maybe it was a test, to see how well she did.

Her hands fluttered nervously over the bodice of her dress. It was pale pink and made of silk, and Astrid felt slightly uncomfortable in it. She had never owned anything so fine, unless you counted her wedding gown. But the seamstress had just finished her first set of garments today, and they had been delivered an hour ago. Betsy had insisted that Astrid surprise her husband by wearing something new to supper.

Conor didn't even seem to notice the gown. "Are you ready?" he asked, offering his arm.

Astrid took a steadying breath, nodded, and linked her arm through her husband's.

He had never escorted her down to the dining room like this—formally, as though they were at a real social event. Usually he simply led the way down the stairs or waited for her to meet him there. The change in routine made her nervous again, and she clutched at his arm anxiously.

"It's all right," Conor said, his expression gentle and reassuring. "Mr. Wilson is a good friend."

He showed her into the dining room. Sure enough, there stood the man Astrid had met at the wedding. He crossed the room, took her hand in his, bowed low, and kissed the backs of her fingers. "My Lady."

Astrid flushed and looked up at Conor for help. How am I meant to address him? He was a commoner—there was no title to use. She didn't want to get it wrong and embarrass her husband.

“Mr. Wilson,” she said finally, hoping she had it right. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“And you,” Mr. Wilson said smoothly. Astrid breathed a sigh of relief.

He looked her up and down. “I must say, that dress is absolutely stunning on you.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Conor did a double take. “It’s a new one,” he said, clearly noticing for the first time.

Astrid couldn’t keep the smile off her face. Two weeks ago, she might have felt overlooked by his failure to notice her new gown. Tonight, knowing him better, she was charmed. It meant that he hadn’t been staring at her simple cotton dresses for the last several days and waiting for the moment they disappeared from her wardrobe.

It meant he was more interested in her than in what she was wearing.

“It looks very nice,” Conor said. “The seamstress did a wonderful job. Do you like it?”

“I love it,” Astrid admitted. Her discomfort in the gown didn’t change the fact that it was absolutely lovely.

“Let’s take our seats,” Conor suggested. “DuBois will be in momentarily with the food.”

“I’ve told you again and again that you need to hire more staff for this place,” Mr. Wilson said, taking a seat. “You rely on DuBois for too much. You should have a separate staff for serving. Your butler is doing the work of five men.”

“No, he isn’t,” Conor scoffed. “There’s hardly anything to do around here. I never have guests. I never go anywhere. It’s only the two of us living here. Hiring extra staff would makemorework for DuBois, because he would have to manage them.”

“You always do things your own way,” Mr. Wilson said, shaking his head.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“And who else’s way should I do things?” Conor countered, taking his own seat as Astrid struggled to sit down properly with the thick fabric that now surrounded her.

“You might consider listening to conventional wisdoms sometimes, at least,” Mr. Wilson said as DuBois entered the room with the supper plates. Astrid inhaled, relishing the smell of herbs and meat. She had had chicken at Middleborough Manor only once before, and it was the most delightful meal she had ever eaten. Mr. Wilson had come at the right time.

“Conventional wisdom,” Conor scoffed. “That’s just what people who aren’t capable of independent thought use to justify their lack of creativity.”

“Sounds like something Killian O’Flannagan would say,” Mr. Wilson said. “It sounds like the way he would defend his business tactics. They’re not conventional. They’re recreative.”

Conor set his goblet down and frowned at Mr. Wilson across the table. “Are you comparing me with Killian O’Flannagan?” he asked.

“Not exactly.” Mr. Wilson cut himself a bite of chicken, looking completely casual, as if he didn’t realize he was being glared at. “I’m just saying that the two of you might have this in common.”

“O’Flannagan and I have nothing in common.”

“Wait a moment,” Astrid interrupted. “Who’s Killian O’Flannagan?”

Mr. Wilson's eyebrows lifted. "You were right," he said to Conor. "She does speak up."

Astrid blushed furiously. Had Conor said that about her? Had he been complaining about her to his friend? She was mortified.

But Conor answered the question as if Mr. Wilson hadn't spoken. "He's a business rival of mine," he said. "He owns a pub in town called the Angry Boar, and he tries to steal my customers. Mr. Wilson is saying that the tactics he uses to do so are unconventional."

Mr. Wilson looked stunned. "You explain your business to her?"

"She asked," Conor said.

"You really do always do things your own way," Mr. Wilson murmured.

Astrid wasn't listening. Her mind was still on what Conor had said about his business rival. "What unconventional tactics does he use?" she asked. "How is he trying to steal your customers?"

"You've heard the rumors about me," Conor said. "You already know."

Astrid gasped. "You're saying this man started those rumors?"

"Many of them," Conor said.

"But he could have ruined your life! How could he?"

"He was trying to ruin me," Conor said calmly. "That was his intent, Astrid. He would have been happy to see it happen."

“He’s a monster, then,” she whispered.

Mr. Wilson laughed. “Don’t you worry about it, My Lady,” he said. “You must know Lord Middleborough well enough by now to know that he’s tough enough to withstand any criticism. The things that O’Flannagan says don’t hurt him. Nothing seems to hurt him, to tell you the truth. It has steam coming out of poor old O’Flannagan’s ears.” He laughed and popped a bite of chicken into his mouth.

But that isn’t right, Astrid thought. Conor can be hurt. Her husband wasn’t the tough, untouchable man that Mr. Wilson was describing. He was strong, yes, but he was also sensitive. He was the man who had kept his childhood horse when the animal was no longer any good to him, just out of the kindness of his heart.

He was the man who had given her chambers of her own when she had come to his house rather than insisting that she come to his bed.

There was a gentleness to him, and that meant that he could be hurt.

And yet, even his best friend didn’t see that side of him. Mr. Wilson sits here laughing about how this Killian O’Flannagan tries and fails to hurt Conor, she thought. He thinks it’s a joke. He thinks it’s funny. How can he think that?

She knew the answer as soon as she asked herself the question. Mr. Wilson thought it was a joke because that was what Conor wanted him to think.

And suddenly, a lot of things began to make sense to Astrid.

Things like how cold and distant Conor had been with her in the beginning. The fact that he had put up walls between the two of them. The fact that he had seemed not to care about her, even on their wedding day.

The fact that now, as the walls began to come down bit by bit, she could see that he had cared about her all along.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

She'd had trouble at first, reconciling the two different versions of Conor that she had seen. The distant and disengaged Earl of Middleborough and the thoughtful and kind man she had married. But now she saw the reason for the two distinct personalities.

He's protecting himself. He's protecting his business. He can't show weakness in public. That's why he seems so hard all the time.

It would spell disaster for him if this man, this Killian O'Flannagan, came to realize that his assaults on Conor's character were effective. And worse yet, there were things Conor cared about that O'Flannagan didn't know about. Things that could be used to hurt him.

Of course he doesn't want anyone to know that side of him.

She looked up at her husband. Conor was watching her, and she knew him well enough now to read the hints of anxiety on his face. The tiny wrinkle between his eyebrows. The way he had sucked his lower lip into his mouth, just slightly.

He was concerned about how she would respond to Mr. Wilson.

So she forced a light laugh. "Whoever this O'Flannagan person is, he's fighting a losing battle," she said mildly. "I can't believe there's anything he could do that would impact my husband." She turned to look at him and said, "I'm surprised you've noticed his efforts at all."

The muscles in Conor's face seemed to relax. He gave her a small, almost imperceptible smile.

Mr. Wilson laughed, completely missing the unspoken conversation that had taken place. “That’s right,” he said. “Smart girl you’ve married, Conor. She understands more than I would have expected.”

“Yes,” Conor said, slowly and softly. “She’s very clever.”

Astrid ate in silence for the rest of the meal, speaking only when spoken to and doing her best to give the impression that she was a well-behaved young lady. She understood more than ever now how important appearances were to Conor and how vital it was that he not appear to be challenged by his wife in front of his business partner.

I can’t make him seem weak, she told herself fiercely. It could damage his prospects. As his wife, it’s my job to help him appear strong.

And she could do it.

She understood now why he had wanted to marry her, why he had considered it a fair trade. In exchange for pardoning her father for his crimes he had gotten a wife who could reinforce the public image he was trying to create.

I can do that for him, she resolved. It’s so very little to ask in exchange for everything he’s done for me and my family. I can do this.

She gave Mr. Wilson her most charming smile.

Chapter 19

Astrid began to venture out of her room during the day, even when not invited by her husband to do so. She was beginning to think of Middleborough Manor as her home.

Betsy was no longer her only friend, either, although she was growing acclimated to the respectful distance most members of the staff preferred to keep. Still, she could always count on the cook to offer her a hot bun if she stopped by the kitchen, and the seamstress was only too happy to show her the garments she was working on.

The day after Mr. Wilson's visit, her head full of thoughts of her husband's business entanglements, Astrid decided to pass the morning walking around the manor grounds. She hadn't explored them yet and she was eager to see the lands that were now hers.

It all seemed much bigger than it did from her bedroom window, she realized as she made her way across the sloping lawn. It was a good thing the manor loomed so large in the distance, or she might have gotten lost.

She walked until she reached a low stone wall that she guessed marked the boundary of her husband's property. Then she turned and walked along the perimeter for a while, thinking to get an idea of just how big around the land was. She abandoned that idea, though, when she realized she'd done nothing to mark her starting point. I won't know when I've made it all the way around. I could end up walking in circles forever.

Perhaps it had been foolish to try to explore the grounds on her own. She would ask Conor to give her a tour the next time it was convenient to him.

Of course, that might not be for a while.

It had become clear over the course of their meal last night that Mr. Wilson's true reason for visiting had not been a social one. He was concerned about the state of their business. Astrid had felt incredibly guilty listening to that conversation.

They earned less money last month than they ordinarily would have because of my

father. Because he stole from them, she thought. And that money was never replaced because Conor chose to marry me instead of pursuing legal action.

Although neither of the men had said anything accusatory to Astrid, Mr. Wilson had also made it clear that Conor had spent too much time at home lately, and not enough tending to the needs of his business. And that's because of me, too. He's neglecting his responsibilities in order to take care of me.

How could she ever have doubted his kindness, his thoughtfulness? How could anyone? He was such a good man.

I'm going to do whatever I have to do to help him succeed, she vowed to herself again. It was a mantra she had been repeating in her mind since dinner last night, going so far as to whisper it to herself as she was falling asleep. I'm going to be a good wife.

Perhaps that started with letting him see that she was comfortable on her own, that he didn't have to stay at home with her anymore. Maybe then he would be ready to resume the responsibilities of his business.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Resolved in her mind that she knew what she needed to do, she turned and walked back up the lawn toward the manor, thinking to search for him in his study and let him know what she had been thinking.

She was taken by surprise, however, when she saw him walking down from the manor and toward her.

“Astrid,” he called, raising a hand in greeting. “I saw you from the window.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, abashed. “Should I not be out here?”

“No, no, of course you should, if it’s where you want to be,” he said quickly. “You know that you’re free to explore the manor and the grounds.”

“Then...is something wrong?”

“Not at all,” he said. “To be honest, I simply...wondered if you might like some company.”

“Oh,” Astrid said.

It’s strange. I never would have thought he would be the one initiating time spent with me. And yet here we are.

“Yes,” she said, pulling herself together. “I would love company. I was just thinking that your grounds are far too massive for me to undertake this exploration on my own. I’m bound to get lost.”

“Our grounds,” Conor insisted.

“You always do that,” Astrid said.

“Do what?”

“When I say something is yours. Your manor or your cook or anything else. You always correct me.”

“That’s because we’re married now,” Conor said. “What belongs to me belongs to you.”

“But it’s yours really,” she insisted.

“And you always do that,” he said, smiling. “Why is it important to you? Why don’t you want these things to be yours?”

Astrid had never actually considered the question, but now she did. “I suppose it’s because I don’t want you to think I married you for your manor and your cook,” she said.

“Why did you marry me?” Conor asked.

“You know why,” Astrid said.

“Tell me.”

“Because of my father. Because I didn’t want him to go to jail.”

“I see,” Conor said slowly. “And if I told you today that you could go home...that I would have our marriage annulled, and that I still wouldn’t pursue legal action

against your father?"

Astrid stopped walking and looked at him. "Are you actually offering me that?"

"I never wanted you to feel forced to be here," he said. "If that's the only reason you're here..."

Astrid shook her head. "It's the reason I came. It's not the reason I'm here now."

Conor's cheeks turned faintly pink, but he didn't question her further.

"You asked me a question," Astrid said. "Can I ask you one?"

"Of course," Conor said. "You can ask me anything."

Is that true? Astrid wondered. Would he really be comfortable answering any question I might ask? She knew enough to know that wives didn't traditionally question their husbands, but Conor had never given her any reason to think he would be uncomfortable with her doing so. In fact, he had done just the opposite, happily satisfying her curiosity at every turn.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“I was wondering about your business,” she said. “The club, with Mr. Wilson.”

“The Arc?” he asked. “What about it?”

“Well, Mr. Wilson made it seem as though you were in trouble,” she said.

“He exaggerates,” Conor said. “Everything is fine, I assure you. Yes, we lost a little money last month, but we do well enough for ourselves that it won’t be a problem in the long term.”

“Then why did he come here last night?” Astrid asked. “Why did he seem so distressed?”

“He’s upset because he’s been having to do extra work lately,” Conor said. “And truth be told, I think he has ambitions of owning a larger share of the club. I’ve thought that for a while.”

“Will he be able to do it?” Astrid asked.

“I’m thinking about giving some of my own share over to him,” Conor said. “Once the books are well balanced again, that is. It would save me from having to spend as much time there as I should be currently, and I know it would make him happy.”

Astrid hesitated, framing what she wanted to say. “If you need to go back to work,” she said, “if you have responsibilities to take care of, I don’t want you to feel as though you need to stay at the manor because I’m here.”

Conor glanced at her. “Would you be happier if I was out?”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Astrid said. “I just meant...I can see the work you’re putting into making sure I’m happy here. I can tell you’re thinking about it all the time. It really does mean the world to me. I don’t know if I’ve told you that.”

Again, Conor said nothing.

“But you don’t need to neglect your business in order to take care of me,” Astrid continued. “I can fend for myself, Conor, truly. You should feel free to go to work during the day if that’s what you need to be doing. I’m fine here.”

They walked along in silence for several minutes.

What is he thinking? Astrid wondered. Is he angry with me? Did I misunderstand something? Maybe I shouldn’t have assumed that he’s doing all these things to try to make me happy. Suddenly, she was filled with self-doubt. Of course none of it is about me. I’m just a solicitor’s daughter—

Then he spoke. “I’m not staying here at the manor every day just to try to make you happy, Astrid.”

“Of course not.” Astrid was mortified. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I apologize.”

“No, you don’t understand.” He turned to face her, taking one of her hands in his. “I’ve been staying here because I want to be near you.”

His words washed over her like a wave.

“You do?” she asked, adrift, struggling suddenly to breathe.

“Of course I do,” he said. “You’re my wife.”

She hesitated. “Why did you marry me, Conor? None of your family was at risk of going to jail.”

“You don’t know why?”

“I thought...I thought it was because you were afraid you wouldn’t be able to find anyone else who would have you,” she admitted. “Because of the false rumors about you. I was told that women kept away from you, and you’d never find a noble lady willing to wed you.”

“I don’t know,” Conor admitted. “That might be true. The rumors certainly are salacious. But in truth, I’ve never asked anyone else to marry me. I don’t know if they would have or not.”

“So why me?” Astrid asked, still feeling breathless. “Was it just because my father offered?”

He rubbed his thumb slowly over the back of her hand as he answered. “When your father offered me your hand,” he said, “I was sure I must be dreaming. I had admired you long before that day, Astrid.”

“But...no. That doesn’t make sense,” she whispered. “When had you even seen me?”

“You sat in that window every day. One had only to look.”

“You saw me in my window seat,” she said faintly.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“And I knew from the moment I did that you were lovely. But I never thought I would actually have you for my own. Our worlds were too far apart.”

“You were an Earl, and I was a commoner.”

“I was a man with a horrible reputation, and you were Tobias Dawson’s cherished and protected only daughter.”

“So that’s why you said yes,” she said.

He nodded. “I would have said yes in an instant, but I wasn’t sure if you wanted me. Then, when we had supper at your father’s house, you told me you did. But you still seemed...unsure, somehow. It was clear you weren’t afraid of me, but it was just as clear that you weren’t eager in the same way I was.”

“And so you gave me my own chambers,” she realized, making the connection.

“And I promised myself I wouldn’t inflict my company on you when you came to live at Middleborough,” he said. “I promised myself I would follow your lead, and that nothing would happen between us, not even a conversation, until you indicated you wanted it.”

That’s why he’s always seemed so cold, then. It wasn’t just because of his business. It wasn’t just a habit he’d developed of keeping people at arm’s length.

He was trying to show her he cared.

She was overwhelmed, suddenly, by a rush of affection for him.

“I might be ready for something to happen between us,” she said, taking his other hand, pulling him closer, and rising up on her toes to kiss him.

Chapter 20

Conor could hardly believe his own good fortune.

He had expected months to pass before Astrid became comfortable in his home. He had prepared for the possibility that she would never fully embrace their marriage and the life he wanted to build with her. He had been sure she would cooperate, but he had been equally sure that she would hold a part of herself back, at least for a time.

And earlier today, when he had offered to let her return to her father’s house...

What made me do that?he wondered. He hadn’t planned it, hadn’t thought about it in advance. He hadn’t considered what the repercussions of such an action would be. And yet, he knew that if she had taken him up on his offer, he would have let her go right then and there. It would have been the end of their marriage.

For half a minute, he had believed she was going to do it.

My reputation is bad enough already,he thought.It never would have survived being left by a commoner. He would have been ruined.

And yet, he realized, that wasn’t why his heart was racing at the thought of what he had almost lost.

He hadn’t thought about his reputation at all.

His only concern had been losing Astrid.

He would have let her go if she had wanted to go. But it would have killed him to do it.

But I'm so glad I offered, he thought. Because how else would I have learned that she doesn't want to leave? How would I ever have discovered that she's happy to be here now?

It was a wonderful piece of information to get.

Now he touched his lips gingerly, recalling the soft press of hers as she'd kissed him out on the grounds. The scent of her hair, the way she'd molded her body to his, the warmth of her...

It was a thought he knew he would be revisiting again and again in the days to come.

I want to do something for her, he thought. Something to commemorate today. We should make an occasion of it. We should celebrate the new closeness we've discovered.

He spent the next few hours in the parlor, carefully building a fire in the fireplace and arranging the furniture the way he wanted it. Then he sent for Astrid.

She arrived, escorted by Betsy, in a gown of spring green with her hair loose around her shoulders. "Isn't it supper time?" she asked. "I expected to meet you in the dining room." She looked around the parlor, clearly noticing that he had pushed the furnishings away from the center of the room and back toward the walls. "What's going on, Conor?"

He walked over to her and took her hand. "I thought we might take our supper in here

tonight,” he said.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“In the parlor?” She blinked. “Is that usual?”

“No,” he said. “But we haven’t troubled ourselves with what’s usual so far in our marriage, have we?”

“I suppose not,” she agreed with a smile.

“Come sit down,” he suggested. “The fire is nice and warm.”

She looked around. “Sit where?” she asked. “All the chairs are fairly far away from the fireplace.”

Conor picked up a thick blanket, shook it once, and then spread it on the floor. “My mother made this blanket before she passed,” he said, indicating that Astrid should take a seat.

She sat. “It’s lovely,” she said, running her fingers over the pattern. “I didn’t realize your mother liked to knit.”

“She was good with her hands,” Conor said, remembering the way his mother had liked to sit in her rocking chair after supper each night and knit a few rows of whatever she was working on. “She was like you in a lot of ways, actually.”

“I don’t know how to knit,” Astrid said.

“But you don’t think it’s beneath you,” Conor explained. “You’re not afraid to work hard. You don’t think servants should do everything so that you don’t have to.”

Astrid smiled. Conor watched her, admiring the faint blush that rose to color her cheeks. "I thought you thought that was strange," she said. "I thought you wanted me to get over it."

"I want you to feel comfortable with the household staff," Conor said. "They're doing their jobs. But I like that you don't think you're better than anybody." He smiled. "And I like that you don't think anybody's better than you. I admired that about you from the first."

"You did?" Astrid asked. "My father always said I ought to learn my place."

"Well, you shouldn't," Conor said. "I liked that you weren't afraid to tell me what you were thinking. When I saw you in the window, and when your father offered me your hand, I knew you were lovely. But I expected you to shy away from me. I didn't expect that you'd be able to speak your mind."

"And all the while I was thinking I was putting doubts in your head by doing so," Astrid said.

Conor shook his head. "You were dispelling my doubts," he said. "You let me know that you could hold your own, that you wouldn't allow your life to be ruined by my bad reputation."

"I don't care about your reputation," Astrid said.

Conor raised his eyebrows. That was hard to believe.

"I don't," she insisted. "Whatever bad things people say about you, they aren't the truth. I've been here only two weeks, and that's already obvious to me. You're a good man, Conor, and a good husband, and anyone who says different is lying."

“That’s kind of you,” Conor said.

“I’m just telling the truth,” she said. “It isn’t kindness, it’s honesty.”

“It can be both,” he said with a smile. “But have you truly considered the fact that you can be painted by the rumors about me?”

“No, I haven’t,” she said.

Conor’s heart sank. If that hadn’t occurred to her, would it change her mind? Would she want to leave him once she’d thought about it? I’ll stick to what I offered, he resolved. I’ll let her go if she wants to. I won’t force her to be here against her will. I care about her too much now.

She must have seen his distress on his face. “I haven’t considered it because it doesn’t matter,” she said. “I thought of it. Of course I did. I thought of it for a few moments on our wedding day. I wondered what people would think when they saw I was marrying you. But I stopped thinking about it a long time ago.”

“Did you really?”

“I’ve had other things to think about,” she said quietly, and rested her hand on top of his. “I haven’t been spending much time worrying about gossip.”

Conor paused for a moment, relishing in her touch. Then he turned his hand over beneath hers and curled his fingers around hers, lifting her hand to his lips and kissing it gently.

“It’s easy to ignore the outside world when you’re spending all day here in the manor,” he said. “Will you be able to do it when we have to attend balls and other social functions? How will you feel when you can actually see the people who are

gossiping about us?”

“I don’t know,” Astrid admitted. “I didn’t like that much at the wedding.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Conor nodded. "I don't like it much either," he admitted.

"But you didn't seem as though it bothered you," she said.

"I can't let them see they're getting to me," Conor said. "That's what they want. They want to know that it's working. I can't let them win."

"That's awful," Astrid said. "It's awful that you have to go through your life with that kind of treatment around you all the time. It's awful that you have to pretend it doesn't matter to you when it does."

"It probably matters less than you think to tell the truth," Conor said. "I've grown used to it. And I can show you how to handle it, how to steel yourself against it in public so that people never realize you care."

Astrid nodded. "You might need to. I wouldn't want to shame you by reacting in public."

"You could never shame me," he said. "You're wonderful, Astrid. I'll be proud to show you off when we go out together. I'm proud to have you as my wife."

She tightened her grip on his hand. "And I hope you know that whatever happens, I'd never leave your side," she said. "You offered that to me today, and it took me by surprise. But even if I'm ridiculed in public, even if my reputation is tarnished, I won't renounce you. I don't want to end this marriage, and I don't want to return to my father's house."

“Are you sure?” he said, hardly able to believe her words.

“I pride myself on being a very loyal person,” she said. “I was a loyal daughter to my father for many years. Now I will be a loyal wife to you.”

“You really don’t have to be,” he said. “I won’t force you to, Astrid.”

“No, you won’t,” she agreed. “I know you won’t. I’m choosing this. You did offer me a choice. Before I ever came here, you asked me if this was what I wanted. You asked me again a few hours ago. And you’re asking me now.”

He nodded.

“Has my answer ever been no?”

“It’s always been yes.”

“And have I ever seemed uncertain?”

“No, you haven’t.”

“The only thing that’s changed is my reason for being here,” she said. “I care for you, Conor. I think I’m falling in love with you.”

He lifted a hand and stroked her cheek gently, marveling at her beauty and bravery. How did I get so lucky? he wondered. What could I have done to deserve such a treasure?

The intimacy of the moment was interrupted by DuBois, who arrived with platters of food. Supper. Conor was half tempted to order the butler away, to push the plates of food to one side, to take Astrid in his arms here in front of the fire and forget

everything else.

But Astrid's stomach rumbled with hunger, and Conor forced himself to focus. He would wait. He had waited this long, and he could wait a little longer.

Besides, the food did smell excellent.

He lifted the lid off of his plate to reveal beef steak and potatoes seasoned with butter and herbs. "This looks wonderful," he said. "Don't you think so?"

Astrid nodded. "The cook really outdid herself this time," she said.

They ate in silence, sitting much closer together than they would have been able to if they had taken their meal in the dining room. Before them, the fire crackled and popped, filling the air with sound so that the lack of conversation didn't seem to matter.

Conor felt utterly relaxed, in a way he never had with Astrid. In a way he never had, in fact, with anyone. The difference between acting as if he didn't care what people thought of him and knowing he didn't have to worry about what someone thought of him couldn't have been more apparent.

Astrid liked him.

Maybe Astrid was falling in love with him.

And maybe I'm falling in love with her.

She shifted slightly against him, resting a little more of her weight on his shoulder, and he leaned into her to give her support.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

There's no 'maybe' about it. I'm definitely falling in love with her.

After admiring her from afar for so long, it felt like a miracle. He had never dreamed that their marriage would fall together this neatly, that everything would work out so well.

Everything in his life seemed perfect in that moment, sitting with the woman he loved in front of the fire.

It was hard to imagine that anything could go wrong now.

Chapter 21

Conor kissed his wife in the doorway. "I really don't have to go," he told her.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "You promised Mr. Wilson you'd come back to work. You don't want him coming here to roust you out again, do you?"

"No," Conor said. "But it's my club, not Henry's, and if I say we can go another few days without both of us at the helm, then we can. I don't want to abandon you here."

"You're being silly, Conor." She wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed him again. "I'm perfectly fine. I have Betsy here, and DuBois if I need him for anything, and you'll be back in just a few hours."

"I know."

“Besides, I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll explore the library,” she told him. “I haven’t come close to exhausting your collection of books yet. You have enough up there that I could spend the rest of my life reading and never run out of new material.”

He smiled. He liked that she was a reader. “All right,” he said. “But if anything does come up, if you need me for any reason, don’t hesitate to send DuBois out for me. Promise?”

“I promise,” she said. “Now will you get going please? I don’t want Mr. Wilson to think I’m a bad influence on you!”

“All right.” He kissed her one last time, grabbed his hat from the hat stand by the door, and departed.

Walking down the street felt strange after so long spent on his own property, and Conor was keenly aware of just how thoroughly he had isolated himself since his marriage. Maybe Henry’s right, he thought begrudgingly. Maybe I haven’t been making myself as available as I should have.

He would make an effort to sit down with Henry today, he decided. He would have a conversation with his friend about what Henry needed to best take care of The Arc, and how Conor could be contributing to set the business up for success. He didn’t want Henry to feel as though Conor was nothing more than a silent partner. He wanted to be involved.

But I should also tell him what I’ve been thinking, about giving him a larger stake in the business, he decided. I shouldn’t have kept that idea from him as long as I have.

He'll be gratified to know that it's something I'm thinking about.

At least, he hoped that was how Henry would feel. He hoped his friend wouldn't simply think it was about time he was given more of a hand in the running of the club.

And more of a financial stake in it, too.

Henry wouldn't be able to shake a stick at that, Conor thought. He would be nothing but happy with the news that Conor wanted to help him increase his personal wealth.

He turned the corner onto The Arc's street, already excited for the conversation he would have with his friend today. Their lives would be changed forever by this, he knew. It was going to be a great day.

Suddenly, Henry burst through the door of the club and came tearing up the street as if his hair was on fire. "Conor!"

Conor took in the expression of alarm on Henry's face. "What's going on?" he asked. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"Something terrible has happened," Henry said. "Thank God you're here."

"What happened?" Conor's heart sank. "We weren't robbed again, were we?"

"No, it's..." Henry shook his head. "You'd better come. The constables are here. They're going to want to speak with you."

"The constables?" Conor said. "Did you summon them?"

"I didn't have a choice," Henry said.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Henry, what’s going on?”

But his friend was spared having to answer by the appearance of a constable on the sidewalk. “Lord Middleborough?” the man said.

“That’s me.”

“I’m Officer Fitzroy. Will you come inside, please? We have some things to discuss.”

A bit put off at being invited inside his own club, Conor nevertheless followed the constable inside and over to one of his tables. “What’s going on?” he asked, taking a seat. “I’m sure my associate, Mr. Wilson, has told you that I’ve been away from the business for a few weeks due to having married recently, so I’m not caught up on the latest events here.”

“The event we’re here to discuss took place just this morning,” Officer Fitzroy said. “So you’re as caught up as anybody else is. Lord Middleborough, there’s been a murder.”

“Murder?” The word rang like a gong in Conor’s head, loud and painful and disorienting. “I don’t understand.”

“A man was found dead on the premises this morning.”

“Who’s been killed?” Conor asked.

“Lord Christopher Hayward.”

It took Conor a moment to recognize the name. Lord Hayward was a frequent patron at the Angry Boar, a crony of Killian O'Flannagan and a perpetuator of the vile rumors that seemed to follow Conor wherever he went. He was an unpleasant man, the kind who kicked dogs in the streets and leered at women and children to frighten them.

Conor had never known him well. He would have recognized him on sight, but he hadn't had a conversation with the man, and he had to work hard to associate the name he was hearing with the face of the bully he remembered. At last, he made the connection.

"I see you know who he is," Officer Fitzroy said.

"Not well," Conor said. "I know of him by reputation, mostly. And I see him around. We've never been friends."

"He's a friend of a business rival of yours, in fact," Officer Fitzroy said. "Isn't that right?"

"I assume you're referring to Killian O'Flannagan," Conor said. "I've seen them keeping company together, yes."

"You assume I'm referring to O'Flannagan?" Fitzroy asked, raising an eyebrow. "Do you have more business rivals, Lord Middleborough?"

Conor was slightly taken aback. He wasn't accustomed to being spoken to in such a harsh way. But perhaps this was just the way police officers conducted their affairs. "No," he said. "I was only trying to clarify what we were talking about."

Fitzroy nodded. "Hayward wasn't a regular patron here at your establishment, was he?"

“He never came here,” Henry said. “He always drank at the Angry Boar. That’s O’Flannagan’s pub,” he clarified. “There’s really no overlap between our patrons and theirs.”

“In that case,” Fitzroy said. “How do you account for the fact that Hayward was here at The Arc last night?”

Conor blinked. “He was?”

“Come, now, Lord Middleborough. You can’t expect me to believe you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t,” Conor said. “I was at home with my wife last night. Today is the first day I’ve come into the club in weeks.”

“You’re telling me that the first day you’ve come into the club in weeks just happens to be the morning after the murder of one of your rivals?”

“Henry will tell you,” Conor said. “He actually came to my home to persuade me to come back. I didn’t want to leave my wife’s side.”

Officer Fitzroy turned to Henry. “What do you say?”

“Well...that’s true,” Henry said. “But it was a few days ago that I went to Middleborough Manor. It’s not as if it was last night.”

“But I wasn’t here last night,” Conor said. “Tell him.”

“I didn’t see you,” Henry said doubtfully.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“The place isn’t that big. If I’d been here, you would have seen me.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” Henry said. “You do tend to lurk in corners. You don’t socialize. You don’t talk to the patrons. I can imagine you being here and nobody knowing about it.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I don’t want to lie, that’s all,” Henry said. “I’m not saying I think you did anything. I’m just saying...I can’t be sure you weren’t here.”

“If I had been here,” Conor said through his teeth, boiling with anger, “I would have come and found you right away. Come on, Henry, you know that. After you took the trouble to track me down at my home, do you really think I would bother to come into the club and not even let you know I’d done it?”

“Well, that does make sense,” Henry allowed. “I guess it’s not likely that you would have hidden from me if you were here.”

“Unless he was here to commit a crime,” Officer Fitzroy said. “In that case, he wouldn’t have wanted anybody to see him.”

“What am I being accused of, exactly?” Conor asked.

“You’re not being formally accused of anything yet,” Fitzroy said.

“Formally?”

“Well, it can’t be denied that a man you consider to be a rival was found dead in your club, Lord Middleborough. We would be remiss not to examine that situation carefully.”

“I see,” Conor said coldly, glad in this moment that he had so much experience at holding back his emotions in trying and unpleasant circumstances. His heart was racing, and he could feel his palms beginning to sweat, but he maintained a cool exterior. “Well, unless you are interested in bringing formal charges against me, I’m afraid I can’t permit you to malign my character inside my own establishment any longer.”

Fitzroy inclined his head. “You understand that we have to shut down The Arc and continue with our investigation.”

“Very well.”

“I suggest the two of you return to your respective homes,” Fitzroy said, looking from Conor to Henry. “Expect us to be in touch. I hope you aren’t planning on going anywhere over the next few days?”

“No,” Conor said. Henry shook his head.

“Good,” Fitzroy said. “See to it that you don’t. I’m sure someone will want to speak with you shortly.”

Conor got to his feet and walked to the door, feeling in a daze.

Henry was right on his heels. “Listen, I’m sorry,” he said. “I feel like I might have made things worse back there. I just got spooked. I don’t want Officer Fitzroy to think I was lying to him.”

Conor stopped and looked at his friend. “You don’t really think I could have been involved in a murder, do you?”

“Of course I don’t,” Henry said. “And, hell, even if they do suspect you...you were at home, right? You have plenty of witnesses. Your staff would have seen you.”

“That’s right,” Conor agreed.

But he was remembering, suddenly, that he had shut himself in the parlor with no one but Astrid for company. That after a certain time of night, his staff wouldn’t have seen him at all.

But it’s never going to come to needing an alibi, he assured himself. After all, I didn’t kill Lord Hayward. Someone else did. And when Fitzroy completes his investigation, he’ll turn up some kind of evidence that will point him away from me and in the right direction.

It was upsetting to be suspected of a crime. But Conor knew that he was innocent, and he would have to trust that the truth would rise to the top.

Poor Lord Hayward. Conor had never liked the man, but he certainly hadn’t wished him dead. Who could have done such a thing? he wondered. Who could the real guilty party be? And why on earth would whoever it was have committed their atrocity inside The Arc, of all places?

For that matter, why would Lord Hayward ever have set foot inside The Arc? Henry was right about that much—Conor didn’t think he’d ever been there before.

There’s got to be a logical explanation behind all this, he thought firmly to himself as he walked back up the sidewalk that would lead him home. There’s got to be some reason for it all.

But Conor had to admit, he couldn't think of one.

Chapter 22

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Astrid flew down the stairs and into her husband's arms. "You didn't have to come home!" she cried, although she had to admit that she was happy he had. Although she was perfectly capable of fending for herself, as she'd told him, the house did seem awfully big and lonely without his presence in it.

She had spent the past hour or so with Betsy, pestering her lady's maid with questions about her family and upbringing. Betsy had tolerated this with good humor, but it had been clear to Astrid that the girl would rather have been focusing on her work.

Eventually, Astrid had given up on bothering Betsy and had made her way to the library, as she had suggested to Conor that she might. But before she'd gotten there, the front door of the manor had flown open, and there he was.

Now she stood back from him just slightly and looked up, worry in her eyes. "You really didn't have to come home," she told him, feeling a little guilty. He had been so worried about leaving her, and she really could have managed for herself. Maybe she should have been clearer about that fact.

But he shook his head, wrapping his arms around her and resting his chin gently on top of her head. "The Arc is closed for the day," he said.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

He inhaled deeply. "I'm not sure how much I should tell you about it," he said.

"What happened?"

“It’s a bit alarming,” he said, “and you’re a woman.”

“Do you really think you’re going to offend my delicate sensibilities?”

“I think I should shield you from things like this,” he said.

“I’ve been shielded from things all my life,” Astrid said. “My father tried to shield me from the fact that he’d stolen from you, even as he was pledging my hand to you. I want to know what’s going on with my husband, even if it is difficult.”

He nodded. “Come sit down, then,” he said, leading her to the parlor. “I’ll tell you everything. But I’m afraid it may upset you.”

She felt upset already, just hearing his concerns. “I can handle it,” she assured him, although she was quaking inside. “Whatever it is, we’ll be able to get through it together.”

He took a seat in his worn old armchair and indicated that she should sit down too. She did so nervously, folding her hands in her lap and waiting.

“There was a death last night,” he said eventually. “A murder.”

Astrid gasped. A murder? That’s horrible! And what could such a thing have to do with us?

“The victim was a friend of Killian O’Flannagan,” Conor said. “My business rival. He’s one of the people responsible for spreading rumors about me and tarnishing my reputation.” He leaned in suddenly, as if he were afraid she might not be hearing him. “But I could never have wished harm to him.”

“Of course not,” Astrid said.

“You believe me?”

“Of course I do! You’re a kindhearted man,” she said. “You couldn’t wish harm on anybody.”

He sighed and nodded slowly, clearly relieved by her assessment.

And Astrid’s heart sank with realization.

“Does someone not believe you?” she breathed.

“The body was found at The Arc,” Conor said. “As a rival of ours, Lord Hayward—the victim—never patronized The Arc. So it looks suspicious that he was there on the night he was murdered.”

“What does that mean?” Astrid asked. “That doesn’t mean that you had anything to do with it.”

“But it looks as though I did,” Conor said. “People know about the rivalry between our clubs. The Arc and the Angry Boar are two of the most popular spots in town for drinking and socializing, and O’Flannagan and I have been rivals for years.”

“If that’s true, then what reason could you have to act against him all of a sudden like this?” Astrid said. “Even if they want to say you’ve got a motive, it doesn’t really make sense. Surely if you were going to do something, you would have done it a long time ago.”

“Maybe,” Conor said. “But no one can deny that Lord Hayward is dead. No one can deny that he was found in my club, and therefore it’s likely that that’s where he was when he was murdered. And no one can deny that Lord Hayward and I didn’t like each other.” He sighed. “I certainly never would have wanted him dead, but I would

have liked to see him ruined financially. He was not a good man.”

Astrid’s heart raced. “They couldn’t have thought you were guilty, though,” she reasoned, “or they would have arrested you. Right? They wouldn’t have let you come home if they thought you were a murderer.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Conor shook his head. "They didn't have enough to bring charges against me," he said. "It's all circumstantial. But I think it's likely just a matter of time. The constable on the scene ordered me not to leave the area. I think that means he's planning to come here and question me further, to see if he can get me to reveal my own guilt."

"But you're innocent," Astrid said indignantly. "By focusing on you, they're ignoring whoever the real killer is."

"I know that. And I'm glad you believe me, Astrid. But they have no way of knowing that."

Astrid shook her head. "I don't just believe you," she said. "I mean, I certainly would believe you if I had no evidence of my own. But as it stands, I don't need to, because I was here with you last night and I know for a fact that you weren't out killing anyone."

Conor smiled, but it was a sad smile that did not reach his eyes. "It's strange to think that we had such a beautiful night together just last night," he said. "And this morning, everything has gone to hell."

"But you don't understand," Astrid said excitedly. "How does he not see it? I have the solution to this problem right here in my hands! I was with you last night. I was with you all night, and I can vouch for the fact that you weren't committing any murders. I can talk to the constable."

Conor shook his head. "No, Astrid."

“What?” She blinked. “Why on earth not? He’s got his eye on the wrong man, and I know the truth. Of course I’m going to help.”

“I appreciate that,” Conor said. “And of course you should tell the truth if you’re asked. But I don’t think they’re going to ask you, Astrid, and I don’t think they’ll be interested in what you have to say on the matter even if you do approach them and try to volunteer information.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re my wife,” he said simply. “Everyone expects that you would defend me. They expect that you would lie to defend me, if necessary.”

“But—”

“It doesn’t matter if you would or you wouldn’t,” Conor said. “As my wife, you can’t be compelled to testify against me in court. And that also means you can’t testify on my behalf. Your words won’t matter. Tell the constable we were together if you wish—it can’t hurt. But don’t expect it to do us any good, either. I’m sure he’s expecting you to say exactly that.”

“Then there’s nothing I can do?” Astrid whispered, feeling as if the ground had dissolved beneath her. What am I going to do if Conor is arrested and taken away? I can’t live in this big house without him. Will they send me back to my father when I’ve only just started to love my husband?

“I don’t want you to worry,” Conor said. “I’ll find a way out of this. After all, I’m not the one who killed Lord Hayward. There must be evidence out there that points to who the real guilty party is. I just have to hope that the police will find that evidence.”

“But what if they don’t?” Astrid asked. “What if they remain convinced that you’re the murderer?”

“I have money,” Conor said. “I don’t like to think of things in these terms, but money can help a man out of a lot of trouble. I can afford to hire a very good lawyer, someone who can argue my case for me in court and help a judge to see sense.”

“I’m afraid,” Astrid admitted.

He stood, took her hand, and pulled her to her feet, wrapping her in his arms. “I knew I should have kept this from you,” he murmured. “It’s too much.”

“No,” she said quickly. “It isn’t too much, Conor. I’m glad I know. Truly. I just...can’t help being afraid for you. For us. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t lose me,” he said. “I promise you that.”

You can’t promise me anything, she thought fearfully. We have no idea what will happen.

But she wanted to be strong for him. She wanted to be a good partner, a good wife, and she knew that this must have been even more frightening for Conor than it was for her. After all, he was the one at risk of losing everything and ending up in jail. He was the one accused of murder.

It’s so very like him to think that he has to be strong no matter what’s going on, she thought. To think that he can’t betray any emotion. And I don’t want him to feel like that with me.

She had to be brave so that he wouldn’t feel like he had to hide his feelings from her.

So she didn't argue with his promise, didn't tell him it was impossible to keep. She swallowed hard and nodded instead.

"What should we do?" she asked. "I suppose we'll need to be prepared for the arrival of the constables."

Conor nodded. "We should go about our lives as normal," he said. "The exception, of course, is that I'm going to want DuBois around at all times now, on the off chance that whoever murdered Lord Hayward should commit another murder. I'll want someone who isn't married to me to bear witness to my whereabouts in that event."

Astrid nodded. "That's a good idea."

"You've had a shock," he said gently. "Why don't you go up to your room and take a few hours of quiet time before supper. I could do with a bit of the same."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Astrid bit her lip. She didn't really want to be apart from him now, knowing that the law might soon come between them and tear them apart for good. "Will we have time together after supper?" she asked.

"As much as you'd like," he said.

"I think I'd like to spend the night with you again tonight," she murmured, blushing.

He nodded. "I'd hoped you would."

She wondered how much of her reasoning he had intuited. Did he know that she wanted to be with him because she was afraid tonight might be their last chance? Perhaps he hadn't thought about it that deeply. It was possible that he was so preoccupied with his own concerns that he wasn't thinking about the motivation behind any of Astrid's actions.

Astrid left the parlor and made her way up to her private chambers. He was right. She would benefit from a couple of hours alone to get her thoughts in order. Because, despite what he had said, she didn't believe that there was nothing she could do to help him out of his predicament.

I may be his wife, she thought fiercely, and I may be a woman. But I'm as capable as anybody of telling what I see. If I can find evidence that exonerates him, the constables and the judge will have to listen.

She would not stop looking, she vowed, until she found proof of her husband's innocence.

Chapter 23

They were at the supper table when the knock on the door came.

Conor knew immediately what was happening and had time, before the fear hit, to feel a pang of sadness for the fact that he wouldn't be spending the evening with Astrid as they'd hoped. Instead, tonight was about to take a very different turn.

"Shall I see who it is, My Lord?" DuBois asked. He was standing in the corner and trying to be unobtrusive, though Conor hadn't been able to quite overlook his presence. Perhaps it was because Astrid kept glancing over her shoulder at him. She still hadn't adjusted to the idea of having servants.

"That won't be necessary, DuBois," Conor said, getting to his feet. "I'll go myself."

Astrid looked stricken.

"It's all right," he told her. "I'm sure it'll be all right. They can't prove I did something that I didn't do, after all."

Astrid nodded but didn't look very reassured.

Conor went to the front door and opened it. Sure enough, the constable stood there, looking gravely serious.

"Good evening, Officer Fitzroy," he said. "Would you like to come in? My wife and I are just sitting down to supper, and if you'd like to join us, I'm sure the kitchen can find you something."

"I'm afraid not," Fitzroy said. "I'm here to take you downtown for questioning in the matter of the murder of Lord Christopher Hayward."

“I’m happy to answer any questions you have right here in my own home,” Conor offered, knowing as he did so that it was futile. Fitzroy had come here to bring him downtown. Conor was likely going to end this night under arrest.

Still, I’ve got to try to fight this. For Astrid’s sake, if nothing else. She puts up a brave front, but I can see how frightened she is. She shouldn’t have to go through this. She’s done nothing to deserve it. The only thing she ever did was to take a chance by marrying a man she knew to have a bad reputation.

And look how poorly that’s serving her now.

As Conor had predicted, Fitzroy shook his head. “We’ll do this down at the police station,” he said. “I’ve got a carriage waiting outside to take you. If you resist, there are more officers on the street—”

“I’m not going to resist,” Conor said.

“That’s wise,” Fitzroy said. “I really didn’t want to have to use force.”

But you would have. Conor heard the implication in the constable’s statement. “May I at least have a moment to say goodbye to my wife?”

“A moment. No longer.”

Astrid came out into the foyer, a clear indication to Conor that she had been listening to every word. “Officer,” she said, “I was with my husband all last night. He couldn’t possibly have done what he’s been accused of, because he was with me.”

“I’m afraid we’re not here for the testimony of his wife,” Fitzroy said. “Say your goodbyes, Lord Middleborough.”

He turned to Astrid and embraced her. “Be strong,” he murmured into her ear. “Everything will be all right. I’ll be back before you know it. Let DuBois take care of you.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Her body shivered in his arms, and he realized she was crying. “I know you,” she said quietly. “I know who you are, Conor, and I know you’d never hurt anybody. Remember that, all right? If they try to make you feel badly about yourself, if they accuse you of things...just remember who you are. And remember that I love you.”

He kissed her only briefly because he couldn’t stand to make a spectacle of it. He couldn’t stand to pour his heart into it, as if it was a real, lasting goodbye. He had to pretend to himself that he would be back with her tonight, even though he wasn’t at all sure that that was true.

Then he turned back to the constable. “All right,” he said quietly. “Let’s go.”

Fitzroy walked him out of the manor and down to the waiting carriage with one hand firmly gripping his arm. Conor wouldn’t have tried to run away. He knew enough to know that that would only make him look more guilty in their eyes. But apparently Fitzroy wasn’t going to take any chances.

The carriage ride was all too short. Conor couldn’t help thinking of it as his last moments of freedom. When he was led into the police station and taken to an interview room to be questioned, he felt as though he might as well have been locked away already. He was sure that this wouldn’t lead to anything good for him, and that he would find himself in a cell before he saw sky again.

Fitzroy took the seat opposite Conor’s. “Where were you last night?” he asked. “Take me through your whole night.”

“There’s not much to take you through,” Conor said. “I planned an indoor picnic

lunch to share with my wife. We ate in the parlor of Middleborough Manor, in front of a fire. We were there for several hours. Then we went to bed.”

“Can anyone testify to any of that?” Fitzroy asked.

“Well, she can,” Conor said, feeling somewhat testy. “She did, in fact, and you rejected her testimony. You said you didn’t want to hear from her.”

“You must have known that would happen,” Fitzroy said. “You’re a wise man, Lord Middleborough, and an Earl to boot. You know I can’t take the word of your wife when it comes to something like this. Did anyone else see you? Any of your household staff?”

“No,” Conor was forced to admit. “I’d asked them to give us privacy for the evening.”

“Well. That’s rather convenient.”

“It’s actually very inconvenient. If I’d had my butler in the room with me, he could tell you the truth, and we could end this charade.”

“You’ve been married for several weeks, Lord Middleborough, have you not?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Your business partner tells me you’ve stopped coming in to work.”

“Is that relevant?”

“It reflects a change in your behavior,” Fitzroy said. “Often, something like that can be a precursor to violent crime.”

“I stopped coming in to work because I’d just gotten married and I wanted to spend time with my new wife,” Conor said. He could hear the irritation creeping into his voice now. He took a deep breath and made an effort to compose himself. “She was a commoner,” he said. “She’s new to my lifestyle, and I wanted to make sure the transition was comfortable for her.”

“Things are said about you, you know,” Fitzroy said, looking down at the notepad in his hand as if reminding himself exactly what those things were. “Things are said about your behavior with women, for example.”

“I’m aware of those rumors. There’s no truth to them.”

“Is that why you chose to marry a commoner, perhaps? Because of the rumors that circulate about you?”

“I married her because I wanted to,” Conor said. “I’d admired her for some time before we married.”

“I see. And I wonder why she married you?”

“You would have to ask her that. Although I suppose, since you’ve decided to disregard her testimony, that you won’t be doing that.”

Fitzroy frowned. “Are you aware of the source of the rumors about you, Lord Middleborough?”

“I believe there are several sources. Isn’t that how rumors generally work?”

“Are you aware that Lord Hayward was one of those sources?”

“That doesn’t come as a surprise to me,” Conor said.

“Nor, I suppose, will you be particularly sad to have one source of ill gossip extinguished?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Good God,” Conor said. “You’re talking about a man’s life. No, I wasn’t fond of him, but that doesn’t mean I’m happy he’s dead.”

“You see, the trouble is,” Fitzroy said, leaning across the table. “We’re having trouble coming up with anyone else who would benefit from seeing this man dead. We can’t find motive for anyone else to kill him.”

“That doesn’t make me guilty,” Conor pointed out. “Maybe it just means you’re not a very good detective.”

“Then why don’t you tell us what you think happened?” Fitzroy suggested. “If you didn’t kill Lord Hayward, who do you suppose did?”

“All right,” Conor said. “If you really want to know what I think, I’ll tell you. I think it absolutely is about me. I think it is about my reputation and the conflict between Lord Hayward and myself. But you’re pinning the guilt on the wrong party.”

Fitzroy frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that all of this is being done to make me look bad,” Conor said. “It’s all about disgracing me, dragging my name through the mud. At first, they did that by crippling my prospects when it came to marriage. But then I got married anyway, thwarting their goals. So now they’re trying to pin a crime on me.”

“Who is?”

“Killian O’Flannagan,” Conor said. “Well, him and his cronies.”

Fitzroy looked very skeptical. “You’re saying O’Flannagan killed one of his own in order to make you look bad? You think he cares that much about your reputation?”

“He’s already shown he is obsessed with my reputation, Conor pointed out. “I’m not saying he did it himself. But someone associated with the Angry Boar is almost definitely behind this. I can’t think of any other answer that makes any sense.”

Fitzroy sighed. “It’s an interesting theory, Lord Middleborough. I will give you that. But you’ve got absolutely no material evidence to support it. Unfortunately for you, all the material evidence supportsourtheory. The murdered man was an enemy of yours. He was found in your club. And no one can account for your whereabouts at the time of his death.”

“Is anyone asking O’Flannagan and his friends about their whereabouts?” Conor asked bleakly. He was fairly sure he knew the answer to that question.

Fitzroy got to his feet without answering. “Wait here,” he said, and left the interview room.

Conor leaned forward, resting his head in his hands. How had he found himself in this situation? To think that such a terrible thing could happen at The Arc! It seemed impossible.It couldn’t have happened when the club was open, he thought.Too many people would have seen. Which means that whoever did it must have gotten in after-hours somehow.

God. That really did make Conor look guilty.I would suspect me too, if I was Fitzroy. I can’t even blame him.

Still, Conor felt that O'Flannaganmustbe responsible somehow. Whoever had done this would have known how damaging it would be to Conor, and although Conor had never been well-liked among theton, O'Flannagan was the only person he had ever

considered to be his enemy. O'Flannagan was the only person who had ever tried to do him harm.

I never thought he'd go this far, though, Conor thought. This feels like crossing a line. He wanted to make up stories about me—fine. But to get me arrested for murder?

A sudden pang of fear shot through Conor as his situation sank in. He was being arrested for murder. He would have to stand trial, and he wouldn't have any better answers on that occasion than he did today. And if he was found guilty...

I'll be in jail for the rest of my life.

God. Poor Astrid. What's going to happen to her? To be married for such a short while, and then to lose her husband to a thing like this...she deserves so much better.

Not for the first time, he felt a stab of doubt about having married her at all.

I love her. And I know she loves me. But I'm afraid this is going to ruin her life.

Fitzroy returned to the room and beckoned to Conor. "Come with me, Lord Middleborough," he said. "We're going to have to keep you in custody for the time being. I'll show you to your cell."

Wordlessly, Conor followed.

Chapter 24

"My Lady?"

Astrid turned. She had been pressed up against the window for hours, staring out at the road in the distance, hoping against hope that she would see the constable's

carriage come back toward Middleborough Manor. Surely, they would bring Conor back at any moment...

But now DuBois rested a hand gently on her shoulder, pulling her away from her vigil. "I don't think he's coming back tonight," he said quietly.

"How can they keep him, DuBois?" Astrid demanded. "He hasn't done anything wrong. You know he hasn't."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Of course, I do,” DuBois agreed. “I’ve known Lord Middleborough since he was a child. I know him better than almost anyone. I’ve always known how false the things people say about him are.”

“Then what should we do?” Astrid demanded.

“There’s nothing we can do, My Lady.”

“There must be something!”

Du Bois shook his head. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “I’m afraid he’ll have to handle things on his own for now. But never fear. Lord Middleborough is a very smart man, and he’ll know what needs to be done. He’ll find himself a lawyer who can help get him out of his mess.”

Astrid hated leaving the situation in someone else’s hands. She realized now just how fortunate she had been, after her father’s crime, to have been given a way to protect him from the trouble he’d been facing.

A lawyer will know what to do, she told herself firmly. Put your faith in that.

But how could she? Astrid had always had faith in the police before, and it was clear that they had gotten this horribly wrong. What if Conor’s lawyer was similarly bad at his job?

What if her husband, who she had just begun to know, ended up in jail forever?

She didn't think she could bear it.

There has to be something I can do, she thought to herself as she made her way up the stairs to the chambers she shared with Conor. She didn't want to return to the private room he had granted her. Not now. She wanted to be where the memory of him lingered and was strong.

She lay down on the bed in their shared room, curled up on her side against the anguish, and tried to think. What do I do? Who do I ask for help? How can I convince the police of his innocence?

Evidence. They need evidence. Hard evidence. My word isn't enough. So I've got to give them something tangible, something that proves he had nothing to do with it.

Was there any such evidence remaining from last night? She tried to think. DuBois had seen them settle in for their picnic, and she knew he would say so if asked. But he hadn't seen them after they'd finished eating, and Astrid knew the police would just claim that Conor had slipped out after supper.

There isn't any evidence that proves he was with me, she thought helplessly. I don't have anything that proves his innocence.

Which means the only way to exonerate him is to prove someone else's guilt.

Suddenly she was on her feet, a plan already fully formed in her mind. She couldn't think too hard about what she was going to do or else she would panic and back out. But it was a good plan, Astrid thought. If anything would work, this would.

She ran to her private chambers and rang the bell that would summon her lady's maid. By the time Betsy arrived, Astrid was sitting at her vanity and staring into the mirror.

“What is it, My Lady?” Betsy asked gently, and Astrid knew by her tone that she must have heard about Conor and his arrest.

“I need you to cut my hair,” Astrid said, running her fingers through her long, dark tresses.

Betsy looked confused. “Why?”

“And I need to borrow some of your clothes,” Astrid continued. “Do you think you have anything that will fit me?”

“My Lady, I don’t understand...”

Astrid turned to face the young maid. “Can you keep a secret?” She asked. “You must. I’m absolutely depending on you.”

Betsy swallowed hard. “I’ll do my best, My Lady.”

“I’m going to be leaving Middleborough Manor,” Astrid said. “But DuBois must think I’m still here. If anyone asks, you’re to tell them I’m in mourning in my room, and that I’m unwilling to receive any guests. It will be up to you to maintain the appearance that I’m here. You’ll need to bring trays of food up each night and dispose of them in whatever way you see fit.”

“My Lady, I don’t understand. Where are you going?”

“To the Angry Boar,” Astrid said.

“That pub? But why?”

“You know that Lord Middleborough has been accused of murder, yes?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Betsy nodded. "But he couldn't have done it."

"No, he couldn't have," Astrid said. "The man who was killed was a regular patron of the Angry Boar. I'm going to pose as a barmaid and see if I can learn anything about the death that I can go to the police with."

"My Lady, you can't," Betsy breathed. "It's too dangerous."

"I must," Astrid said firmly. "I have to do something. He's my husband, Betsy, and I love him. I can't just sit here in the manor, waiting and hoping that everything will turn out all right. I must do what I can to help him."

Betsy hesitated, then nodded. "I'll do what I can to help you, then," she said.

"Thank you," Astrid said fervently. "I can't hope to do this without you."

"Do we really have to cut your fine hair, though?" Betsy asked, running her fingers through it.

"You tell me. Would a servant ever have hair like mine?"

Betsy sighed. "No," she admitted. "A servant would cut her hair short so that it wouldn't interfere with her work."

"Then that's what I've got to do," Astrid said. "I can't have them so much as guessing at my true identity. I need to appear to be just another girl looking for a job."

Betsy nodded. "I suppose it wouldn't be safe for you to be in the Angry Boar if anyone realized you were Lord Middleborough's wife."

"Exactly. I need you to help me for my own protection," Astrid said. "Can you do it?"

"Yes," Betsy said, some steel in her voice now.

"Good," Astrid said. "Thank you, Betsy. I don't know what I would do without you." And for the first time since she had acquired a personal maid, that statement felt like the truth.

The rest of the day was a blur of activity. Astrid tried hard not to focus on what she was doing. She forced herself not to mourn the loss of her lovely dark hair, which had reached to her waist, as Betsy cut it off at the shoulders. She kept her attention instead on how free and light her head felt, how much pressure was suddenly gone from her neck and shoulders.

Betsy brought piles of clothes for Astrid to try on. Most of her maid's things were too small for Astrid, but she found a few dresses that would work. Betsy also chose a few items from the collection Astrid had brought to Middleborough Manor with her. Together, Betsy and Astrid altered those dresses, removing lace and other decorative details to make them as plain as possible.

"How will you get out of the house?" Betsy asked.

"You'll have to make sure no one is watching," Astrid said. "Clear the way for me so that I can sneak out the door. And then, you'll have to be in the foyer again tonight after midnight to let me back in. I don't have any way of knowing what time I'll be back on this first night, so I'll need you to stay awake and wait around until I get here. Can you do it?"

“Yes, My Lady,” Betsy said, her voice full of determination. “I can.”

“I’m very lucky to have you on my side,” Astrid said. “I don’t think I’d be able to do any of this without you, Betsy.”

“Lord Middleborough is innocent,” Betsy said. “I know he could never kill a man. I want to do my part to help see him free.”

On impulse, Astrid stepped forward and embraced her maid. Betsy froze for a moment in her arms, then returned the embrace.

“You’re not quite like any other lady I’ve ever served,” Betsy said. “Most of them would shy away from a man who had been accused of a crime.”

“Most of them shied away from Lord Middleborough before he was ever accused of anything,” Astrid pointed out. “They needed no great reason to keep them away. I may be of common birth, Betsy, but I think I see my husband more clearly than any of the nobles do. And I believe you see him clearly, too.”

“Thank you, My Lady.”

“Go now,” Astrid said. “You mustn’t be seen spending too much time with me today. If my disappearance should be discovered, I want you to be able to say you don’t know where I am and be believed.”

“You shouldn’t worry about protecting me, My Lady,” Betsy protested.

“It’s for my sake as well as yours,” Astrid assured her maid. “If anyone thinks you know where I am, they’ll work to pry the truth out of you. I know you wouldn’t willingly betray me, but they might threaten you or trick you, and I wouldn’t expect you to stay silent under those conditions.”

“I would,” Betsy said staunchly.

“I know you would do your best,” Astrid agreed, smiling. “That’s all I ask of you, Betsy, truly. Now go downstairs and spend the rest of the day with the servants. You can start telling them how distraught I am. Tell them I refuse to leave my room and that I don’t want to be seen by anyone.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Will I see you again before you leave, My Lady?” Betsy asked anxiously.

“Only on my way out the door,” Astrid said. “We won’t have time to speak.”

“Then let me say one last thing to you now,” Betsy said.

“What is it?”

“Have you ever been to a pub?”

“No,” Astrid said. “But I’ve read about them in books.”

Betsy nodded. “I’ve never done that, but I’m not sure a book can adequately prepare you for what you’ll be facing. You’ll be surrounded by intoxicated men who see you as nothing more than a wench to bring them more drinks. The lights will be dim, and the conversation will be loud. People will be shouting at you, and they might be touching you.”

Astrid shuddered, but she steeled herself against her fear. “I can handle it,” she said.

“I just want you to know what you’re facing,” Betsy said. “Make sure you don’t go anywhere alone with anyone. You might want to avoid talking to the men at the pub. And you don’t want to stand out in any way or be memorable to them at all.”

Astrid nodded. “Thank you,” she said. “This helps.”

“I’ll have a hot meal ready for you tonight when you get back, and a basin of water so

that you can clean yourself up,” Betsy said.

“Don’t get yourself in trouble,” Astrid cautioned. “Don’t you do anything that will call attention to you either.”

“I won’t.”

“All right. Then I think we’re going to be able to manage this,” Astrid said. “I’ll see you on my way out in a few hours.”

Betsy left the room, and Astrid sat on her bed, fingering the ends of her newly cropped hair and marveling at how quickly this plan had come together.

She just hoped it would help clear her husband’s name.

Chapter 25

Nobody knows you, Astrid reminded herself as she made her way down the street at dusk. Nobody knows who you are. You’ve spent your entire life in your father’s house, away from others’ eyes. Your wedding was very small. People may know you by reputation as the commoner who married the Earl, but nobody knows you by sight.

God, she hoped that was true.

If she walked into the Angry Boar and was recognized, this was all going to be over in a hurry.

Astrid liked her chances, though. In addition to being cut short, her hair was now tucked up under a bonnet. She knew that her long, smooth curls had once been her most distinguishing feature. She suspected that her own father might walk right by her without recognizing her now.

She hoped.

The Angry Boar was easier to find than she had anticipated. The patrons were raucous and rowdy, as Betsy had warned her that they would be. They spilled out of the building and onto the road, laughing and staggering. Awfully early in the evening to be so drunk, she thought, but she said nothing.

The inside of the pub was even louder, and smoke permeated the air. Uncomfortable and nervous, Astrid hesitated in the doorway. Maybe this was a bad idea.

Maybe it was. But if it had even a chance of helping Conor then she knew she had to try.

She stepped over the threshold and approached the bar. The man who stood behind it looked as though his face had been carved out of granite. He looked up at her and did a double take, and Astrid realized she probably wasn't the sort of person who usually came into this pub.

"Help you?" he growled.

Astrid took a steadying breath. "I'm looking for a job," she said.

The man raised his eyebrows. "You want to work here?"

"Yes, sir," Astrid said, nerves vibrating. What had he meant by you? Had he guessed who she was?

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

He regarded her for several seconds. "Can't pay much," he grumbled.

"That's all right," Astrid said, a flood of relief rushing through her. "Really. I just need a job. Any job. I'm willing to work cheap."

He eyed her suspiciously. Astrid could have bitten her tongue. I shouldn't have been so eager to accept his first offer, she thought. I should have negotiated. But then again, if she had tried to negotiate, there might not have been a second offer.

The man handed her a dirty apron. "I'm Horace."

"Betsy," Astrid lied. She hoped her lady's maid wouldn't mind having her name borrowed.

Horace pointed to a tray, and then to a table full of carousing men. "Take those ales to those fellows."

"So I've got the job?" Astrid asked, stunned by how easy it had been.

"Didn't say that, did I?" Horace said. "We'll try it for tonight. See how you do. Then I'll make a decision."

Astrid nodded. That seemed more than fair to her. And she could certainly get through a night of serving ale to drunk men if it was going to bring her one step closer to freeing her husband and proving his innocence. She picked up the tray carefully and made her way across the room.

The men looked up as she approached. “Here’s the wench with our drinks!” one of them exclaimed loudly. “You certainly took your time about it!”

Astrid didn’t bother to explain that she had just been given the job a few moments ago and therefore couldn’t possibly have gotten their drinks to them any more quickly. She carefully balanced the tray on one arm and transferred the mugs of ale to the table, avoiding eye contact as she did so. Betsy’s warnings rang in her ears. Don’t stand out to them. Don’t be memorable to them. Best that they just see her as an object.

The ales dispensed, she started away from the table. Suddenly, a man called after her. “Girl!”

She turned so fast she almost dropped her tray, startled by his call. “Yes?”

Immediately, she could have kicked herself. Hadn’t Betsy counseled her not to speak?

But the man was only waving an empty mug at her. “Aren’t you going to take these mugs away with you?” he asked, gesturing at the table. Sure enough, it was crowded with empty mugs from the men’s last round of drinks.

Astrid returned to the table without speaking and loaded up her tray with empty mugs. They were lighter than the full ones she had carried over here, of course, but she felt shaky now, her confidence having taken a hit. This hadn’t gone as well as she had hoped. She gripped the tray with two hands as she made her way back to the bar.

Horace was waiting for her and watching her with a scowl. “You’ve never worked in a pub before, have you?”

“What gave me away?” Astrid asked.

“Pretty much everything you’ve done since you walked in the door. It couldn’t be clearer that you don’t belong in a place like this. Why don’t you go on home to your father or your husband, or whoever’s supposed to be in charge of you?”

“I’m not married,” Astrid lied. The lies were starting to come more easily to her.

“Then who do you live with?” Horace demanded.

“I live alone,” Astrid said. “That’s why I need money. I’m alone in the world. I haven’t got anyone to take care of me.”

“You should go look for a job as a seamstress or something,” Horace said. “You’re delicate. I can tell. You’re used to being taken care of. The girls I employ are tough. They’re used to environments like this. They’ve seen more by their twentieth birthday than someone like you would in her life.”

“Maybe that’s not the life I want,” Astrid said.

Horace folded his arms across his broad chest. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Every middle-class girl should be grateful for what she has.”

What would he say if he knew I wasn’t middle class at all? Astrid wondered. What would he say if he knew I was actually the wife of an Earl? Would he be so overcome by her pedigree that he would give her whatever she wanted with no further argument? Or would he think she belonged here even less, and hasten her out the door?

She summoned all the courage she had within her and stood taller. “That was only my first try,” she said. “I learn quickly, Horace. I can do well at this. Give me a chance.”

Horace groaned. “I can’t believe this.”

“I promise you won’t regret it,” she said.

“Oh, really? I won’t? What about when your father comes in here looking for you and punches me in the nose for giving you a job? What then?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“I told you,” Astrid said, “I don’t live with my father.”

“Have you got a father?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “But he’d never look for me here. He won’t be looking for me at all. And if he found me, he wouldn’t pick a fight. He’s not very...physical.”

“I see,” Horace murmured.

“Come on. Let me try to learn the ropes,” Astrid said. “Do you have another tray of drinks that needs to be delivered?”

Horace sighed. “Give me a moment, and I will. You stand there and look pretty until I have need of you.”

“All right,” Astrid said, trying her best to sound agreeable.

“Lucky thing for you that you are pretty,” Horace added. “There definitely wouldn’t be a job for you here if you weren’t.”

Astrid leaned against the bar, doing her best to look casually unrefined. It was an effort. She had been raised to stand up straight, to keep her hands clasped in front of her and her eyes down. But the girl who had marched into this bar and demanded a job wouldn’t have done any of that. Being brave enough to act in the moment was one thing, but overriding years of habit was something else altogether.

She wondered if anyone found her presence here strange. She wondered if any of the

men had troubled to look up from their drinks and to notice the girl at the bar who didn't belong in this place.

She wondered if, even now, they were sitting at their tables and whispering about her.

“Betsy.Betsy.”

Astrid remembered her alias just in time and spun around. Horace had prepared another tray of drinks. She nodded and reached out for it. “Where does this one go?” she asked.

He pointed. “That table over there.”

The table was a little further away than the first one had been, and the men were just as rowdy. If Astrid hadn't known better, she would have thought Horace had deliberately set her a more difficult errand in order to test her.

That doesn't make sense, though. He has no control over who needs drinks taken to them.

She picked up the tray and crossed the floor to the table where the men were waiting. Without a word, she circled them, placing a mug of ale in front of each man and replaced on her tray with an empty one. When she had completed her circuit, she returned to the bar.

Not a single man spoke to her this time.

“Well,” Horace said begrudgingly as she arrived back in front of him and set her tray down on the bar. “That was better. Perhaps you can learn to do this after all.”

Astrid nodded emphatically. “I can,” she said. “I'm a quick study.”

“All right,” he agreed. “Keep it up. We’ll discuss the possibilities open to you at the end of the evening.” He pointed to the end of the bar. “Go and join the other girls, and they can assign you to a few specific tables and give you instructions on what you need to do.”

Astrid thanked him and went down to the end of the bar. A cluster of young women, all of them around her own age, regarded her doubtfully as she approached.

“You’re new?” one of them asked.

Astrid nodded. “My name is Betsy.”

“I don’t know what Horace is thinking,” another one said. “She’s obviously too soft for a place like this. She should be serving some fine lady in a rich home, not working here.”

“Excuse me,” Astrid said, her voice harsh. It was one thing for Horace to tell her he didn’t think she could handle this work, but Astrid wasn’t about to put up with it from these girls. “If you tell me what I need to be doing, I think you’ll see that I can handle the work as well as anybody.”

The girl who’d doubted her raised her eyebrows. “We’ll see about that,” she said.

“Give her a break, Vivian,” said one of the others.

“Shut up, Charlotte, and go wipe down the table in the corner,” Vivian said. Then she turned to Astrid. “Have you worked in a pub before?”

“No,” Astrid admitted.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Then you’re not ready to serve customers,” Vivian said. “Your job will be to collect empty mugs. Don’t talk to any of the men. Don’t offer anyone anything. Collect the empty mugs, take them into the back, and put them in the sink. That’s all. Do you think you can manage that?”

Vivian was clearly under the impression that she’d given Astrid some kind of onerous chore, but Astrid couldn’t have been any happier with her assignment. Collecting the mugs would give her the perfect excuse to walk around the place and observe what was going on without talking to anybody. She wouldn’t be noticed, but she would be in a perfect position to notice everything.

And if Killian O’Flannagan ever comes by to visit his pub, she thought, he’d better be careful. Because I’m going to have my ears out, and if he says anything that’s even remotely incriminating, I’ll go straight to the police.

Chapter 26

The rest of the night seemed to go by in a blur. Astrid kept expecting things to slow down, waiting for a moment when she would be able to stop and collect her thoughts, but that moment never came.

“There are mugs all over those tables,” Vivian barked at her when she found an empty chair and sat down for a moment, eager to rest her aching feet. “No patrons will take them if they look occupied, and then the pub won’t do business. Go and clean them up.”

And Astrid was off again.

How long is the Angry Boar open?she wondered. She had no idea how long she'd been working, but it felt like it must have been hours. Surely Betsy—the real Betsy—couldn't have stayed awake this long. She would be asleep now, and Astrid would just have to pray that nobody caught her on her way in later.

The clientele were another problem. Even though Astrid wasn't directly in charge of serving them, it didn't take her long to see that Betsy had been right about the kind of treatment she could expect from pub patrons. Hands seemed to find her every time she walked too close to a table. Astrid had no idea whether their little pinches and pokes were deliberate, nor could she decide what to do about it.

Just bear it,she told herself, gritting her teeth.You'll only have to be here a few days, most likely. Just long enough to find out something about Killian O'Flannagan that you can use to help Conor win his freedom.

She didn't dare ask any of the other girls about O'Flannagan. The last thing she needed was for Conor's rival to find out that the new hire at the Angry Boar had been asking about him.

That would make him start asking questions about me, she thought.And once he does that, it won't be hard for him to figure out who I am. I'm only safe as long as nobody is looking at me too closely.

Eventually, the pub's crowd began to die down. Astrid took a last load of mugs back to the kitchen, put them in the sink, and began to fill it up with hot water. She didn't know whether washing dishes was part of her job, but she supposed someone would come and stop her if she wasn't supposed to be doing it.

“You're the new girl, right?”

Astrid looked up. A girl she hadn't seen yet this evening was standing in the kitchen

doorway with a tray of glasses in her arms.

“I’m Betsy,” Astrid said.

“I’m Harriet.” The newcomer looked harassed. “We’ve got a man passed out on the bar out there. Ordinarily it would be my responsibility to wash the mugs, but we’re trying to get him out the door before Mr. O’Flannagan shows up. Would you mind finishing up in here?”

“Not at all.” Astrid’s heart raced. “Mr. O’Flannagan is coming?”

“He comes at the end of every shift to make sure things have gone smoothly,” Harriet said. She glanced over her shoulder, and Astrid could see that she was distracted.

“Go ahead,” Astrid said. “I’ve got things under control in here.”

“I owe you one,” Harriet said, and rushed out the door and toward the bar.

At the end of every shift! This was perfect. Astrid had hoped she would see O’Flannagan before too long, but she couldn’t have asked for anything more than an exact predictor of when he would be in the pub. All she had to do was wait around each evening for him to arrive and hope he said something that gave her a clue as to what had happened to his murdered friend.

I’ll introduce myself to him tonight, she thought. The situation was ideal. She was the new employee in his pub. He would want to know who she was. He would be excited to meet her. And perhaps in his excitement, he would let something slip.

It’s the best opportunity I’ll get.

But first she had to finish washing the dishes.

That was for the best, though. The evening had been so full of new and strange experiences that Astrid felt she could use a few minutes to herself to relax. She hadn't been responsible for washing dishes since she had left her father's house, of course. But growing up, it had always been a chore she'd found peaceful.

She submerged her hands in the warm water and closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of it. The muscles in her fingers relaxed—she hadn't even realized how tightly clenched they'd been. She scrubbed her hands together to wipe away the stickiness of dozens of spilled drinks and dirty mugs.

This job truly is disgusting, she thought ruefully. I feel terrible for the women who have no choice but to do this throughout their lives. I'm going to be getting out of here in just a few days, and I already feel as if I'm going mad.

She lingered washing the mugs, but finally the job was done, and she could put it off no longer. She made her way out of the kitchen and into the main room of the pub.

All the patrons were gone. Horace stood behind the bar, wiping up. "How was your first night?" he asked.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“It went well,” she said, unwilling to let him hear a complaint pass her lips. “I wonder if I might say hello to Mr. O’Flannagan?”

Horace raised his eyebrows. “What do you want with the boss?”

“Just to meet him,” she said. “Since I’m working on his staff now.”

Horace shook his head. “Well, you just missed him,” he said. “He was in a rush to get somewhere, and he only stopped in for a few minutes tonight.”

Astrid’s heart sank. “I missed him?”

“Don’t get so worked up. He’ll be in tomorrow. Talk to him then.”

She nodded. He was right. But she supposed a part of her had been holding out hope for a miracle, that perhaps she would be able to get the information she needed from O’Flannagan tonight and spare herself even one more day of this place.

She made her way home in the dark, feeling distraught and fearful as she negotiated the streets leading back to Middleborough Manor. Her father would have been appalled to see her out alone at night like this. Conor wouldn’t like it either, she thought.

And she could see, now, why it was something her father had tried for so many years to keep her from. There was no one around—right now. But it felt as though someone could jump out from around a corner at any moment and threaten her life.

Turning onto the drive that led up to the manor's front door felt like a long exhale. Doing her best to keep to the shadows in case anyone was looking out any of the windows, Astrid ran up to the front door.

It swung open as shed climbed the stairs. Betsy was waiting for her in the foyer, an anxious look on her face.

"Oh, Betsy!" Astrid flung herself into her maid's arms.

"We have to get upstairs, My Lady. Quickly."

Astrid followed Betsy without another word, racing on tiptoes up the stairs and into her chambers. Once the door was shut, she looked up at Betsy anxiously. "Did anyone notice I was gone?" she asked.

"No one," Betsy reassured her. "Here. I saved a sandwich from the kitchen for you. I'm afraid it's not as nice a supper as you could have had if you were here. I had to eat your chicken pie so that I could return the dishes and make the kitchen think you'd eaten it."

"You did right." Astrid accepted the sandwich and took a big bite. She hadn't realized until that moment just how hungry she was. "You were right about that place, Betsy. It was horrible."

"Did you find what you need?"

"I'm afraid not," Astrid admitted. "I'm going to have to go back and try again tomorrow."

Betsy frowned. "I wish you wouldn't," she said quietly. "I've been thinking about it, My Lady, and I don't think Lord Middleborough would want us to do this. He would

want me to convince you to stay home, where it's safe."

"I know he would," Astrid said. "But I can't be convinced, I'm afraid."

Betsy bit her lip.

"Don't worry, Betsy," Astrid reassured her maid. "It isn't at all your fault. There's nothing you can do to stop me. But I won't be able to rest until I've cleared his name. I have to keep visiting the Angry Boar until I speak to Killian O'Flannagan and hear from him personally what he thinks about Lord Hayward's murder."

* * *

The second day was shaping up to be just as bad as the first, with one minor exception—Vivian seemed marginally less irritated by Astrid's presence. It would take a little more time, Astrid thought, but it was possible that the veteran barmaid could be convinced that Astrid was up to this job after all.

In a way, it's too bad I'm not planning on staying here for long, she thought to herself. As soon as I win Vivian's favor, I'll be leaving, and she'll feel she was right about me all along.

She turned to gather more mugs from the table behind her—

And was startled by the sight of her father's face in the crowd.

She very nearly dropped all the mugs in her hands. What was he doing here, of all places? He had been Conor's solicitor. He would surely know about the bad blood between Conor and O'Flannagan. Had he really been coming to the Angry Boar the whole time? Could he have betrayed her like that?

Then another thought, a much more frightening one, slammed into her mind, and she turned and bolted for the kitchen, letting the swinging door shut behind her.

I can't let him see me!

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

She was lucky in the fact that she was unrecognizable. She was probably one of the only members of the town who nobody knew at all. But her father...he was one of the few people in the world who could identify her on sight.

If he caught a glimpse of her across a darkened, crowded room, it was true, he might not realize who she was. Not with her hair cut off and her servant's garb. Not here, in a place she had no business being.

But if he caught two or three glimpses, or if he got a look at her up close, he would absolutely know it was her.

Astrid had no idea what he would do then. Would he cause a scene? Would he give her identity away to Horace and the others who worked here? She had to assume not—surely her father would protect her—but it was possible that he wouldn't be able to conceal his shock. And that would definitely lead to trouble for her.

She would have to stay out of sight for the rest of the shift.

Quickly, she filled the sink up with water and submerged her hands, even though she had no mugs to wash. If anyone came back here, she would have to make up a story about having been ordered to clean a few mugs and hope that no one looked too deeply into it.

And she would also have to figure out, somehow, what her father was doing here.

Was it possible he was one of O'Flannagan's cronies? And if so, could he know something about Lord Hayward's death?

Astrid certainly didn't want to implicate her father in this crime.

But if he had information that could help prove Conor's innocence...well, she couldn't allow herself to rest until she'd gotten her hands on that information.

One way or another, she thought resolutely, I'm going to have to talk to him about this.

Chapter 27

Leaving Middleborough Manor in the middle of the afternoon was more difficult than leaving at night, because the manor staff was all around. But, as it turned out, Astrid didn't even need to make a secret of her outing.

"Of course you would want to visit with your father during this trying time," DuBois said. "Are you sure you wouldn't like us to send a carriage for him and bring him here to see you?"

"That won't be necessary, thank you." Astrid definitely didn't want to have this conversation here at the manor. If it turned out her father was in some way culpable for what had happened to Lord Hayward, she wanted to leave herself some options when it came to how she would proceed.

But if it comes down to him or Conor, I'm not going to protect him, she swore to herself. I'm not going to let my husband take the fall for my father's crimes. We've both done more than enough to keep him out of jail already.

DuBois had the carriage summoned to collect her at the front door of the manor. It was such a different experience from walking home from the pub late at night that Astrid could hardly believe both events belonged to her world. Last night I was a lonely bar wench, she thought to herself. This afternoon, I'm the wife of an earl. What a strange life this is.

The carriage dropped her off in front of her father's home. Even from the outside, it was achingly familiar, and Astrid felt a pang in her heart. "Give me an hour," she told the footman. "Then come back and pick me up."

"As you say, My Lady."

She rapped three times on her father's door with the brass knocker mounted there, feeling bolder than she ever had in her life as she did so. The idea of demanding entrance to this house made her feel, for the first time, the weight of her new status as Lord Middleborough's wife. Always before, her father had been in charge of her.

But now my status outranks his. Now I can tell him what to do.

He would always be her father, of course, and in that sense, he would always outrank her. But this shift in power between them made Astrid feel more on a level playing field with him. She felt equal to the task she had come here to achieve.

After a moment, the door opened. There stood her father, just as she remembered him.

And for a split second, Astrid wanted to throw herself into his arms and sob, as she had when she was a little girl. So many terrible things had happened over the past couple of days. Her husband had been taken away from her just as she'd begun to love him! It wasn't fair. And here was her father, the man who'd always held her when she'd cried out against the unfairness of the world as a child.

But she wasn't a child now.

She had to stay strong, for Conor's sake.

"Father," she said. "May I come in?"

“Of course,” he said, standing back and holding the door open for her. “I paid a call to Middleborough when I heard the Earl had been arrested, but I was told you were taken ill and that you weren’t seeing anyone.”

Astrid frowned. It had not occurred to her that her father might come to see her, that her subterfuge might keep him out. “I wasn’t told,” she said. “I would have made an exception for you, of course.”

“I’ve been worried about you,” he said. “I couldn’t believe Lord Middleborough was accused of murder.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

It pained Astrid to see how quickly the news of her husband's arrest had spread. "He didn't do it, Father," she said. "I was with him during the hours when the man was killed. He couldn't possibly have done it."

Her father nodded. "I never thought he had," he said.

"Then how do you explain your association with Killian O'Flannagan?"

He turned and stared at her. "What?"

She could bear it no longer. "I saw you, Father! I was at the Angry Boar last night, and I saw you there! What in God's name were you doing in that place? You must know that O'Flannagan is Conor's sworn rival."

"What was I doing there?" he asked. "What were you doing there, Astrid? The Angry Boar is no place for a young lady, even with her husband to look after her. What could you possibly have been thinking?"

"I took a job there," she admitted.

"You what?"

"I had to!" she defended herself. "I had to insinuate myself among those men, to find out what they were saying about Lord Hayward's murder. I think one of them must know what really happened, Father, and they must know that Conor isn't guilty. I think it's possible they're setting him up to take a fall for something they did."

“Astrid, wait a minute—”

But she couldn't seem to stop herself now that she'd begun. “You know, don't you, that O'Flannagan and his friends are the ones who have been spreading rumors about Conor?” she asked. “All the unsavory things we've ever heard about him have come from them.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because Conor told me. And I believe him. You're the one who told me he was a good man, Father—”

“He is a good man. I remain convinced of that.”

“Then how can you be socializing with his enemies!” she cried. “These are the people who I believe conspired to take him down. And it's not only Conor's life they're ruining with their words and their actions, Father. Did you think about that? It's my life, too. My husband is in jail now, and I'm left all alone in that giant manor. Now I'm the one being gossiped about!”

“Astrid, stop,” Tobias interrupted. “Calm down. Come and sit in the parlor and let's talk.”

Astrid opened her mouth to shout that she didn't want to talk, that she wanted him to give her answers, only to realize how foolish such a statement would be. She inclined her head and followed her father into the parlor, where they took their old familiar seats.

“I was not at the Angry Boar to socialize,” Tobias said, once he'd seated himself.

“You weren't?”

“Of course not,” Tobias said. “Astrid, you lived with me for over twenty years. Have you ever known me to socialize with those men?”

“You didn’t always tell me where you were going or what you were doing—”

“The answer is no. You haven’t. And that’s because they’re no friends of mine. I know what kind of people they are. I knew better than to believe the stories they tried to tell about Lord Middleborough, and I know better than to trust the lies they’re feeding me now.”

“What lies are they feeding you?”

“The ones you’d expect,” Tobias said. “They’re sure that Lord Middleborough is guilty of the murder of which he’s been accused, or so they say. They say it was only a matter of time until his jealousy and his outrage at them drove him to kill.”

Astrid’s eyes filled with furious tears. “That’s not true!” she protested. “He’s nothing like that, Father. He’s kind and gentle, and...and he’s strong, but I don’t know what being locked away will do to him. It’s so hard for him to open up to people. I think he’s been emotionally locked away for a long time.”

And he was just starting to open up to me, she added to herself, not wanting to share those private details with her father. We were just starting to really grow close to each other. What if I do get him back, but it’s too hard for him to trust me, or anyone, ever again?

“I went to the Angry Boar for the same reasons you did,” Tobias said. “I wanted to find out what was being said. I consider Lord Middleborough to be a part of my family, after all.”

“You do?” She hadn’t known that.

“Of course,” Tobias said. “He’s my son-in-law. Married to my beloved daughter.” He reached out and took her hand. “I know I’ve disappointed you, Astrid—”

“No, Father—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“It’s all right. I know I have. You don’t have to say otherwise to protect me. Now I just want to do everything I possibly can to help you and Lord Middleborough out of this terrible predicament.”

Astrid’s eyes filled with tears again. She had believed that she was in this on her own. It was wonderful to realize that she had her father on her side. “Thank you,” she whispered, unable to give her gratitude full voice.

Tobias nodded. “You should be aware that I’ve also had conversations with the solicitor who works on the books at the Angry Boar.”

“You have?”

“I got him to show me the Angry Boar’s financial records and, Astrid, that pub has been party to enough financial fraud that we could close them down permanently if we wanted to do so.”

Astrid gasped. Here, at last, was a card she might be able to play. “But why would the other solicitor allow you to see the books?” she asked. “He would have been betraying his own employer.”

“Because I got him half the jobs he has in the first place,” Tobias said. “Lord Farnsworth knew what he was doing when he threatened my reputation and my livelihood—it truly is most of what I have. Many of the solicitors in this town got their start thanks to my offering their name around. They know I could ruin their careers if I wanted to.”

“You threatened him?” Astrid gasped.

“Yes, I did,” Tobias said. “I wouldn’t have acted on my threat. But I needed to see those books, and I’m glad I did, because they confirmed what I believed about the Angry Boar. Are you sorry I chose to act? Do you wish I hadn’t done what I did?”

Astrid thought of how it would feel to march into the Angry Boar, the place where she had been taunted by the patrons and told she would never be enough for her coworkers, and tell them she was shutting the place down.

She thought of how it would feel to face Killian O’Flannagan and tell him that he was the criminal, that she knew it, and that she was going to make sure everyone else knew it too.

She thought of how it would feel to tell them all that they had to leave Conor alone forever, that if they didn’t, she would never leave them alone.

“No,” she admitted. “I’m glad you did it.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” he said.

“But, Father, what are we actually going to do with what you’ve learned?” she asked. “We could go to the police, I suppose, but it only gets O’Flannagan into trouble. It doesn’t exonerate Conor, and that’s the only thing I really care about.”

“I know,” her father agreed. “But if we let O’Flannagan know that we know what he’s been up to, he may be willing to tell us who the real murderer was.”

“You don’t think it was him?”

“No, I don’t think a man like O’Flannagan would kill with his own hands,” Tobias

said. “I’m sure he had someone do the dirty work for him. And if he feels he’s at risk of losing his business, he might be willing to turn on that person. This whole affair has been about advancing his business, hasn’t it?”

“You’re right,” Astrid agreed. “It seems like a bit of a long shot to me, but it’s far better than no shot at all.”

“The only question that remains is how we confront him with the knowledge,” Tobias said. “How do we get ourselves in front of someone like Killian O’Flannagan long enough to convince him that we know what we know?”

Chapter 28

Astrid fluttered about in the foyer of Middleborough Manor, feeling excited and anxious. It felt wonderful to be doing something that stood a real chance at contributing to her husband’s freedom. But it was also frightening.

The plan she had come up with for confronting Killian O’Flannagan was a daring one, and she didn’t think her father was going to think much of it. He had never been a brave man. But, she reminded herself, he was brave enough to go to the Angry Boar in the first place when he thought we needed information. And he was able to get the information we needed.

She decided not to write off his willingness to be involved in her plans before she had even spoken to him. She would give him a chance. He had surprised her once. Maybe he would do so again.

“DuBois,” she said, “I’m going to wait in the parlor. When my father arrives, I’d like you to show him in directly.”

“Yes, My Lady,” DuBois agreed. “And might I say that I and the rest of the staff are

very happy to see you out of your room?”

“Thank you, DuBois.” Astrid turned and went to the parlor, thinking to take her favorite seat by the fire and try to relax as she awaited her father’s arrival.

But the idea of sitting and waiting was too overwhelming. Instead she found herself pacing, practicing in her mind what she would say to her father when he arrived, practicing the argument she would make if he fought back against her plan.

There’s nothing he can say, she reminded herself. There’s nothing he can say that will convince me that this isn’t the best possible idea for us.

She heard the sound of the front door opening and footsteps crossing the foyer. A moment later, DuBois appeared in the parlor doorway.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Mr. Tobias Dawson to see you, Lady Middleborough,” he announced, directing her father into the room.

“Thank you, DuBois,” Astrid said. “Father, please, won’t you sit down?”

Tobias turned in a slow circle, taking in the room around him. “This really is a lovely home you have,” he said. “I must admit, I’m impressed by how comfortable you seem here, Astrid. It’s good to see you doing well.”

Astrid nodded. “I’ll be doing much better once my husband is released,” she said. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to get right to business. Every moment wasted is another moment Lord Middleborough spends alone in a cell.”

Tobias nodded. “I quite agree.” He sat down in the chair that would ordinarily have belonged to Conor.

Astrid felt her throat constrict. It felt wrong to have anyone else sitting in Conor’s chair, even her own father. But he doesn’t know, she reminded herself. It’s only a chair. It’s not as if it matters. You’re just upset because you miss him and wish he would come home.

So she sat down in her own seat and forced herself to be still. “I’ve been thinking about the information you gave me since last night,” she said. “And the only think that I can think for us to do is to confront Killian O’Flannagan directly.”

Tobias frowned. “I’ve thought on that too, daughter,” he said. “I think it makes much more sense for us to send him a letter.”

Well, they were off to an inauspicious start. “Why would that be better?” Astrid asked her father.

“The main advantage is that it allows us to preserve our anonymity,” Tobias said.

“But how is that helpful?” Astrid demanded. “We can’t remain anonymous if we’re going to demand something in return for not going to the police with what we know.”

“I believe we can, actually,” Tobias said.

“I don’t see how.”

“We simply tell O’Flannagan in the letter that he must come forward with the true identity of Lord Hayward’s killer,” Tobias said. “We let him know that if he doesn’t comply within a set amount of time—a week, perhaps—then we’ll take the information we have about his business dealings to the police.”

Astrid shook her head. “Father. You can’t be serious. You must see why that isn’t going to work.”

“I see no problem with the plan,” her father said stubbornly.

“Well, I do,” Astrid said. “It’s going to be obvious that we were the ones behind it. Who would benefit from Conor going free? Me. Nobody else in town is likely to care very much about his well-being. O’Flannagan isn’t a stupid man, he knows I’ve got the biggest stake in it.”

“I fail to see how he could think you were involved,” Tobias said. “You’re just a girl.”

“But you’re not. And everyone knows how much you care for me, how much you

would do to make me happy. Don't you see how neatly it all fits together? My husband is arrested, and hardly a few days later, information surfaces about a financial crime that Killian O'Flannagan has committed. Who else could be involved in uncovering that information but my father, the solicitor?"

Tobias paled slightly. "I see what you mean," he admitted. "Perhaps we should take some time and think about this before we act."

"I don't think we need to," Astrid said. "I've got another plan."

"Yes," Tobias said. "You mentioned that you thought it would be a good idea to confront him directly. But I have to say, I don't think that's a very good idea at all, Astrid."

"He's going to know it's us if we take any action at all, Father."

"Maybe not."

"He is. And I refuse to sit by and do nothing while my husband is in jail for a crime he didn't commit."

Tobias leaned forward in his chair. "Astrid," he said. "Perhaps you don't understand what a dangerous proposition this really is. You're talking about confronting a volatile and dangerous man. Not just confronting him but threatening him."

"Yes, I am," Astrid said firmly. "I have to let him know what will happen if he doesn't cooperate. We're planning on asking him to give information against someone else, likely a close friend or associate of his. There's no way he'll tell us what we want to know unless we make it clear that his livelihood is at stake if he doesn't."

“You’re not thinking,” Tobias insisted. “He won’t give you what you want. When a man like O’Flannagan feels cornered, he doesn’t make rational decisions. He lashes out.”

“What makes you say that, Father?” Astrid said coldly. “Is it because that’s what you did when you felt cornered? You lashed out by stealing from Conor, and then by promising him my hand in marriage?”

“That’s exactly right,” Tobias said. “That’s exactly what I did. In many ways, Astrid, I am no better than this Killian O’Flannagan. I’ll protect my own people and my own business at almost any cost. And because that’s the way I am, I can well predict what he will do when he’s confronted with this information.”

“What will he do?”

“He might become violent,” Tobias said.

Astrid thought about her experiences at the Angry Boar. Although she had spent only three nights working there and hadn't yet come face to face with O'Flannagan, she could well believe that the pub's owner was the sort of man who might turn violent if pressed.

And there was the fact that she believed him to be associated with murder to consider. If she was right about that, she knew already that violence wasn't something that bothered him significantly.

I must remember that bad financial practices are not the worst thing I'm accusing him of, she told herself. I'm also accusing him of having knowledge of, or maybe even a hand in, the murder of a nobleman. That's a terrible crime. If he's guilty, more than just his business would be at stake.

Maybe father is right. Maybe he will turn violent when he hears what we've come to say.

But it doesn't matter.

She had gone into the Angry Boar knowing that the atmosphere would be risky and unsavory. She had done it for Conor. And now she would go in again and sit before Killian O'Flannagan. She would say what she needed to say.

Nothing was more important than securing her husband's freedom.

Tobias was watching her anxiously, and she realized he was waiting for a response. "Maybe he will become violent," she said. "And I'll bring my footmen with me to guard against that."

"There are a lot of men in that pub, Astrid. They might well outnumber you and your footmen."

"They might," she agreed.

"If you insist on going, you should at least bring the police with you."

"I can't do that," she said. "You know I can't. If I turn O'Flannagan into the police, I'll no longer have any leverage over him. I'll have no way to compel him to tell the truth about who murdered Lord Hayward. He needs to see that there's a way for him to stay out of trouble, that if he goes along with what I'm asking him to do, this problem will go away."

"But you can't mean to march into the pub, sit down in front of the man, and order him to do what you want," Tobias protested.

"That's exactly what I mean to do," Astrid said.

"No, Astrid." Her father's voice hardened, and Astrid recognized the tone he had used with her on so many occasions in the past. It was the voice he had used every time he had told her she wasn't permitted to go outdoors. It was the voice with which he had ordered her to be polite and respectful to Lord Middleborough when he had come to meet her for the first time.

I've done what he's asked all my life. I've always been obedient. But this time, I

know better. This time I'm going to do what's right.

"I'm sorry, Father," she said. "I've made up my mind about this."

"I can't do it," he told her. "It's too risky. I can't put either one of us at risk that way. We're just going to have to think of another plan."

"No," Astrid said. "This is the plan. This is what's going to work. We go tonight. We take O'Flannagan by surprise. We tell him what we know, and we tell him what we want. And either he cooperates with us, or else nothing could have made him do it. Either way, this is the only possible way this can be done."

"Astrid, I know you're anxious to free Lord Middleborough," her father said. "But I'm telling you, this isn't the way. It can't be done like this. I'm not going to walk into the Angry Boar and make demands of O'Flannagan. I'm simply not."

"All right, Father," Astrid said.

He was thrown for a loop. She could see it. "All right? Truly? You're just...conceding the point?"

"I'm not conceding anything," she said. "You told me you weren't going to go. That's fine. I'm certainly not going to compel you to do anything you don't want to do. I'll go on my own."

"Astrid!" he protested.

"You can't think I'm going to waste even a moment while Conor's freedom is in jeopardy," she said. "You can't possibly think it. It's a wonder I haven't gone running up the road to the Angry Boar already."

“You can’t do this by yourself,” her father said. “It’s far too risky for a young lady, even if you do have your footmen with you.”

“I would prefer not to do it alone,” Astrid agreed. “I would prefer to have my father by my side.”

Tobias closed his eyes and sighed.

Astrid knew she had won.

“Very well,” he said. “God save us if you’re wrong. We’ll confront Killian O’Flannagan tonight.”

Chapter 29

“Wait,” Astrid said. “Wait until they’ve all gone.”

Tobias Dawson looked more out of place lurking around on the street at night than Astrid could have imagined. She had felt uncomfortable out here when she had been the one navigating these streets all alone, but that was nothing to her father. He looked as if he wanted to run and hide.

I love him, but he’s a bit of a coward, she marveled. He always has been. Keeping me indoors all my life...well, I can’t doubt his love for me, but it really wasn’t a practical solution to the question of how to keep me safe.

“We shouldn’t do this,” Tobias said. “We shouldn’t be here. We haven’t thought this through.”

“I have thought it through,” Astrid said.

“You haven’t,” he countered. “I know you think you have, Astrid. I know you think you know what you’re doing—”

“Hush,” she whispered, cutting him off. Two more patrons made their way out of the

Angry Boar, both of them laughing and clutching each other's shoulders for support as they wandered up the road.

"This establishment is so unsavory," Tobias fairly whimpered.

"You've been in here before," Astrid said, feeling exasperated.

"Yes, but I never thought to return," Tobias said. "And certainly not with my daughter!"

"Sometimes we have to do things we never expected to do," Astrid pointed out.

For example, I never expected to marry an earl in order to free my own father from the threat of arrest. And when I did marry Lord Middleborough, I certainly never expected to fall in love.

I never anticipated that I would become the kind of girl who would do anything, break any rule, to secure her husband's safety.

I never thought of myself as someone who was strong.

It was pleasant to learn this new truth about herself, Astrid thought, even if it was difficult too. It was good to know that she could be relied upon, even though she wished there was no need for it.

She crept closer to the Angry Boar and angled her head, trying to see into the window. "I think it's empty," she said. "It looks like only the people who work there are inside now."

"What about O'Flannagan?"

“I don’t know what he looks like,” Astrid admitted. “Do you?”

“Of course.”

“Then you take a look.”

“Astrid, this is a terrible idea.”

“Father,” Astrid snapped. “If you don’t look in that window right now and tell me whether Killian O’Flannagan is one of the men in that pub, I’m simply going to march in there and announce myself.”

He stared at her. “When did you become this aggressive woman?”

“When my husband was falsely accused of a crime.”

“We don’t have to do this,” he said. “You’re a lovely young girl, Astrid. If you’re worried about your reputation, you needn’t be. It won’t be tarnished by this unfortunate incident. I’ll have no trouble marrying you off again.”

“Father!”

“Or is it that you’ve grown accustomed to the lifestyle an earl can provide?” her father asked. “If that’s your concern...well, I can’t offer you another marriage, but I’m sure you’ll be free to stay in Lord Middleborough’s Manor if you agree to remain wedded to him despite his arrest.”

Page 74

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“You don’t understand anything,” Astrid breathed. “I really thought you did, Father. I thought you knew what we were doing here.”

“Whatarewe doing here?”

“IloveConor,” she said. “This isn’t about my reputation, and it’s certainly not about money. I had no idea you thought so little of me.”

He said nothing.

Maybe that’s all he’s capable of understanding,she realized.Maybe he can’t fathom that a young woman would have another reason to act as I am.

But shouldn’t he be able to?

“You loved Mother,” Astrid said quietly. “Didn’t you? I think you did.”

“I loved her more than life itself,” Tobias said quietly. “I love her still. I think of her every day.”

“If you could do something—anything—to restore her to you,” Astrid said, “wouldn’t you do it? Even if it was dangerous? Even if the people around you told you it was ill advised? Would anything in the world stop you?”

Tobias looked down at his boots.

Astrid waited.

“No,” he said quietly. “Nothing would stop me. I would go to the ends of the Earth to have your mother back by my side.”

“Then you understand why I have to do this.”

“I didn’t realize you felt that way,” Tobias said.

“Neither did I, until recently,” Astrid said. “But I do.”

Tobias squared his shoulders. “Very well,” he said. “I will do all I can to help you.”

“You will?” She was stunned.

“Of course,” he said. “I love you more than anything, Astrid, and I won’t have you suffer as I did. As long as there is a chance that we can get your husband back, I will help you fight to do that.”

Astrid nodded, feeling suddenly tearful. “Thank you, Father.”

Tobias came forward and peered into the window. “Oh, he’s there,” he said grimly.

“He is? Which one?”

“The tall, dark haired one by the bar. That’s O’Flannagan.”

Astrid felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach. Killian O’Flannagan was a massive, hulking man, muscular and powerful. She had been determined to confront him—she was still determined to do so—but it hadn’t occurred to her that she would be facing someone of such bulk and mass. If this does turn violent, he could easily get the best of both me and Father. He wouldn’t even need the help of the other men in the room.

She turned and walked back up the road to the footmen she'd stationed a little way behind her. "Once I go inside," she said. "Approach the building. If there's any sign of violence from within, come in and help us get out."

"Do you expect trouble, My Lady?" one of the footmen asked.

"I hope not," Astrid said. "But you can't be too careful, I suppose."

The footman nodded.

Astrid turned to her father. "Let's go," she said.

He gave her no argument and followed as she made her way to the door of the Angry Boar.

You've got one chance, she told herself. One chance to speak. One chance to command the room before someone sees you and seizes control of this conversation. Speak first and do it loudly, because you might not get a second chance.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

So she strode inside and lifted her voice to the rafters. “Killian O’Flannagan! I wish to speak with you.”

O’Flannagan turned.

His face looked as if it had been chiseled from red rock. He had the lazy scruff of a man who needed to shave, but she could still see the sharp definition of his jaw beneath that. He narrowed his eyes as he took her in.

“Who the hell is this?” he asked.

It was unclear to Astrid just whom he was addressing, but it didn’t matter. She was here to speak for herself. “I am Lady Astrid Middleborough, wife of Lord Conor Middleborough, and I’m here to speak with you about my husband’s arrest.”

“And who’s this?” O’Flannagan asked, waving a hand at Tobias. “You look familiar.”

“I’m Tobias Dawson, sir,” Tobias said. “I’m the father of Lady Middleborough,” Astrid registered a note of wonder in her father’s voice as he introduced himself.

It’s because he’s impressed with me,she realized.He’s pleased to be able to introduce himself as my father. He considers that to be something special.

“I know who you are,” O’Flannagan realized. “You’re that solicitor.”

“I am,” Tobias agreed.

“What are you doing here now?”

“As I said, I’m here with my daughter.”

“But why have you brought your daughter here?” O’Flannagan asked. “This is no place for a young lady.”

“I’m employed here,” Astrid interrupted.

“You most certainly are not,” O’Flannagan scoffed.

“I am. Ask Horace, your bartender. He gave me a job earlier this week.”

“But,” O’Flannagan sputtered. “Why in the world would a lady seek out a job at the Angry Boar? And the wife of Lord Middleborough, no less!”

“Can we take a seat at one of your tables?” Astrid asked. “I’ll explain everything if you’ll grant me a few moments of your time.”

“I’m really quite busy.”

“I understand that, Mr. O’Flannagan, but I think you’re going to want to hear what I have to say. It has to do with some irregularities my father here found in your financial records.”

“Your father is not my solicitor. He’s never even seen my books.”

“Hear what we have to say,” Astrid said. “And then judge for yourself whether or not we’ve seen your books. But I can tell you that if you send us out of here without hearing us out, you are going to regret it. We’d prefer to settle this here, with you. Without involving the police.”

O'Flannagan paled.

We've got him,Astrid thought triumphantly.We've got him, and he knows we've got him.

"Very well," O'Flannagan said, his voice cold and tight. "Let's sit down."

"Perhaps your men could give us the room?" Astrid suggested.

"You don't give orders here," O'Flannagan said. "My men will stay."

"As you say."So much for the effort to face him one on one. She would just have to do her best to scream, quickly and loudly, if he looked like he was going to threaten her.After all, he still doesn't know about the footmen outside. I have that advantage.

She sat down opposite him. "I think you know, then, what we're here to discuss," she said. "My father recently had the opportunity to review the Angry Boar's financial records."

"That's a crime," O'Flannagan said sharply. "It's illegal for him to look at my books without being asked by me personally to do so."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

Was it a crime? Tobias Dawson had already demonstrated that he didn't mind breaking the law when it suited him to do so. Astrid glanced anxiously at her father.

"All right, it's a crime," Tobias said evenly. Astrid was awed by his sudden bravery. "Turn me in if you must. But your own crimes are far greater than any I've committed, Mr. O'Flannagan. You've committed fraud against your suppliers, your business partners, and your clientele."

"You can't prove it," O'Flannagan hissed.

"You must know that I can," Tobias said. "If I didn't have the information I needed to go to the police with this, I wouldn't be troubling you."

"Why are you troubling me?" O'Flannagan asked. "If you were going to go to the police, you would have done so already. There's something you're not telling me. What is it?"

"We're here about Lord Middleborough," Astrid said.

"What about him?" O'Flannagan asked. "He got what he deserved if you ask me. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before that man committed some heinous act. You're just lucky to have escaped being the victim of it, My Lady." He shook his head. "Poor Lord Hayward. He was a good man, and a good friend. He did not deserve to die like that."

"You're lying," Astrid said. "I know you are. You know something about Lord Hayward's death."

O'Flannagan raised his eyebrows. "What exactly are you accusing me of?"

"You know precisely what I'm saying," Astrid said. "I don't know if it was you personally or if it was a friend of yours, but I know that someone associated with the Angry Boar murdered Lord Hayward and planted the evidence in Lord Middleborough's club to make my husband appear to be guilty."

O'Flannagan's jaw dropped.

Astrid was not to be deterred. "I'm here tonight because I want your help in figuring out who was involved," she said. "I want you to either confess your crime to me or help me discover who the guilty party is. And if you refuse to help, I'll go to the police with what I know about the fraud you've committed. The Angry Boar will be permanently shut down, and you will go to jail."

Chapter 30

"How dare you speak to me so?" O'Flannagan breathed. "How dare you come to my place of business and make wild accusations against me when you have no evidence to speak of and no idea what you're talking about?"

"Because I know I'm right," Astrid said, determined to stick to her plan. Of course, he will argue. Of course, he will try to volley the accusation right back at you, to make it seem as though you're the one who's guilty of something here. But you're not. You've done nothing wrong. Don't let him make you forget.

"You're just a little girl," O'Flannagan spat. "You've no place here. Get out of my establishment at once."

Astrid drew herself up. "I am not just a little girl," she said. "I am the Lady of Middleborough Manor. You are nothing but a commoner. So mind your tone when

you speak to me.”

“You come here and accuse me of having a hand in a murder?”

“I say to you that I know beyond doubt that my husband is innocent of the crime of which he’s been accused,” Astrid said. “I know because I was with him all night the night Lord Hayward was killed. But beyond that, I know because I know him as a man.”

“Meaning what?”

“I think you understand what I mean,” Astrid said. “I think perhaps you understand better than anyone else in this town what kind of man Lord Middleborough really is. Because you’re the one who makes up all the heinous lies about him, aren’t you?”

O’Flannagan opened his mouth, but for once no words came out.

“You’ve spent a lot of time and energy on painting him as a villain,” Astrid said quietly. “I can only think of one reason any man would work so hard to ensure that his rival looked bad. You must have known that you would have to make him look bad, because he would never do it on his own.”

O’Flannagan shook his head, but he still didn’t speak.

“He’s a good man,” Astrid said. “I think you’ve known that about him from the start.”

“I don’t know how you can come in here and make such wild accusations,” O’Flannagan said again.

“Nothing I’ve said is wild,” Astrid said. “I’ve spoken nothing but the truth. And now,

Mr. O'Flannagan, you have a decision to make. Will you cooperate with me willingly? Will you tell me who was involved in Lord Hayward's death so that my husband can go free? Or will you compel me to involve the authorities?"

O'Flannagan clenched his hands into fists and looked down at the table.

If things turn violent, Astrid thought, anxiety stirring in her gut, it's going to be now. She readied herself to scream for her footmen.

O'Flannagan looked up. Anger—rage, really—was etched across his face. But when he spoke, his voice was even.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Very well,” he said quietly. “I’ll tell you what I know.”

Astrid’s heart pounded. Was this really going to work? She didn’t dare look at her father. She knew he had had his doubts about the plan, even more than she had.

O’Flannagan sat back in his seat. “I don’t know who was responsible for Lord Hayward’s death,” he said. “It wasn’t me. And it wasn’t any of my people, either.”

“Why should I believe you?” Astrid asked, feeling a lead weight settle into her stomach. She had thought he meant to cooperate...

“Believe what you want,” O’Flannagan said. “But it’s the truth. At this point, I would happily turn someone over if I knew they were guilty. I’ve poured my whole life into this business. I don’t want to lose it. I don’t suppose you can imagine what it’s like to dedicate your life to something.”

“I can,” Tobias said quietly, glancing at his daughter. “I believe him, Astrid.”

So quickly? How could her father be sure? “Say I believe you,” Astrid said, although she was far from accepting O’Flannagan at his word. “You were saying just a few minutes ago how confident you were of Lord Middleborough’s guilt, how you felt he’d gotten what he deserved.”

O’Flannagan shook his head. “What you said of him was true,” he admitted. “Lord Middleborough is standoffish and unpleasant at times, but I’ve never known him to be unkind. I’ve certainly never known him to be violent. He doesn’t strike me as the kind of man who would be likely to commit murder.”

“Then why are you putting that story about?” Astrid demanded. “Why are you saying such things aloud, if you don’t believe them? You must be trying to protect your own people because you know they’re guilty!”

“No,” O’Flannagan said. “I’m trying to advance my business. Nothing more. Lord Middleborough’s arrest is a good thing for the Angry Boar, and so is the fact that the dead man was found in The Arc. No one wants to drink there anymore. They’re all coming here.”

Astrid stared at him. “You are a really despicable person,” she said quietly. “A man is dead. A man has been falsely accused. And all you care about is the success of your business.”

“I didn’t kill him,” O’Flannagan said sourly. “There’s no need for you to take this out on me.”

“No need to take it out on you? You’re taking advantage of a horrible situation!” Astrid cried. “You’re using these terrible things that have happened to help advance your own ends! How can you live with yourself?”

“It’s none of your business how I live with myself,” O’Flannagan said. “Are you going to the police with the information you gathered illegally about my books?”

“I should,” Astrid said.

“Even though you would be implicating your own father?”

“I’ll go to the police myself,” Tobias said. “It would be worth it, to shut a man like you down.”

O’Flannagan raised his eyebrows. “I thought you said you believed me.”

“I believe you didn’t kill Lord Hayward,” Tobias said. “That doesn’t mean I believe you ought to walk free, given the kind of man that you are. My daughter is right. It’s appalling to see someone take advantage of a tragedy and try to turn it in his favor.” He turned to Astrid. “Do you want to turn him in?”

“Wait,” O’Flannagan said.

“For what?” Astrid asked.

“I can help you,” O’Flannagan said.

“How?” Astrid demanded. “You just claimed not to know who killed Lord Hayward. Are you changing your story now?”

“No,” O’Flannagan said. “But I have contacts you don’t have, Lady Middleborough. I know people, and I belong to this part of the town. And you don’t. I can ask around. I can find things out.”

“You mean you’d help us try to discover who committed the crime?”

“Someone out there knows something about it,” O’Flannagan said. “Instead of you and I trying to tear each other apart over this, maybe we should try to get our hands on the real murderer. Yes, I committed fraud and started rumors, and I may be a selfish man. But there are worse criminals than me to contend with.”

Astrid hesitated. “Do you really think you could help find the guilty party?” she asked. If we could find whoever it was, that would mean that Conor could be exonerated. Then everything would be all right again.

“I want to know who it was as much as you do,” O’Flannagan said. “Lord Hayward was a friend. He was one of the principal patrons of the Angry Boar. He helped us to

get our start, and he's kept us running through the hard times. He was one of the biggest supporters this business had."

In everything that had happened, Astrid hadn't had time to think about the murder from that perspective. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've been insensitive."

"I wouldn't have expected you to think about things that way while your husband is in jail," O'Flannagan assured her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:50 pm

“Still,” Astrid said. “You lost a friend and a business partner. It must have been very unpleasant to have me come in here accusing you of being responsible for his death.”

“I can’t say it’s been my favorite experience,” O’Flannagan agreed. “But I did wonder whether Lord Middleborough might actually be the guilty party. It didn’t seem in character for one such as him, but then, the police seemed to be so sure. I didn’t know what to think.”

“But you believe me?” Astrid said. “You believe me when I say it wasn’t him?”

“I do,” O’Flannagan said. “It takes a hell of a woman to stand up to me the way you just did. You must have been very sure of everything you were saying.”

Astrid nodded. “I am sure,” she said fervently. “If the police and the courts would only let me testify, this would all be over by now.”

“Perhaps there’s something more I can do for you,” O’Flannagan suggested.

“What do you mean?” Astrid asked.

“I’m a trusted businessman in this part of town—and I’d like that to remain the case,” O’Flannagan added, shooting a very pointed look at Tobias. “I know they won’t let you testify, you being the wife of the accused and all. But if I were to go down to the police station and vouch for Lord Middleborough, give a statement on his behalf—”

Astrid couldn’t help it. She let out a gasp. “You would do that for us?”

“I would expect a guarantee from you that you’ll forget what you’ve discovered about my finances,” O’Flannagan said.

“You’ll have it,” Astrid assured him.

“From both of you,” O’Flannagan said, turning to Tobias.

Tobias nodded. “Of course. If this works, if Lord Middleborough is allowed to go free, I’ll never trouble you again.”

“I don’t think I can convince the police to forget about him as a suspect altogether,” O’Flannagan said. “They must have some fairly convincing evidence if it’s led them to arrest the Earl of Middleborough. But perhaps I can convince them that it’s best to let him await trial at home with his wife.”

Astrid felt like she might start to cry at the thought of it. Conor, back at home with me. Back in my arms. “Please try,” she begged. “It would mean the world to me. And in return, I’ll do whatever I can to help you learn who really murdered your friend.”

O’Flannagan nodded. “Very well. I’ll speak to the police, and in the meantime, I’ll ask around and try to find out whatever I can. Perhaps you can visit the pub again in a couple of days’ time, and you and I can discuss what we’ve learned.”

“I’d like that.” Astrid got to her feet. “Thank you, Mr. O’Flannagan.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Get out of here before I change my mind.”

Astrid nodded, turned on her heel, and made for the door. She could feel more than see her father behind her, pursuing her, and knew that he was just as eager to depart the premises as she was.

“Come back to Middleborough Manor for the evening,” she said, once they were out on the street. “It’s a nicer journey than the trip back to your house. Safer. And our cook will put on supper for us.”

Tobias shook his head. “I should really get back home,” he said, and Astrid realized he wasn’t in the same celebratory mood as she was.

“That went well!” Astrid said. “Don’t you think so? He did get angry, but I think he’s really going to help us.”

“I think he is too,” Tobias agreed. “But you mustn’t get your hopes up too high, Astrid. I know you want to see your husband home again, but one man’s word might not be enough to sway the police. Lord Middleborough may have to stand trial before he has a chance at being released.”

Astrid knew her father was right. But still, as they turned onto the road that would lead them to the manor, she felt more hopeful than she had in days.

Chapter 31

The carriage that had delivered Astrid and Tobias to the Angry Boar was waiting for them a short way up the road. Astrid climbed in, making room for her father beside her.

“How do you really think it went?” she asked anxiously. Now that they had left the building, her nerves had caught up with her. She couldn’t believe how boldly she had confronted Killian O’Flannagan.

“I think you did as well as could be expected,” Tobias said. “Assuming he’s telling the truth about how he plans to proceed, I think you have a reasonable chance of seeing your husband back home pretty soon.”

“Do you think he has the kind of influence he claims to have?” Astrid asked. “Will his vouching for Conor be enough to convince the police that they should release him?”

“It won’t come down to anything about Conor’s character,” Tobias said. “That part will be a mere formality. This is going to be decided by dollars and cents.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

“Money?” Astrid frowned. “You mean O’Flannagan will have to pay for Conor’s freedom?” She felt suddenly despondent. “He must have been lying, if it’s like that. He would never pay for Conor to go free.” And if Astrid was being honest with herself, she wasn’t entirely sure she would have wanted him to. Yes, she wanted Conor home, but would Conor relish being in the debt of his rival? Somehow, she very much doubted it.

“No,” Tobias said. “Nothing so direct. But when O’Flannagan said that he was a trusted businessman, he didn’t mean he was trusted as a man. He meant that his business could be trusted to succeed. A significant portion of his income is used to pay the taxes that fund the police force. So he has clout with them.”

“I see...” Astrid hesitated, thinking this over. “I have money.”

“You have your husband’s money, which cannot be pledged to anything while he is in prison awaiting trial,” her father said. “If he were to be convicted, the money would fall to you, and you would have the right to do as you pleased with it. But until that time, you have nothing to offer the police. Financially, you have no worth.”

“And I’m his wife, so no one will listen to me about anything,” Astrid said bitterly.

“Take heart, Daughter,” Tobias said. “I think it possible that O’Flannagan will help you now that he has heard your story.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I just want Conor home again,” she said, feeling weak and exhausted. “I don’t care what I have to do.”

Her father wrapped an arm around her. "It was brave of you to go there today and face O'Flannagan," he said. "I never would have believed you had something like that in you. I have to think that Lord Middleborough will be proud when he hears what a tenacious wife he has."

"Or he'll be ashamed of me for acting improperly," Astrid said.

Tobias shook his head. "I would have expected to feel that way, if I hadn't been there to see you," he said. "But you were so bold. So sure of yourself. It was as if you expected, from the moment you walked into the pub, that you would be listened to."

"I was acting," Astrid confessed. "I thought that if I acted sure of myself, he would think that I was."

"Well, I believe it worked," her father said. "I'm proud of you, Astrid."

Astrid didn't know quite what to do with the emotions her father's pride stirred in her. She had always thought of him as someone who didn't quite understand her, who loved her but would never be able to empathize with the things she felt. Now it seemed that the two of them were on the same side.

At least one good thing came out of this mess, she thought ruefully. I'll never say it was for the best, but if it's brought me closer to Father, that's something to be thankful for.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Astrid was lost in her own thoughts, wondering what Conor would say when she explained to him what she had done to get him home. Would he be angry that she had gone to his rival?

It doesn't matter if he is, she decided. Let him be angry. I would love to have that problem. Because if he's angry with me, that means he's home.

She wondered how long it would take before she knew whether O'Flannagan had kept to his word, and whether his idea had worked.

I suppose he won't be able to see the police until tomorrow, she thought. I wouldn't expect him to go in late at night anyway. That's asking too much. But maybe that means Conor will be home by tomorrow night.

She would have to prepare him a fine meal, she decided. The finest of his life. His hired cook was much better at food preparation than Astrid could ever hope to be, but she wouldn't feel right unless she helped. She would go to the kitchen first thing tomorrow morning and insist that the night's dinner be the best Middleborough Manor had ever seen.

Conor isn't going to know what to think of me. Taking a job at the Angry Boar, working in his kitchen...I hope he can still see me as the woman he fell in love with. I hope none of this changes how he feels about me.

The carriage pulled up outside her father's home, and Tobias opened the door and climbed out. "Thank you again for your help, Father," she said. "Are you sure you won't come back to the manor with me tonight? You haven't been up to visit yet since the wedding."

"I should get some sleep," Tobias said. "And I daresay you'll want the house to yourself in case that husband of yours does return. He's not my biggest fan, either," he added. "He might not welcome me in his manor."

"It's my home too," Astrid said stubbornly.

"Perhaps that's so, but you're going to have plenty of explaining to do without accounting for the presence of your father." Tobias smiled. "You get home now, Astrid. If Lord Middleborough makes it back, send a courier to me and let me know.

If you haven't seen him by tomorrow night, send along a message and let me know about that too."

"I will," Astrid said. "Thank you for coming with me, Father. I know it wasn't easy for you to do."

"You're my daughter, Astrid. I'll do anything for you. Never forget it."

He shut the door and walked toward his house. Astrid watched his retreating back. For the first time since she'd been a child, she saw strength in his shoulders. He was a good man. He was a giant of a man. He had his flaws, but she had too often sold him short.

She would remember today the next time she doubted him.

The carriage sprang forward again, wheeling about in the road and heading up toward Middleborough Manor. Astrid sat back in her seat and thought how empty the manor would feel tonight. Thank God for the staff, she thought, wondering at how her perspective on having hired help in the home had changed. It was still awkward to be served and tended, but it was much better than being alone.

The cook would have prepared a hot meal for her. Astrid would take it in her chambers—her own chambers, not those she had shared with Conor. She didn't want to be overwhelmed by his absence tonight.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

And Betsy would be there. Betsy would sit up with Astrid as late as Astrid liked. It was part of her job as a lady's maid, but she also seemed to enjoy the conversation.

I'll tell her all about what happened today at the Angry Boar, Astrid thought. It will be good practice for when I have to tell Conor about it, and Betsy will give me some idea of how a normal person might respond to such a tale.

Also, she had to admit, she was proud of her exploits. She was proud of her cunning plan and her daring in carrying it off. She wanted to brag a little.

And after that, she thought, perhaps I'll stay up late reading for a while. Or maybe I'll enjoy a nice warm bath. I've had a hard few days, and I think I deserve to do something kind for myself. Besides, it would be good to scrub herself clean, to get herself looking good for Conor, when he came home. He would appreciate that.

The carriage slowed, then pulled to a stop.

Astrid sat forward, confused. They couldn't have arrived at the manor yet, could they? They hadn't been on the road long enough.

She pulled back the curtain and looked out the window, but all she could see was blackness.

Definitely not the manor, then. There were lanterns lighting the path leading up to Middleborough Manor. Even if one or two of them had gone out—which they wouldn't, because they were well tended—it was unthinkable that someone would have to approach in the dark like this.

She was just about to get out and ask the driver what was going on when she heard a loud noise, like the crack of the world's most powerful whip.

What was that?

But she knew. She knew by the spray of red that flecked against the glass of the carriage. She knew by the sudden shouts from outside, triumphant and outraged at the same time.

A gun. That was a gunshot.

They shot the driver.

Her body froze. She needed to run, to get away from here, but there was nowhere to go. The voices surrounded the carriage now. There was no way she could leave without running straight into whoever had fired that gun.

And they knew she was here. Of course, they knew. There was no point in having a carriage if you didn't have a passenger. In fact, Astrid thought, they probably knew exactly who the passenger was.

The only thing for miles on this path out of town is Middleborough Manor, she thought. With Conor in jail, I'm the only one likely to be returning there at this time of night. This is an attack specifically targeting me.

Why? Why did they want her? Who were they?

Could it be a coincidence that this was the day she had visited Killian O'Flannagan? What if everything he'd said to her at the Angry Boar was a lie? What if he had been party to the murder of Lord Hayward?

He wouldn't have wanted to kill me in his pub, she thought wildly. But here on the road, with no one watching...

Or maybe that was wrong. Maybe it was someone else altogether. She was the wife of an earl, after all. She must have considerable worth to a lot of people.

She looked frantically around the carriage, trying to find someplace to hide. Of course, it was a lost cause. If there had been a steamer trunk in here, as there had on the day of her move up to Middleborough Manor, she might have tried to cram herself inside it. But even that would have been a painfully obvious strategy, and she would have expected to be found within moments.

The voices drew closer. Astrid shrank back into the seat, trembling.

Thank God I didn't persuade Father to stay with me, she thought. If they're here to kill me, it's just as well they didn't get him too.

The door of the carriage creaked open.

The barrel of a pistol preceded a grinning man Astrid didn't recognize into the carriage. "Good evening, Lady Middleborough," he said.

Chapter 32

The sound of the cell door creaking open jerked Conor from his uneasy sleep.

He couldn't believe he had fallen asleep at all. It still seemed surreal that he was here, in jail for murder. His fine clothes looked out of place here. He felt dirty and uncomfortable, and he wanted nothing more than to go home.

The other prisoners had been whistling and hollering at him for some time—it

amused them, it seemed, to have an earl in their midst—but they were quiet now. Conor wondered whether they had all fallen asleep too.

It occurred to him that he had no idea what time of day or night it might be. That was disorienting.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

A light was shining in from the doorway. Conor blinked and tried to focus his eyes around it, to see who was there. After a moment, the visual became clear—it was the constable, holding a lantern and beckoning him forward.

Conor, much to his own consternation, was afraid to get up and move. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“You’re being released,” the constable said.

“Released?” Conor couldn’t suppress the surge of vindication that rose up in him. “Did you catch the real killer, then?”

“Temporarily released,” the constable said. “You’ll still have to stand trial. But someone thinks it’s appropriate to allow you to await trial at home in your manor.” His tone made it abundantly clear that he was not that someone.

Conor got to his feet and came to the door. The constable stood back to let him pass, his face twisted with dislike.

“You still think I’m guilty?” Conor asked.

“Whether you’re guilty or not, there’s a right way and a wrong way to do things,” the constable said. “Prisoners stay here until they go to trial. That’s the way it’s done. To bend the rules for you, just because of who you are...”

“It wasn’t my decision,” Conor reminded him.

“But you’ve got no problem taking advantage of it.”

“I have a wife at home,” Conor said. “I have responsibilities. I can’t choose to stay in jail and leave her on her own if I have the option to go home to her. I don’t think you’d choose any differently, either, if you were in my shoes.”

The constable said nothing, merely led Conor to the front desk. He disappeared into an adjoining room for a few minutes and returned with a small box. “Your effects.”

Conor pocketed the money he’d had on his person when he’d been brought in. It already felt like a lifetime ago. “Thank you,” he said.

“We can summon a carriage to take you home,” the constable offered.

“I’d be much obliged.” In truth, Conor didn’t want to accept anything from the police after the way he had been treated. But a carriage would get him home much more quickly than walking would, and he yearned to see Astrid.

She had been so frightened when he’d been taken. What must she be thinking now? She had been on her own for days.

He had always admired her strength, her ability to stand up for herself, and he thought she was probably better equipped to deal with a crisis like this than other men’s wives might have been. But still, it couldn’t have been easy for her.

She’s still so new to this world, he thought. She entered into a marriage specifically to avoid losing her father to arrest, and just a few weeks later, her husband is arrested. She must be in pieces.

He had to get to her as soon as possible. He wanted nothing more than to put his arms around her and reassure her that everything would be all right, that he was home now

and that he would make sure a defense of his case was put together.

I can afford to hire the best lawyers. I'll get through this. It's going to be all right.

The carriage arrived. Conor bid a strained farewell to the constable. The man had only been doing his job, Conor knew, but it was still a hard thing to forgive. He would never forget the shame and pain of being dragged out of his home and away from his wife.

Still, as the carriage pulled away and the barren land around the jail gave way to the lush greenery of the countryside, Conor began to feel better. I'm on my way to Astrid, he thought, feeling happy and hopeful. I'm going to see her soon.

Please just don't let her be too heartbroken over all of this.

The two of them had only just begun to really trust each other. Conor had no experience in the matter, but he imagined that something like this had the potential to either bring a couple closer together or push them apart. He hoped desperately for the former.

There was another matter plaguing Conor, as well. Why had he suddenly been released from his cell? What had changed that had led to the constable opening that door and letting him go free?

Someone thinks it's appropriate to allow you to await trial at home. That was what he had said. But who was someone? Who had the power to sway legal decisions, to sway the constable when it came to who was locked up in his jail?

It was a power Conor thought he himself might have had, under different circumstances. I probably could have persuaded him to let somebody go home until their trial, he thought. I am the Earl of Middleborough, after all. It's my taxes that pay

for most of what the police force needs.

And hadn't he had the power to absolve Tobias Dawson of his crime? He had gotten Astrid's father off the hook without so much as blinking. The police had never been involved in that case, of course, but Conor didn't delude himself that it mattered. If they had known about Tobias Dawson's crime and Conor had told them to drop it, they would have.

But that's different. Theft is a completely different thing from murder. If they truly believe I'm responsible for Lord Hayward's death, what could possibly persuade them to let me go?

He didn't know. And the not knowing spooked him. It felt as though he'd agreed to a bargain without knowing the terms. What had he given up in payment for this unexpected freedom? What was the catch?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

I'm going to be waiting for the other shoe to drop until this is all over, he thought unhappily. I'm going to be dreading every knock at the door in case it's some mysterious benefactor coming to collect on a debt.

Almost, for a moment, he allowed himself to wish that he was back in his cell. It had been cold and wet and had smelled horrible, and his stay there had been degrading and humiliating. But at least in his cell Conor had known what he was doing. He had known that he was handling things as best he could, and he had been certain of the appropriate next steps he needed to take.

Now, back out in the world, he felt suddenly adrift.

What if this was a trick of some kind? What if it could be used against him when he went to stand trial? He didn't think it could—how could he be judged for following the instructions of a police officer? But nothing about any of this made any sense.

The only people who would care enough to try to get me out of jail are Astrid and her father, he thought. Astrid, because she loves me, and her father because he loves Astrid. Nobody else in the world gives a damn about me or about what happens to me. They never have.

Could Astrid or her father have arranged his release?

That was a tempting thought, but with a resigned sigh, Conor let it go. Neither of them had that kind of power. Astrid wouldn't have been permitted to even give a statement defending him—she was his wife, and the law forbade her involvement. As for her father, he wasn't powerful enough to make anything on this scale happen.

I wish I could believe that they were behind it. But it just doesn't make any sense.

So, all right then. If not them, then who?

Could Henry have been involved? It was hard to picture Henry, the consummate playboy, going to the mat for anyone on a serious issue. But then, Henry was Conor's oldest friend. Maybe I've sold him short, Conor thought. Maybe he did care enough to get involved.

After all, Conor would certainly have intervened if Henry had ever been arrested. Perhaps he feels the same way, and I've simply never bothered to notice that about him.

And Henry probably would have the power to sway the police. He was a significant shareholder in The Arc, and Conor knew better than anybody that money talked. And even though Henry was of common birth, he was friends with the people who mattered. He had an in with almost every noble family nearby.

Henry. It must have been Henry. Nothing else makes any sense.

The mystery appeared to be solved, and Conor sat back in his chair. I'll summon Henry to the manor tonight, he decided. I'll want to thank him for his hard work in getting me freed, and I'm sure Astrid will want to convey her thanks too. And we'll have to have a celebratory meal, of course.

For now, though, all that mattered was getting to Astrid.

He longed to wrap his arms around her, to feel the softness of her body pressed against his. He wanted to finish their last evening together, the one that had been interrupted by his arrest.

A part of him wanted to stay up all night with her, going over everything that had happened since the last time they'd seen each other. He wanted to tell her all about the jail cell where he'd been kept and what it had felt like to be locked up. He wanted to tell her how frightened he'd been when the other prisoners had called out to him. He wanted to tell her how it had felt when the constables had sneered at him, as if he were a total waste of life.

No. I'll never tell her those things. It's too much of a burden. She shouldn't have to think about me in that position. I'll keep it to myself. I'll protect her from it.

After all, he was her husband. It was his responsibility to make sure she felt safe in the world.

Conor knew that the things he'd been through over the past couple of days were going to haunt him. He would probably never be the same. Those images would be in his head forever. The memory of what it had felt like to find himself in jail was never going to go away.

But he wouldn't allow Astrid to live with those terrible things in her head.

For her, he thought, the world can still be beautiful. For her, everything can be repaired. This will fade away, given time. It will become just a forgotten moment, a short span of time in her otherwise charmed life during which things were falling apart. But we'll put ourselves back together, and Astrid will be able to go on undamaged.

Of course, that would only be true if Conor managed to get himself acquitted of the crime he'd been accused of.

But somehow, now that he was back out in the world, acquittal seemed a lot more likely. It was as though the crime had stopped sticking to him now, had slipped

away. Lord Hayward's Murder had remained behind at the jailhouse. Conor was going home.

The carriage came to a halt in front of Middleborough Manor. Conor climbed out and drew a deep breath. I'm coming, Astrid, he thought to himself. Please be all right.

Chapter 33

The first sign of trouble was the fact that all the lamps were lit. At this time of night, they shouldn't have been. It made sense for the upstairs lamps to be lit—Astrid would be awake in her chambers, no doubt—but downstairs?

There should be no one active on the lower level of the manor. Not at this hour.

Perhaps they know I'm coming home, Conor thought. Perhaps a message was sent. He had assumed he would be walking in to greet an unsuspecting Astrid, surprising her with his return. But it was possible she was sitting inside waiting for him.

Better if she is, he decided. That would mean she hasn't been panicking.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

The second sign of trouble came when DuBois came running through the front doors and down the steps.

“My Lord!” he cried. “You’re home!” His face did not reflect any relief or pleasure, as Conor would have expected. Indeed, he looked distressed.

Conor frowned. Worry was beginning to take hold now. “Yes, I am,” he said. “You don’t think me guilty, DuBois, do you?” It had occurred to him suddenly that his butler might be reluctant to have him in the house because he thought Conor a murderer.

But DuBois shook his head. “Of course not, My Lord,” he said, and his face was earnest. “We all know you couldn’t have killed that man. You don’t have a killer’s heart. It’s just—” He wrung his hands.

“Spit it out,” Conor urged.

“It’s Lady Middleborough,” DuBois said.

“Is she all right?” Conor’s heart raced. He had been so worried about her. Now it seemed that perhaps he might have been right to worry. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s gone,” DuBois said.

“What do you mean, gone? Where did she go? Back to her father’s house?” It was no great surprise if she had, he thought. If he had been thinking when the police had picked him up, he would have told her to go back to Tobias. It only made sense for her

to be with someone who could look after her during this time.

But DuBois was shaking his head. “We should get inside,” he said, and for the first time Tobias realized that his face was pale.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“A note was delivered by courier a few hours ago,” DuBois said.

“Who did it come from?”

“We don’t know. But it says—well, I should let you read it.”

“Did Astrid send the note?” Conor was confused, and fear was starting to creep in. Was DuBois trying to tell him that his wife had left him?

They entered the manor and DuBois led the way across the foyer. Several members of the staff were gathered by a small table, whispering urgently. They broke apart when they saw Conor, their voices quieting.

“Somebody tell me what’s going on,” Conor said.

DuBois picked up a folded sheet of paper from the table and handed it to Conor. “This is the note that was delivered,” he said quietly.

Conor flicked it open and read:

Lady Middleborough has not been harmed, but if you want her to remain healthy, you will meet with me to discuss my demands and the terms of her possible release. Come to The Arc tonight at one o’clock. Bring no one. If the police are informed, or if you attempt to come with any company, Lady Middleborough will meet the same fate as

Lord Hayward.

The words seemed to swim before Conor's eyes. He tried to force the message to make sense.

They're threatening to kill her.

Why would anybody want to kill Astrid?

But he knew why. Killing Astrid would gain the same thing as framing Conor for Lord Hayward's murder—it would utterly destroy Conor.

He latched onto the one thing that seemed to offer a scrap of hope. The terms of her possible release. It wasn't a guarantee—they were going out of their way to make sure he knew it wasn't a guarantee—but it was a chance. There was a chance that Astrid might be able to walk away from this.

Demands. They were going to want something from him.

Well, they could have it. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered as much as Astrid's life. Would he be asked to give up his business, to relinquish his title and live as a commoner? Would he be asked to hand over all the money he had?

He would do it.

He had been bested.

But even as he felt the cold shroud of utter defeat settle over him, a tiny spark of rage seemed to ignite within him. How dare they? How dare they use Astrid like this? She has nothing to do with any of it.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

Astrid, he now realized, had been nothing but a pawn from the beginning.

He had considered it before he'd married her. He had taken trouble to make sure that she actually did want to marry him. That had mattered to him.

But he hadn't thought about it enough. He hadn't been careful enough. If he had, he wouldn't never have brought her into this world in the first place. He had known he was the kind of person who drew a target on himself. He had known people would attack him for who he was. He had known he had rivals.

Successful people were always vulnerable, and Conor was no exception.

He should have left her with her father.

No. He shook his head, trying to clear it. That isn't right. I know that's not right. Tobias used her as a bargaining chip too. He used her to get himself out of legal trouble. It was good luck for Astrid that the person Tobias had been beholden to had been someone who cared for her and would treat her well.

She could easily have ended up married to someone who wouldn't appreciate her at all, he thought. She could have had a husband who was unkind, or cruel, or even just unloving.

Yes, being Conor's wife came with risk. But everything worth doing carried a little risk. He felt sure that Astrid would have said the same thing if she was here now.

She fell in love with me, he reminded himself. She loves me just as much, just as

deeply, as I love her. She's glad that we're in this together, married to each other.

And now it's my duty to show her that I'll never let her down.

He looked up from the note. DuBois was watching him with trepidation. "I suppose I'll have to go to The Arc tonight, as the note says, and find out what this is all about," he said.

"I think I should go with you, My Lord," DuBois said.

Conor shook his head. "You saw what the note said. I'm to go alone."

"I don't think they'll act against her if you bring me," DuBois said. "They're warning you against it because you'll be easier to face if you're on your own than if someone is backing you up. But they want something from you, and if it's clear that you've come ready to negotiate, I think they'll want to talk too. If they hurt Astrid, they lose their only bargaining chip. They'll realize that."

"No, DuBois," Conor said. "I'm going alone. Maybe you're right, I don't know. Maybe they'll be so glad I showed up at all that they won't care that I disobeyed. But maybe they will care. We don't know who these people are, but we know that they're dangerous. They kidnapped Astrid. And this note definitely implies that they murdered Lord Hayward."

DuBois inclined his head, conceding the point.

Conor sighed. "I would go right now if I could," he said, feeling fretful. It was hours until one a.m. How was he supposed to sit around the manor and wait to see Astrid again? He longed to hear her voice, to touch her and feel for himself that she was unharmed.

“I can make you something to eat,” the cook suggested.

“I’m not hungry.” He couldn’t even imagine feeling hungry.

“You should eat, My Lord,” the cook urged. “You’ll need your strength about you if you’re to face these criminals tonight.”

She was right, and Conor knew it. He allowed himself to be shepherded into the dining room and sat at one of the tall wooden chairs. He felt rather like he was a child again, being guided through the motions of sitting down for a proper dinner.

Time seemed to slip by in fits and starts. Eventually, someone emerged with a bowl of a hearty stew and placed it on the table before Conor. He ate methodically, lifting the spoon to his mouth again and again without really thinking about what he was doing.

His thoughts were with Astrid.

Where was she right now? What was happening to her? Had anyone bothered to explain to her that she might have a chance to go home? He knew she must be frightened.

If she’s conscious, that is.

The thought of Astrid unconscious and tied to a chair somewhere was enough to make him lose his appetite. He put down his spoon and stared into the bowl of stew, unable to continue eating.

What if the thing her kidnappers want is something I can’t give?he wondered suddenly.What if they’re going to ask me to get a sum of money together that’s greater than the worth of anything I own?That would be a hefty amount, to be sure,

but it was certainly possible.

This is how Tobias felt when he stole from me, he realized suddenly. If he hadn't come up with the money he needed, he would have lost his home and his livelihood. His daughter would have been out on the streets.

Conor was going to have to apologize to the man. Now that the shoe was on the other foot, he knew that he would have made the very same choice Tobias had. He would steal, if that was what it took to make Astrid safe again.

There wasn't anything he wouldn't do.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

That thought restored his determination, and he picked up his spoon and began eating again. He forced himself to fill his mind with images that were pleasant instead of alarming, like holding Astrid in his arms again. Like bringing her back home, where she belonged.

We are never going to be apart again, he swore to himself. If we make it through this, if she's not killed, and I'm not arrested, I'm not ever going to let anything come between us as long as I live.

He finished his soup and got to his feet. Without thinking about where he was going, he made his way up the stairs and into his study. He avoided even looking at the big master bedroom, the place where he and Astrid had only just been beginning to spend time together.

We'll have plenty of time. Years and years. Our whole lives. We'll laugh about this one day.

It was hard to imagine that just now.

He sat down at his desk and pushed some papers around, going through the motions of organizing things, almost as if by cleaning up the things on his desk he might be able to clean up his thoughts and get his plans for that evening into some semblance of order.

At least this confrontation is going to take place at The Arc, he thought. The Arc was his home turf. He knew every nook and cranny of the place, knew it better than anyone else. Nobody would be able to sneak up on him or take him by surprise in his

own club.

It was, perhaps, the only advantage he could count on.

He sighed and cradled his head in his hands. God, let me save her. Let me bring her home safe.

Chapter 34

As the clock struck midnight, Conor pulled on his boots.

DuBois stood in the doorway of his study, concern etched on his face. “You should really take a carriage, My Lord,” he said. “This late at night, there might be bandits about.”

Conor shook his head. “If I pull up in a carriage, with a coachman, they might hurt Lady Middleborough,” he said. “They might consider that to be me having brought someone along.”

“I don’t know how they can expect you to go without a carriage,” DuBois said. “You don’t think you’re perhaps taking the note’s instructions too literally?”

“I think that if I don’t take them literally, I risk putting my wife in grave danger,” Conor said. “I won’t take that chance, DuBois.”

The butler nodded. “As you say, sir. What would you have us do while you’re away?”

“Wait one hour,” Conor said. “If you haven’t heard from me by then, summon the police to the house and show them the note.”

“Once they’ve seen it, it’s likely they’ll decide to follow you to The Arc,” DuBois pointed out.

Conor nodded. “If I can’t take the situation in hand within the hour, I’m going to need their help,” he said. “It will be fine to have them come in at that point. I’ll just have to make sure that whoever’s behind this vile kidnapping isn’t too close to Astrid when the time comes.”

“How will you do that?”

“I’ll stand between her and the gun, if I have to,” Conor said grimly. “She’s in this situation because of me. If someone is to be killed tonight, I won’t allow it to be her.”

DuBois was quiet.

“Don’t worry,” Conor said, though he couldn’t imagine his words would have any real effect on the man who had been serving his family since Conor’s childhood. “I’ll be home by sunrise, and this will all be behind us.”

“I’m sorry, My Lord,” DuBois said.

“Sorry?” Conor frowned. “For what?”

“I failed you. I failed to keep your wife safe from harm.”

Conor shook his head. “Of course I don’t blame you,” he said. “You weren’t with her when she was taken.”

“I should have been,” DuBois said. “I should have done a better job keeping track of her. I didn’t have any idea where she was or when she was due to be back.”

Privately, Conor agreed that DuBois could have done better at staying on top of where Astrid was, but he didn't want the butler to blame himself for what had happened. "She was with her father," he said. "That was what you knew about her whereabouts. It wasn't wrong for you to trust that she was all right while she was with her father."

DuBois inclined his head gratefully. "I'll leave you to it, shall I?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

“Remember what I said,” Conor told him. “If you haven’t heard from me in an hour, involve the police. Make sure you show them that note.”

“Do you think seeing the note might make them reconsider your innocence in the murder of Lord Hayward?” DuBois asked.

Conor honestly hadn’t thought about that—he had been too preoccupied with worry about Astrid to think about his own problems—but now he wondered. Whoever had written the note seemed to be claiming credit for the murder that Conor had been accused of.

“Maybe,” he said. “They might just think I wrote it myself. You might have to insist that they pursue the case to The Arc and uncover what’s actually going on rather than allowing them to make assumptions.”

“I can do that,” DuBois said. “I’ll make sure they follow up. I won’t let you down again.”

“I have confidence in you,” Conor assured his butler. “But now I have to go. It’s a long walk, and if I’m to reach The Arc by the appointed time, I can’t delay.”

“Of course not,” DuBois agreed. “I’ll see you in a few hours, then.”

Conor waited until his butler had retreated. Then he got to his feet and made his way to the door, feeling as if he was walking through a cloud.

This can’t be real.

Just a few days ago, he and Astrid had been discovering their feelings for each other. They had been together and happy, looking out over what Conor thought was sure to be a beautiful life together.

And now I'm going to stand trial for a murder I didn't commit, and Astrid is God knows where, in the hands of God knows who.

Was she already at The Arc? He hoped she was. He hoped she had been there this whole time. If nothing else, there would probably be something comforting about being in a club that she knew belonged to her husband.

He put on his jacket and his hat and walked out the front door and down the steps that led to the path where carriages pulled up in front of the manor. A part of him wished he could have taken DuBois' advice and called for a carriage to transport him to The Arc tonight. It would have been a relief to sit back and give in to his dire thoughts.

But if he had taken a carriage, he would have had to wait even longer before leaving the house. That would have been unbearable. Already, he felt as if he was losing his mind with the pressure of having waited around all day to go and rescue Astrid.

Walking to The Arc is good. It means I can leave now. It means I can be doing something. Every step felt positive, constructive. It felt like he was putting actual tangible effort into helping his wife.

When this is all over, he thought bitterly, I'm going to find out who was responsible for putting us through it. I'm going to track them down and make them suffer for what they've done to us.

Conor was not the kind of man who could physically harm another. He knew he didn't have it in him to take that kind of retribution. No matter how angry he felt right now—and he had to admit that he felt more angry than he ever had in his

life—violence would not be a recourse for him.

But he had other ways of seeking revenge. He was wonderful at manipulating people, at getting what he wanted from a situation. It was a power he tried to use only for good. The most self-serving thing he had ever done, he thought, was when he had convinced Astrid to marry him.

And that turned out to be good for everyone involved.

But he could do something that wasn't good for everyone involved, couldn't he? He could make sure the person responsible for kidnapping Astrid went to jail for the rest of his life for the murder he had almost certainly committed.

The best thing to do will be to find them and keep them talking, he thought. As soon as I've ascertained that Astrid is all right, I'll just get her kidnapper into a conversation. He's bringing me in because he wants to talk to me anyway, right? So we'll negotiate.

And we'll waste time.

And after an hour, DuBois would contact the police, who would read the note, come to The Arc, and make the appropriate arrest.

If everything went the way Conor hoped it would, he and Astrid would be back at home by sunrise, with a full apology from the police in hand. Their troubles would be over.

He imagined falling asleep with his arms wrapped around her, reassuring them both that they were together and safe and that nothing more would be done to harm them.

He imagined waking up late in the day to the smell of a warm meal being brought to

their chambers.

We won't leave the house again for weeks, he thought. We'll sequester ourselves, stay close together, talk about the things we've been through. We'll recover together until we're both feeling strong again.

It sounded like a paradise.

Of course, if it was going to work, a lot of things would have to happen according to plan. Conor would have to be in control of the situation from the moment he walked through the doors of The Arc. Any unexpected twists, any surprises, could throw a wrench in the gears that would ruin everything.

I won't allow that to happen.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

Conor knew that he was good at keeping control of a situation. He was practiced at not letting his emotions show on his face. That was a skill that was going to serve him well tonight. The worst possible thing would be to allow Astrid's kidnappers to see how very afraid Conor was.

He could see The Arc now. The sign swung innocuously on its hinges. A lantern was lit inside—Conor could see the flickering glow through one of the windows—and he knew that the kidnapper, whoever he was, was ready and waiting.

Was he ready?

This was going to start as soon as Conor walked through the door. There would be no going back, no pausing to regroup. He would need to be at his best.

He shook his head to clear the fog and was pleased to find that it dissipated easily. Now that he was here, adrenaline seemed to be flooding his system.

Astrid is only a short distance away now, and she needs me. I've got to be the best man I can be, the husband she deserves.

He wondered again if she knew he was coming for her.

She must know. She knew how much he loved her. He had made that clear, hadn't he?

He thought so.

There was no point in waiting around outside. He was as ready as he was ever going to be. He inhaled deeply, strode toward the door, and pushed his way inside.

Astrid was sitting in the middle of the room. The tables that should have surrounded her had been pushed back to leave a clear space in the middle of the club. As Conor had worried in his darker imaginings, she was tied to a chair.

Her head slumped forward, but at the sound of the doors opening, she looked up. He saw the moment when she saw that it was him, the way her eyes lit up, the way her whole body jerked as if she was trying to stand up and run to him despite her restraints.

Conor dashed across the club, fell to his knees, and carefully removed the cloth gag that had been tied around her mouth. She opened and closed her jaw a few times, careful, stretching.

“Are you all right?” Conor asked urgently.

“I’m all right.” Her voice was rough, and Conor thought she had been crying.

He wrapped his arms around her, desperate to give comfort. “It’s all right,” he said. “We’re all right now. We’re going home.”

“Conor, wait, listen, you don’t understand.”

He didn’t need to understand anything. His entire plan had slipped from his mind as if it had been oiled. She was here, and there was no one stopping him from untying her and taking her home. His hands moved to the ropes that bound her and he began to pull at the knots.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a voice said.

Conor froze. He turned slowly, trying to make out who had spoken, but he couldn't see a thing in the darkness. "Who's there?"

Cold laughter. "Who do you think, Conor?"

Did he recognize the voice? He wasn't sure. It wasn't O'Flannagan—the Irishman's accent would have given him away. He ran through a mental list of O'Flannagan's cohorts, trying to put a face with the voice he heard.

Then a figure stepped forward from the shadows.

"I'm surprised you never figured it out," he said quietly. "I thought you were more clever than that."

Conor gasped as the man's face came into view. "Henry?"

Chapter 35

Henry Wilson stepped out of the shadows.

"You should have figured it out," he said quietly. "I thought surely you would. I thought you must. Who else could have executed such a plan? Who else could be behind everything that's happened in the last few days?"

"O'Flannagan—"

Henry scoffed. "Killian O'Flannagan never had anything to do with it," he said. "That man is soft, a coward and a simpleton. He's not capable of putting together any kind of complex scheme. Just look at his track record. In all the years you and he have been rivals, the most he's ever done against you is to start a few rumors."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

That was true. Committing murder, or even enlisting one of his associates to carry out the murder, would have been a shocking escalation for O'Flannagan.

But then, to Conor's knowledge, Henry had never engaged in violence before either.

He had thought his friend was someone he knew, someone he could count on. He had trusted Henry with every detail of his life. Now he felt cruelly, monumentally betrayed.

"You couldn't have done this," he said. "O'Flannagan was my enemy, at least. You—you and I are friends."

"That's so like you," Henry said. "You're so eager to believe the best of people. You think everyone is like you, Conor. You think everyone is better than they appear, that we all have hidden wells of kindness and compassion. It never occurs to you that some of us are exactly as we seem."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you thought of me as a friend because we saw each other every day," Henry said. "It means you needed a friend, and I was there, so you cast me in the role. You never listened to what I was actually saying to you, did you?"

"What were you saying to me?"

"I've been telling you for ages that I needed more from you," Henry said. "I needed you to work harder around The Arc. I needed more money. I needed more leeway

when it came to decision making. And you ignored me.”

“You killed a man because you wanted greater creative control over the bar?” Conor was in disbelief. Surely that couldn’t be the answer. “How does killing Lord Hayward get you what you want? Or did you just do it to get my attention?”

“I know my desires are small to you,” Henry said, his tone scathing. “Everything I am is small to you, isn’t it? I’m not a member of the ton. I’m a commoner. You think I’m lucky just to be included in your little enterprise. You think I couldn’t possibly want or expect anything more than what I already have.”

“That’s not what I think,” Conor protested. “My God, Henry, I was planning to give you a larger stake in the business. I was going to talk to you about it, but then...well, I got married, I got distracted—”

“I don’t want a larger stake,” Henry scoffed. “I should own this business. I do all the work, and you do nothing.”

“The Arc wouldn’t even exist if it weren’t for me,” Conor protested. “I put up the startup money. Don’t you remember that?”

“Oh, I remember. You’ve never let me forget it. You put up the money at the beginning, and ever since then the club has been yours.”

“It’s yours too,” Conor said. “It was always yours too.”

“It shouldn’t be mine too! I’m the one who works with all the suppliers and gets us everything we need to operate. I’m the one who spends time with all our customers. I’m the one who hires the staff and talks to them every night. I do everything. What do you do, besides that initial outlay of money? You almost never even show up here anymore.”

“And so, you decided to kill Lord Hayward,” Conor said. “Why? Why would you do such a thing, Henry? How does that help you?”

Henry shook his head. “You’re such a fool,” he said. “This is why you shouldn’t be running a business. I thought you would know it was me far sooner than this. Who else could have gotten into The Arc—twice, now—without breaking anything or leaving any sign of forced entry?”

Conor didn’t know what to say to that.

“Lord Hayward was one of Killian O’Flannagan’s regular patrons,” Henry said. “I knew that the moment he turned up dead, people would connect him with O’Flannagan. And they might even look at O’Flannagan’s enemies to determine a suspect. But I couldn’t be sure.”

“So you committed the murder here,” Conor realized. “To frame me for the crime.”

“It was almost too easy. I knew you wouldn’t be coming in. When we had supper together the other night, when I pestered you about when you would be returning, you gave me a timeline I could use. That was helpful, by the way. I thank you.”

Conor gritted his teeth at the thought that he had in any way aided Henry in committing his crime. “You called him here?”

“After hours. I found him on the street. I told him that I had information against you that O’Flannagan might be able to use. He followed me right away. He was eager to get his hands on anything damaging.” Henry laughed unpleasantly. “People really don’t like you, Conor.”

It was deeply unsettling to see someone he had thought of as a friend acting so cold and cruel. Conor did not want to hear Henry describe the act of murder.

He wanted to get the violent man in front of him away from his wife.

The police are coming, he thought to himself. But he also knew that not nearly enough time had gone by. He had only been here at The Arc for a few minutes. DuBois wouldn't alert the authorities until at least two a.m., as he had been ordered.

Conor was going to have to stall.

"So you killed him knowing that I would be blamed," he said, trying to draw out their conversation as much as he could. Even though it was painful, he forced himself not to look at Astrid. He wanted Henry's focus squarely on him until he could maneuver them to a safe distance.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

“Of course,” Henry said. “And it happened just the way I planned, didn’t it? You were arrested on suspicion of murder. The police don’t even have any other suspects. They’re convinced you’re the guilty party. Your trial will be a mere formality, and when it’s reached its conclusion, you’ll be in prison for the rest of your life.”

Astrid made a soft, agonized little noise. Conor ached to comfort her, but he didn’t so much as spare her a glance. “What were you going to do if I wasn’t convicted of the crime?” he asked. “You must have had a backup plan.”

“I don’t need one,” Henry said. “I was prepared to testify against you, if it looked like the case wasn’t going to wrap itself up neatly. I don’t think it would have been necessary to do so, but believe me when I say I have no hesitations about telling the police that I found the door unlocked when I came in the morning after the murder.” He shook his head. “You’re the only person who has the key. Besides me, of course.”

“I can’t believe they’re not even considering you.”

“You never considered I might be guilty,” Henry pointed out. “Besides, I was careful. I have what you so crucially lacked—a strong alibi. I was at a party the night of the murder.”

“But you weren’t.”

“It was easy enough to slip out for an hour, to do what needed to be done. By the time I returned to my companions, everything was in place, and no one had so much as noticed my absence.”

“You killed a man,” Conor said. “How could anything be worth that. I never thought of you as a violent person, Henry. I never thought you were capable of such a thing.”

“It’s remarkable what people are capable of when they have to earn everything they have,” Henry said scathingly. “You’ve had everything given to you all your life. You could never understand what it’s like to be poor.”

“You’re not poor! You’re the co-owner of a successful business!”

“And now I’m going to be the primary owner,” Henry said. “You’ll be locked away for the rest of your life, convicted of murder. You’ll be in no position to run this club. You’re going to have to turn it over to me.”

“What makes you think I would do that?” Conor demanded. “Even if I am convicted, why would I give you my share of the club now?”

“I worried you might not,” Henry admitted. “I’d been thinking about it for the past couple of days, and I realized you might sign your share over to your new wife.” He jerked his head toward Astrid. “So when you were released from prison, I altered my plan. I decided we needed to meet here tonight.”

Astrid spoke up. Her voice shook, but she sounded more calm than Conor felt. “Don’t give him what he wants,” she said. “Whatever he’s after, tell him no, Conor.”

“Shut up, wench,” Henry said. “Do I need to put that gag back on you?”

“That isn’t necessary,” Conor said hurriedly. “She’ll be quiet. Astrid—please.”

He could feel the anger rolling off her in waves, but she quieted.

“Why don’t we sit down and discuss your demands,” Conor said, determined to keep

Henry's focus on him and away from Astrid.

"Are you saying you're willing to comply?"

"I came here to discuss things with you, didn't I?" Conor asked. "That ought to show you that I'm open to anything."

"I'm glad to see you finally grew some sense," Henry said. "Believe me, if you hadn't cooperated, your wife would have been the one to pay the price. I'm sure you wouldn't have liked that very much." He grinned. "I know how much you worried about her suffering as a result of being a part of your life."

"What?" Astrid asked.

"He hasn't told you?" Henry asked her. "He very nearly refused to marry you. He was so worried for you. He was afraid of what being married to him would do to your reputation." He laughed. "He spills all his secrets to me."

"Don't talk to her." Conor was feeling violent, maybe for the first time in his life. He didn't know what he would do if Henry didn't stop, but he suspected it wouldn't be anything good. He had to keep calm. When the police arrived, he didn't want Henry to be able to claim that Conor had just shown up randomly and assaulted him.

"I'll talk to whoever I want." Henry sat down at one of the tables. He pulled a gun out of his jacket pocket and set it on the table, close to his own hand.

Conor didn't dare try to go for it. Henry would get there first, and then he would likely start shooting. He had to avoid that at all costs.

As long as I can keep him talking, we'll be all right, he thought. If this turns violent, all hope is lost.

Slowly, careful not to move too fast and alarm Henry, he eased into the opposite chair at the table. “Let’s talk,” he said. “You want to own The Arc outright. I might be willing to offer that in exchange for—”

“In exchange for nothing,” Henry said. “I have your wife. That’s the deal. You give me what I want, your wife goes free.”

“I want you to testify in my favor,” Conor tried. “Tell the police you don’t think I’m guilty. We don’t have to tell them who really killed Lord Hayward.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

Henry laughed. "You're in no position to bargain," he said. "We do this my way, or we don't do it at all. Make your choice."

And he picked up the gun and aimed it at Conor's head.

Chapter 36

Astrid struggled helplessly against the ropes that bound her to her chair. Surely, she ought to be able to break free now that Conor had loosened them?

But it didn't seem that he had loosened them. Pulling against them felt like it was only making them tighter. Henry knew what he was doing, she thought bitterly, wondering whether he had ever done something like this before. It certainly didn't feel like she was the first person he had ever tied to a chair.

She watched helplessly as he aimed his weapon at Conor's head. She wanted to shout out again, to tell Conor to give Henry whatever he wanted, that it didn't matter, that nothing mattered as much as Conor's life, but she didn't dare. She knew she had been provoking Henry by speaking up. If he got angrier, there was no telling what might happen.

She forced herself to sit quietly, waiting for the right moment to say or do something that might turn the situation back in their favor.

"All right," Conor said quietly. He raised his hands slowly, and Astrid could tell he was also trying not to alarm Henry or push him into acting. "Put the gun down, and I'll give you what you want."

“Full ownership of the club?”

“I’ll sign it over to you right now.” There was a heaviness in Conor’s voice, a resignation, and Astrid’s heart went out to him. He cared about this club. She knew that. He considered it one of his life’s great accomplishments.

How dare Henry take it away from him like this?

And when this was all over, Conor would still have to stand trial for murder. A murder Henry had committed.

The injustice of it all made her want to scream. She bit down hard on her lip, forcing herself to stay quiet. Interceding would only make things worse.

Slowly, Henry lowered his weapon. He didn’t set it down, but it hung loosely from his hand, by his side instead of pointing at Conor’s head.

Astrid let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. Her whole body trembled with relief. She felt as if the gun had been pointed at her own heart.

“You’ll have to sign the club over to me,” Henry said. “I’ve got the paperwork all prepared.”

“How are you going to explain what prompted me to do such a thing?” Conor asked.

Astrid had the feeling he was stalling. Was he trying to put off the moment when he would actually have to sign away his club? She wished he wouldn’t. The sooner he cooperated, the sooner they could go home and put this horror behind them.

At least, I hope so.

Henry would let them go, wouldn't he? If Conor signed the papers, there was nothing to be gained by killing him. The club would already belong to Henry and killing the suspect in Lord Hayward's murder—and in the very same location, no less—would only reopen that investigation. It would cause the police to look for another suspect.

He can't kill Conor, Astrid realized, with a sudden flood of relief. He needs Conor to take the fall for his crimes. It was strange that the idea of her husband being falsely accused of murder should suddenly bring her such comfort.

Henry seemed to have no hesitation about answering Conor's questions. "It won't be difficult to explain at all," he said. "You're a murderer, after all, and you're perfectly aware that you're about to stand trial and go to prison for the rest of your life. Obviously, you would want to give your business to someone who could care for it."

"And you'd be the natural choice," Conor said.

"Of course. No one knows The Arc better than I do. Not even you. No one is more capable of running it than I am. Admit it, if the circumstances were different, you would be begging me to take over for you."

"If you hadn't been the one to frame me, you mean?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"I admit it," Conor said.

"Maybe I should take over some of your other responsibilities for you, as well," Henry said, leering at Astrid. "Since you'll be away, unable to look after things..."

"That's not negotiable," Conor said, his voice suddenly firm. "Astrid will return to her father when I'm convicted. Our marriage will be dissolved. She may marry again

in time, if she chooses to do so. Court her if you wish, but now that she's heard what you're truly like, I don't give much for your chances."

"We'll see," Henry said. "After all, I have the same information about the girl's father that you used to win her hand."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

Astrid shook. What he said was true. Henry knew, just as Conor had, that Tobias had stolen money from The Arc. She knew her father had signed papers absolving him of his crime, but what if Henry could find a way to make those documents disappear?

Is it possible I could end up married to such an awful man?

She had been frightened of the idea of marrying Conor, before she had known him as she did now. But that fear had always been based on speculation. She had never thought of Conor as a known risk. But Henry wasn't just cruel. He was a murderer.

What will happen to me if I'm sent to his house?

She would tell her father what had happened here, of course. But Henry was so powerful, so capable when it came to manipulating people. What if he somehow managed to get what he wanted from Tobias anyway?

"You'll never have her," Conor said firmly, and Astrid had the feeling he was speaking for her benefit, trying to reassure her that she was safe.

She didn't feel very reassured.

Henry turned and walked over to the bar. A moment later he was back with a stack of papers in hand. "Here," he said. "You've got to sign these documents. They'll make the property, and the business, mine."

"You took the liberty of having them drawn up in advance," Conor observed.

“That’s just good common sense,” Henry said. “It’s not as if we’re going to go and find a notary in the middle of the night, with a gun to your head.”

“No,” Conor agreed. “I suppose that wouldn’t be a very good plan.” He picked up the top paper off the stack.

“What are you doing?” Henry demanded. “We don’t have all night. Start signing.”

“I’m going to read them first,” Conor said. “That’s just good common sense too, isn’t it? Never to sign anything without reading it first?”

“You were always like this,” Henry growled. Astrid could hear the frustration mounting in his voice. “Such a pedantic, condescending, arrogant bastard.”

“Because I want to read a contract before I sign it?” Conor’s eyebrow arched in a way that made Astrid’s heart ache. She had fallen in love with that look of mild curiosity. “You can’t expect me to trust that these contracts say what you tell me they say,” Conor said. “You can’t expect me to trust you at all, surely?”

“This might go a little more easily for you if you do,” Henry said. “I’ve been patient, Conor. I’ve taken the time to explain things to you. I didn’t have to do that, you know. Have you forgotten who here is armed and who is not?”

“I haven’t forgotten.” Conor’s eyes were on the gun. Astrid tried to take comfort from the fact that he was at least tracking the weapon’s position, but that was hard to do when Henry was waving it around like it was a toy.

For the first time, it occurred to her to wonder whether Henry might not be slightly disturbed in his mind.

Could he really have been this demented, violent man the whole time?she

wondered. He seemed kind when we talked at the wedding. I rather liked him that day. He made me feel better about the future that lay ahead of me.

Could he have been using her as far back as the wedding?

She had been nearly in shock when the two men who had stopped her carriage and kidnapped her had brought her here, when she had seen who was behind her abduction. I really believed he was Conor's best friend, she thought.

Maybe she had been right in that belief. Maybe their friendship had once been real.

What could have caused it to deteriorate so badly? What could have made Henry want to hurt someone he had once called a friend?

He must have lost his mind, she thought. Whatever's going on now, it has nothing to do with the friendship these men have shared for years.

Maybe there's a hope of getting Henry to remember that he once cared for Conor.

If only she dared speak up!

Conor methodically read through page after page of the contracts that had been placed in front of him. Even though Astrid was proud of him for sticking up for himself, she was beginning to really worry about the way he was delaying. Henry was clearly getting angry now. He strode over to the door and peered out the little window at the street beyond, no doubt checking to make sure that they were still alone.

"It's one thirty in the morning," Conor said. Astrid could make out a hint of shredded nerves in his voice. She wondered if Henry knew Conor as well as she did, if he could hear Conor's nervousness now. "I don't know what you're looking for, but there's not going to be anyone out there at this time of night."

“Stop talking and read,” Henry snapped. “You wanted to read it, so read it.”

“What’s your hurry, exactly?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

“I would have thought you’d be the one in a hurry,” Henry said. “Your time at home with your wife is limited, after all. The police are going to come back soon enough to take you to trial. Wouldn’t you rather get out of here so you can get her home?”

“Just stop talking about her, all right?”

“This whole experience must have been an ordeal for her,” Henry said, clearly not listening. “Surely you want to take her back to your manor, so she can relax in the luxury afforded to the noble class?” He leaned around to look at Astrid. “You may as well enjoy that while you can,” he said. “Once he’s convicted, once you’re sent back to your father’s house in disgrace, no member of the ton will look at you.”

Did he really imagine she wanted to make herself another titled match, Astrid wondered. Could he really think her primary concern was that she wouldn’t live in a manor when this was all over?

Maybe she had misjudged him. Maybe he wasn’t crazy. Maybe he really was just shallow and cruel.

And maybe it didn’t matter.

There was nothing he could say that would take away the things he had done. He was a kidnapper, a traitor, and a murderer.

Suddenly, the idea of Conor signing the papers in front of him made Astrid sick. Why should he have to sign away the business he had worked so hard to build? Why should Henry, who had lied and cheated to get what he wanted, be able to take it from

him? Was there truly no justice at all in the world?

Perhaps that was why Conor was hesitating.

Perhaps that was why he hadn't yet put pen to paper.

But Henry appeared to have run out of patience. "Sign," he said, raising his gun again, cocking it. "Signnow."

Astrid couldn't help the whimper that escaped her as Henry pointed the weapon at Conor.

Henry heard the noise. A grin spread across his face. He stalked past Conor, gun held out before him, and pressed it to Astrid's temple.

She shivered as the cool metal touched her skin.

"Sign," Henry said in a voice that was just as cold.

Chapter 37

"Wait," Conor said. He felt as if his bones were turning to water. "Wait."

"Wait for what? Sign the damn papers!" Henry pushed the barrel of his gun harder into Astrid's temple. Conor could see the way the pressure of the gun against her head actually pushed her head to one side. Her eyes were filled with tears, and she was biting her lip so hard it had turned white.

No. No, no, no.

"Don't think I won't do it," Henry snarled, sounding nothing like the man Conor had

known for so long. He sounded like a wild animal. “You know I’m not afraid to kill, Conor. If you think you’re going to appeal to my sense of mercy now—”

“How do I know you won’t pull the trigger once I’ve signed?” Conor asked.

“You don’t. What you know is that I will do it if you don’t sign. I’m done being jerked around. Sign the papers now.”

There was nothing he could do. There was no more stalling to be done. He pulled the papers to him and began to sign.

The police still aren’t here.

It didn’t matter. He had lost. He couldn’t wait for the authorities to intervene. He should have had DuBois send them along sooner, rather than waiting a full hour. But it was too late now.

If I don’t do this, he’ll kill Astrid. Her life was all that really mattered.

It was, he reflected ruefully, a master stroke by Henry, and a manipulation that could probably only have been carried out by someone who knew Conor as well as Henry did.

Others might have guessed that he would be unwilling to give up his business, that he would have fought harder to keep it. He had been instrumental in The Arc’s existence from the very beginning, after all. And while he would still have his earldom after this—until he was convicted of murder and stripped of his lands, that was—there was something very special about having a business he had built on his own.

Others might have thought that threatening Conor directly, holding a gun to Conor’s head, would have been the best way to get him to sign away his business.

But they would have been wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

If the gun had been on him, Conor knew, he would have been willing to continue stalling. To continue the gamble. He would have been able to draw this out a little more and wait for the police to arrive.

With Astrid's life in danger, though, he couldn't do that.

She's too precious to me, he thought. And Henry knows it. He knows because I allowed him into my life. Because I confided in him about how much I cared for her. Because I let him into my home, where he could see the two of us together and understand just how devoted I am to her.

He might as well have handed Henry the gun he was holding now. He had given the man everything he needed to carry out this dastardly plan.

"You're not signing fast enough," Henry said, a manic note in his voice, a gleam in his eye.

God, he really wants this club. It was one of the great ironies of Conor's life that he had legitimately wanted to give more of the ownership of the club to Henry. If I'd only done that when I first thought of it. If only Tobias hadn't robbed us, hadn't derailed my plans—

But if Tobias hadn't robbed them, he would never have married Astrid.

He couldn't wish for that. Even though it would have undone all the terrible things that had happened since, he couldn't wish away his marriage to Astrid.

She slumped forward in the chair suddenly, the weight of her head pulling her down. Alarmed, Conor began to rise from his seat.

“Sit,” Henry snapped, jerking the gun in his direction before returning it to Astrid. “She’s just passed out.”

Conor eased slowly back down into his chair, his blood boiling. “As least let me check on her.”

“She’s fine. You can come check her when you’re finished with those papers. Maybe that will finally give you a little incentive to stop dragging your feet about this.”

And he was right. Conor hadn’t been hurrying through the process of signing—a part of him had still been hoping that the police might show up at the eleventh hour. But the stress of the day had become too much for Astrid, and he knew it was time to get her home. There was no more hope of anyone intervening.

It hasn’t been anywhere near an hour anyway, he thought, running his thumb over the edges of the pages left in front of him. There were only a few places left that his signature was needed. There was no way to drag this out long enough to make a difference. The only useful thing he could do, really, was to get himself and his wife out of the club before Henry decided to resort to violence.

He signed the last page and pushed the stack of contracts across the table toward Henry. “There,” he said. “I’m finished. Now will you let us go?”

“I’ve got to read them first, don’t I?” Henry asked, grinning wickedly.

“You already know what they say.”

“Bring them to me,” Henry said.

Conor got to his feet and made his way over.

“Now hold them up and show me that you’ve signed each page,” Henry said. “I don’t want to let you go only to find out that you tried to trick me by skipping a line. I could get you back in here to correct that, of course, but it would be a lot of hassle, and frankly, I don’t think either of us wants to be put through that. Better to get everything done right now. Don’t you agree?”

“Of course, I do,” Conor said coldly. He held up the stack of papers so that Henry could see his signature. Then he began to cycle through the pages, showing his old business partner one after another. “I’ve signed every page,” he said. “As you can see. I have no desire to drag this out. I just want to take Astrid home.”

“Does she like carnations?”

“What?”

“I think I’ll bring her carnations when I come to her father’s house to court her,” Henry said musingly. He reached out and took the contracts from Conor.

“She’ll never be yours,” Conor said scathingly. “She’s seen who you truly are.”

“Her father—”

“Her father’s not a fool. He cares for her. She’s bound to tell him the truth about you, and then he’ll never send his beloved daughter to your home.”

Henry’s face darkened. “If that’s the way of it, maybe I should just shoot her now,” he said.

Conor felt a vice grip his heart. “No,” he said. “No, wait.”

“Wait for what? If what you say is true and she’ll never be mine, what difference does it make?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

“Was this always who you were?” Conor whispered in horror. “You were my dearest friend for so long. Were you always, at your core, this twisted person? This man who would kill to get what he wanted?”

“Who I am is not your concern!” Henry said, his voice rising in both pitch and volume. “Tell me, if your wench thinks herself too good for me, why should I let her live?”

“Because...because I can change her mind.” Conor was shaking at the very thought of what he was suggesting. But if it was the only way to save Astrid’s life...

“What do you mean?” Henry demanded.

“I’ll talk to her,” Conor said. “I swear it. Let me take her home. I’ve known you for so long, Henry. I know the goodness in you. I have stories I can tell, stories that will restore her regard for you.”

“You can convince her to consider coming to me once you’re in prison?”

“Yes,” Conor said, hating himself for it. “I think I can.”

I’ll have to try to get word to Tobias somehow, he thought. I’ll have to let him know that the man who’s coming for Astrid is a murderer, and that he must keep her away at all costs. Of course, he would never truly try to persuade Astrid to go to Henry. Not after all that Henry had done. But he might have to persuade her to act like she was considering it.

It might be the only way for her to stay safe long enough to get away.

The two of them may have to flee, he thought. I'll give her a carriage, and my strongest horses. Tobias is a clever man. He'll be able to find work in a new town. And Astrid is a lovely girl. It will be easy to marry her to a kind man, a man of means who can keep her safe from Henry's machinations.

God, how had everything gone so wrong?

Henry tucked the papers that transferred ownership of The Arc into his breast pocket. "I suppose we're done here, then," he said.

"You'll let us go?" Conor asked. He had hardly dared to believe that Henry would hold to his word.

"Another death at The Arc would serve neither of us," Henry said. "Take her and get out, before I change my mind about all of this."

"Henry..." Conor hesitated. "You've been a friend to me for many years."

Henry said nothing.

"Our friendship was real to me," Conor said. "I see now that it was never real to you. But I want you to know that I valued you. I cared about you. You meant something to me. And I'm sorry things are ending this way."

"You should go," Henry said.

"Please step away from my wife so that I can untie her."

"You can untie her while I'm standing here," Henry countered. "I don't want the two

of you to try something, make a move against me, while my guard is down.”

“She’s not even conscious, Henry.” Conor was afraid to approach while Henry had the gun on Astrid. He was too volatile. Right now, he was saying he didn’t want any more murders in The Arc, but just a few minutes ago he had been threatening to kill Astrid. He’s unstable, and that makes him considerably more dangerous.

“She could wake up,” Henry said stubbornly.

“Henry, please. Just let me take her out of here. We’re finished. I’ve given you everything you wanted. You’ve gotten everything you asked for. I’m just asking you to let us leave.”

“I’m not stopping you.” But he still hadn’t removed the gun from its position at Astrid’s temple.

He’s afraid to give up control, Conor realized. He knows that having the gun on Astrid is giving him power over me, and he doesn’t want to lose that. He’s afraid that once I get to her, once we’re out of this situation, I’ll be able to turn things to my advantage.

And he’s right to fear it. Because I’m smarter than he is, and I can think of a way out of this. I can exonerate myself and get my club back.

There’s still hope for me and for Astrid.

For the first time since he’d arrived at The Arc and seen that Henry was the one behind Astrid’s kidnapping, a glimmer of optimism shone through his despair.

Just as that feeling of hope began to radiate within him, Henry Wilson crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Conor dove for the gun automatically, without thinking. His hand closed around it and he rolled to his knees, looking around wildly for the new threat.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

Killian O’Flannagan stood in the doorway of The Arc, staring at the scene before him in utter amazement.

Chapter 38

Conor didn’t know what O’Flannagan was doing here, but he didn’t care. He tore across the room to Astrid’s side and flung his arms around her. “Astrid!” he cried, peppering her cheeks with kisses. “Are you all right? Can you hear me?”

She stirred a little in his arms, but didn’t wake.

He kept both hands on her—he felt as if he might never let her out of his arms again—and turned to face O’Flannagan. “Why are you here?” he asked. “Were you in cahoots with him?”

“With Wilson?” O’Flannagan huffed out a laugh. “Certainly not. I was walking by—”

“You were walking by at one in the morning?”

“I sometimes enjoy an evening constitutional,” O’Flannagan said archly. “As I was saying—I was walking by and I saw that a lamp was lit. That seemed strange to me, and of course I remembered there had been a murder in this club not all that long ago. Then I walked in and saw your man there holding a gun to the girl’s head.”

“It was him,” Conor said. “He’s the one who killed Lord Hayward. He confessed it all to me before you came in.”

“I suppose the fact that he had a gun on your wife is compelling enough evidence to at least make a case against him,” O’Flannagan agreed. “And I can certainly testify to that fact.”

“You would do that? For me?”

“Spare me. I have no desire to see you in prison, Lord Middleborough,” O’Flannagan said, waving a hand dismissively. “It seems things may have gotten a bit...dramaticbetween the two of us.”

“I’d say that’s fair,” Conor said weakly.

O’Flannagan gestured to Astrid. “Is she hurt?” he asked.

“I think she’s just overcome.”

“We should untie her.”

Conor nodded and loosened the ropes that bound Astrid’s wrists. As soon as she was free, she slumped forward and began to fall. He caught her, lifted her in his arms, and carried her to one of the tables, where he laid her down to conduct an examination.

O’Flannagan cane and stood beside him. “Her breathing seems fine,” he said. “I’m sure she’ll come around before long.”

Conor hesitated. He knew what he needed to say, but it did not come easy. There was so much bad blood between himself and Killian O’Flannagan. They had been rivals for so long. It felt almost unnatural to stand next to the man now, knowing that the real enemy had been Henry.

How could it have been Henry?

That question was going to take much longer to grapple with, and Conor wasn't really ready for it. He would have plenty of time to think about it later, once he was back at home.

For now, though, he faced O'Flannagan. "I owe you my life," he said. "And my wife—you saved her. You saved us both. I don't know how to begin to thank you."

"Forget it," O'Flannagan said. "I certainly have no desire to see the girl killed. She irks me, but she's a spitfire."

"You know my wife?"

"That is a longer tale than you and I have time for right now, I believe," O'Flannagan said. "I'm sure she'll be willing to tell you all about it once she's awake and feeling a little better."

Conor nodded, feeling confused.

"And what about your man there?" O'Flannagan nodded in Henry's direction. "What are we to do with him?"

"You'll testify that you saw him holding the gun on Astrid?" Conor asked.

"I will," O'Flannagan said. "I'm always willing to tell the truth in the service of the law."

Conor went over to Henry's prone body, reached into his breast pocket, and pulled out the contracts he had been forced to sign.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

O'Flannagan examined them. "This is what you were doing?" he asked. "I saw you at the table with some papers. You were signing away your share of your business?"

"He made me do it," Conor explained. "That's why he was threatening to kill Astrid. He's been after full ownership of The Arc for a while."

"And so, he framed you for Lord Hayward's murder," O'Flannagan surmised.

Conor was surprised. "That's right."

"I don't think the police will have any trouble putting that together," O'Flannagan said with a small smile. "I believe your worries are over when it comes to the law."

"Do you really think so?" Conor hardly dared believe it.

"Look at the facts," O'Flannagan spread his hands. "We have two men with keys to the club where Lord Hayward was murdered. One has shown himself to be prone to violence. What's more, he has a clear motive. These papers prove he was willing to commit violent acts if he thought they would help him come into ownership of this club." He wrinkled his nose a little.

"You needn't sneer at it now, of all times," Conor said, nettled. "I like my club. If you don't prefer it—"

"I find it a bit too straitlaced," O'Flannagan said. "But you're quite right. You and I have lost enough to this man." He waved a hand in Henry's direction. "Perhaps it's time we set our differences aside."

It was a sentence Conor had never thought he would hear from O'Flannagan. "If you mean it," he said cautiously. "Then I quite agree. I would love to put our rivalry to bed once and for all."

"As I was saying," O'Flannagan said. "It's clear that your man is a criminal with violent tendencies. No such claim can be made about you. I think the police will see that you were merely unfortunate in the fact that the crime was committed in your club. You should be off the hook for good now."

A suspicion occurred to Conor. "You weren't surprised to see me tonight," he noted.

"Of course, I was," O'Flannagan said. "I was surprised to see anyone in a club in the middle of the night."

"That's not what I mean. You weren't surprised to find me out of jail."

"Oh," O'Flannagan said obliquely.

"You're the one who arranged for my release, aren't you?"

"Don't fall all over yourself," O'Flannagan said. "It was hardly any effort at all. I simply reminded the constable that he worked for the people, and that the people might be disturbed to see their Earl locked away with his trial still pending."

"I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything to me. Save it for your woman."

"Astrid?"

"A remarkable girl, truly."

“She really is,” Conor agreed.

On the table, Astrid stirred. Conor hurried to her side. She blinked, slowly, gazed at the ceiling, then turned to look at him.

“Conor,” she said quietly.

He drew her up in his arms and held her close for several long seconds, not caring that O’Flannagan was still standing right there. To the Irishman’s credit, he looked away, busying himself by pretending to study Henry’s contracts.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Conor said. “We’re both going to be fine now, Astrid. We’re going to go home as soon as you feel up to walking.”

“I’m ready now,” she said. “I want to go.”

“Give it just a minute,” he urged her. “Get your strength back. You passed out in the chair.”

“I want to get out of this place,” she whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

He wrapped his arms around her. “We’ll have the cook prepare some soup for us when we get home. Would you like that?”

“I don’t know if I have an appetite.”

“I understand,” he said. “But you should try to eat. You’ve been through an ordeal.” He rubbed slow circles on her back. “My God. I’m just so glad you’re all right. I was terrified. I’ve never been so frightened in all my life.”

She rested against him. For several minutes, they leaned into each other quietly, comforted by the warm weight of each other’s bodies and the tension in each other’s arms. Everything’s going to be fine, Conor told himself, trying to calm his nerves. We’re safe now. It’s going to be all right.

Astrid straightened in his embrace. “Mr. O’Flannagan?” she asked.

Conor looked up. Astrid had caught sight of O’Flannagan. She looked perplexed. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to save you from this mad gunman,” O’Flannagan said, indicating Henry. “Your husband has bad taste in friends, my girl.”

“Perhaps he’ll choose his friends more wisely from now on,” Astrid said.”

“One must hope,” O’Flannagan agreed.

“Perhaps he’ll come to realize he has friends in places he might not have thought to

look,” she said shrewdly.

O’Flannagan laughed. “What did I say?” he asked Conor. “A clever lass indeed.”

Astrid slid off the table and onto her feet. Conor kept a careful hand on her back in case she needed any extra support, but she seemed to be fine under her own power. “Let’s go home,” she told Conor.

Conor took her hand and was just about to lead her to the door when it burst open again.

A knot of police swarmed into the room. They spread out, taking up all the space inside the club. One officer rushed to Astrid’s side and began speaking to her in hushed tones. Several more had made their way to where Henry lay and were examining his prone form.

It took Conor a surprisingly long time to understand what was going on.

Then DuBois appeared in the doorway.

Of course, Conor thought. The hour must be up. And DuBois is here with the police, doing just as I asked him to.

He hurried to his butler’s side, confident that Astrid was secure in the hands of the officer she was talking to. Another officer had commandeered O’Flannagan and was clearly being treated to a rundown of the events that had taken place that night.

“DuBois,” he said. “You came.”

“As you ordered,” DuBois agreed. “I’m very glad to see that you’re all right, My Lord. I must admit, you had us all worried. We had rather hoped that you would

make it home before the hour was up, and that we wouldn't be required to involve the authorities. But at the same time, it was a relief to let them know what was going on."

"You did the right thing," Conor assured him. "If anything, I should have listened to you about involving the police earlier in the evening. Things almost went very badly."

"Is Lady Middleborough well?"

"She'll be fine," Conor said. "I wonder if you might return to the manor, DuBois, and ask the cook to put on a stew for us? I'll want her to eat something when we get home."

"As you say, sir," DuBois said. "And I'll also send a carriage around so that you won't have to walk home."

"That would be much appreciated." He had been worried about Astrid walking all the way home, especially in the dark.

One of the police officers came over as DuBois retreated. "Lord Middleborough," he said. "We've just spoken to Mr. Killian O'Flannagan about the events here tonight, and it seems clear that Mr. Henry Wilson is behind not only your wife's kidnapping, but likely also the murder of Lord Hayward."

"Yes, Mr. Wilson confessed as much to me," Conor said. He handed over the ownership contracts. "These are the papers he forced me to sign when he had a gun to my wife's head. He's done all this to try to gain control of The Arc."

The officer nodded. "In light of the circumstances, you can rest assured that these contracts will be void," he said. "Mr. Wilson is being taken into custody as we speak."

“Am I still considered a suspect?”

“No,” the officer said. “Consider yourself cleared of all charges.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

A rush of relief washed over Conor, but he managed to keep his expression to a bare smile. “Thank you, constable,” he said, and returned to Astrid’s side.

Chapter 39

The carriage ride home felt too short for Astrid’s liking. It was such a relief, after everything that had happened, to be snuggled against Conor’s side. She wanted to talk to him, to tell him all the things she had done in his absence, to see whether he would be shocked or proud of her, but she was too exhausted to speak.

“It’s all right,” Conor said, seeing her eyelids drooping. “You’ve had a shock. Your body’s reacting to it. You don’t need to fight it.”

But she wanted to fight it. Her eyelids were drooping, but she didn’t want to sleep. “Can’t stay awake,” she murmured.

“Sleep,” he said. “I’ll wake you when we get home.”

But Astrid felt as though she had only been asleep for a few minutes when the carriage jerked to a stop. The stillness and the lack of rumbling over cobblestones was what woke her. She struggled to sit upright.

Conor opened the carriage door, not waiting for his driver to come and do it for him. “Come on,” he said, stepping out and holding out a hand to assist Astrid. “You’ll feel better with some food in you.”

Even the thought of eating was exhausting, and Astrid thought she would likely fall

asleep right at the table. But she didn't protest. It felt too good to have Conor wrap his arm around her waist and take her by the hand, steering her gently into the dining room, guiding her into a chair.

He knelt before her and cradled his face in her hands. "You're so lovely," he whispered. "I'm so glad you aren't hurt."

"He never wanted to hurt me," Astrid said. "He wanted to hurt you." She brought her hand up to her own cheek and laid it over his. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"You're sorry? Why are you sorry?"

"It's my fault you were in that situation," she said. "If I hadn't been kidnapped—"

"Oh, Astrid, no. It isn't your fault you were kidnapped. How could you think such a thing?"

"Because I shouldn't have been out of the manor at all," she said. "I knew better. I knew what I was doing was risky."

"What were you doing?"

She told him, carefully laying out the way she and her father had gotten information against O'Flannagan and gone to his pub to confront him. She kept her gaze firmly on her knees as she spoke, afraid even to look at him, terrified that she would see anger or disappointment on his face.

"When we spoke to Mr. O'Flannagan, it became clear that he wasn't guilty, any more than you were," she finished. "And he agreed to help secure your release from jail. That's where I was. But on my way home, my carriage was stopped, and I was taken."

“You went there all alone,” he breathed.

She looked up. He was as white as a sheet. “I wasn’t alone,” she said. “My father was with me.”

“You went at night.”

“Yes, last night,” she said. “I had to go when no one else would be around, didn’t I?”

“You could have been killed,” he said. “If O’Flannagan had been the murderer...”

“But he wasn’t,” Astrid said.

“But if he had been,” Conor pressed. “I’m sure he wouldn’t have hesitated to kill you, to silence you. You took a terrible risk.”

“Are you angry with me?”

“You’re alive,” he said. “How could I be angry with anybody? I just...I can’t believe you did that. I can’t believe you put yourself at risk that way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“But Astrid,” he continued. “None of that makes it your fault that you were kidnapped. You have to understand that. What Henry did is entirely his responsibility, and nobody else’s.”

She nodded and leaned into him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

DuBois appeared in the doorway. “Excuse me, My Lord,” he said. “The stew you requested is ready.”

“Excellent. Please bring it in.” He got to his feet, but instead of taking his usual seat across the table from Astrid, he sat beside her. Astrid was glad. The idea of putting any more distance between them than was strictly necessary was painful.

He took her hand in his, entwining their fingers, and she smiled up at him.

The stew was laid out before them. It was a hearty concoction, beef broth with several kinds of meat and vegetables and thick-cut potatoes. For several minutes, neither Conor nor Astrid spoke as they sated their hunger.

She was surprised by how hungry she was, and by the way her exhaustion seemed to retreat in the face of this meal. It must have been at least two thirty in the morning now. She ought to have been sleeping. And she hadn’t slept in over twenty-four hours, unless you counted the time she had been unconscious.

Eventually, the soup bowls emptied. Conor stood up and helped Astrid to her feet. As he did so, the exhaustion came swooping back in, clouding her mind, preventing her from clearly perceiving what was going on around her. Through a fog of sleepiness, she heard Conor say something, heard DuBois answer.

Then they were walking up the stairs. Astrid felt as if she was floating, as if her feet were barely taking her weight. A blink later and she was standing in the master bedroom, being helped out of her dirty dress by Betsy.

“Conor?” she asked.

“He’ll return in a moment, My Lady,” Betsy said, her voice brisk and efficient, yet somehow still conveying sympathy. “I’m to get you into your nightgown. Here, put your arms up.”

Astrid did as she was told and felt the cool, light weight of her nightgown settle over her shoulders. She closed her eyes. I could fall asleep right here.

She wasn’t aware of lying down, of her head hitting the pillow, but suddenly Conor’s arm was wrapped around her. She could feel his lips pressed to the crown of her head.

We’re safe, she thought with a rush of relief. It’s all over now. Nothing can happen to us anymore.

Astrid closed her eyes and let herself slip away into a dream.

* * *

Over the next few days, everything seemed to happen very quickly.

The morning after their encounter at The Arc, a constable and a solicitor came over to the manor to officially clear Conor of the murder of Lord Hayward and to void the contracts that would have transferred ownership of the club to Henry. Astrid sat on the sofa in the parlor wrapped up in blankets, listening as Henry discussed matters with his guests.

“That’s all resolved, then,” Conor said when he was finished and returned to the parlor. He paused to place another log on the fire, then took a seat beside Astrid on the sofa. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” she said. “There’s really no need for all this.”

“Indulge me,” he said. “Take one day and relax on the sofa. It will make me feel better about everything you’ve been through.”

The truth was that it made Astrid feel better too, and she was glad he was insisting. She had been perfectly prepared to be tough, but she was glad she didn’t have to. She still felt shaky and frightened about what had happened the day before, and it was a relief to wrap herself in a cocoon of blankets and sit in the warm glow of the fire.

“I heard from Killian this morning before you were awake,” Conor said.

“He’s Killian now?”

“I think so,” Conor said. “We discussed the possibility of going into business together.”

“His business or yours?”

“Both of them,” Conor said. “The Angry Boar needs a financial backer, as it turns out.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised to hear that, given what my father discovered about the way they were manipulating their books,” Astrid said.

“Well, exactly,” Conor agreed. “I can help to get them back on the right track with the funds at my disposal. And as for me, I need someone to help me run The Arc now that Henry won’t be involved in the business anymore.”

“He’ll run The Arc for you?” Astrid found that hard to believe. “I thought Killian didn’t like The Arc.”

“He doesn’t. He probably won’t want to run it himself,” Conor said. “I imagine he’ll want to put one of his associates in charge, which is fine with me. It’ll be a matter of finding the right person, someone whose tastes reflect the aesthetic of my club. The point is that I won’t have to do that part of the job myself, which is good, because I’d be very ineffective at it.”

“I think you might be better than you think you would,” Astrid said. “You did a great job navigating the situation with Henry at the club last night.”

Page 100

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

“That had very little to do with social graces,” Conor said. “I was merely trying to keep him from killing us until the police arrived.”

“But the way you did it was very graceful,” Astrid insisted. “Think about it, Conor. You had to manage his anger. Not many people could have done that. And at the same time, you were grappling with your own confusion at finding out that your best friend wasn’t the man you thought he was.”

“I suppose you’re right,”

“I’m definitely right.”

“All right,” he agreed. “You’re definitely right.”

“And if you can keep your cool and operate so well under those trying circumstances, surely you can manage to socialize with members of the ton at a club. Or even at a party.”

“I see your game now,” he accused, smiling at her. “You’re trying to convince me to attend a party. I knew it was only a matter of time before you tried to drag me into that world.”

“That’s not what I’m doing at all,” Astrid protested.

“Oh, no?”

She smiled. “I’m trying to convince you to throw a party.”

“What!”

“Just consider it,” she said. “Our wedding was very small, after all, and you and I weren’t on good terms yet when it took place. I feel like celebrating, don’t you? I feel like throwing our doors open to the other members of the town and letting them see that you’re not the man you’ve been rumored to be.”

He groaned. “What put you in the mood to do this now? I thought you’d want a few days of quiet rest after everything that’s happened.”

“I’m not asking for a party tomorrow,” she said. “It will be Christmas in a few months. Perhaps a seasonal party would be appropriate. And as for your question, I think we should do it now because everyone is thinking about us right now. Everyone is still thinking about your arrest and the fact that you were exonerated. Everyone is about to be thinking about the fact that you and Killian were once enemies and now you’re partners.”

“And what difference does that make?” Conor asked her.

“It means that they’ll be primed to change their minds about you,” she explained. “If the police could be wrong about you, if the man responsible for the worst of the rumors about you could be wrong, then perhaps everyone else can see that they’ve been wrong too.”

“I don’t need the town to like me,” Conor said. “I’m well accustomed to being on my own.”

Astrid shook her head. She turned and kissed him gently. “Everyone needs to be seen for who they are,” she told him gently. “Everyone needs to feel understood by the society they live in. And if people see the real you, they will like you. That part will happen whether you need it or not.”

“Killian was right about you,” Conor told her.

“Was he?”

“You’re a remarkable girl,” he told her, and pulled her close to kiss her again.

Epilogue

The Christmas party was to begin at six o’clock, but by five-thirty, the foyer of Middleborough Manor was full of guests.

“What’s going on?” Astrid asked. She felt anxious now that the day of the party was here. Her stomach fluttered with worry and anticipation. “I thought no one would be arriving until six. Maybe even later.”

“They’ve never seen the inside of Middleborough Manor before, My Lady,” Betsy explained, securing one of Astrid’s hairpins. “Lord Middleborough is a mystery to them, and so are you. Everyone is anxious to see what will happen tonight. No one wants to miss even a moment of the spectacle.”

“How do you know this?” Astrid asked her maid.

“It’s been the talk of the town for weeks!” Betsy said with a giggle. “Every time I’ve been to market, someone’s been talking about it. All the other maids have been preparing their ladies for this party, and everyone has been asking me for as much information as I can give! Don’t worry, though,” she added. “I haven’t told them anything. Not even what kind of flowers to expect.”

Astrid nodded. When she had suggested a party, she hadn’t realized it would be such a big deal. Perhaps that had been naive. But she had never hosted a party for members of the ton before. The only one she had even attended was her own wedding, and she

had been so distracted then that she wouldn't have noticed if wild horses had run through the event.

The manor had been decorated in elaborate garlands of evergreen, bedecked with holly berries. Poinsettias stood on every surface. Instead of their usual work clothes, the servants had dressed for the occasion, the maids in simple frocks of red and green and the manservants in black and white. Astrid thought her home had never looked so beautiful.

Betsy finished fixing her hair and stepped back to admire her handiwork. "You'd better go," she said. "Your guests are waiting to greet you."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

Astrid nodded, nerves spiking.

“Don’t worry, My Lady,” Betsy said. “You’ll do well. You’ve fit into this world from the very first moment you set foot in Middleborough Manor.”

“I’ve never been one of the ton,” Astrid objected. She could feel her humble upbringing clinging to her like second skin.

“That only makes you stronger,” a voice said from behind her.

She turned. There was Conor, dressed for the party, looking devastatingly handsome. He held out his hand, and she placed hers in it.

He raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them softly. “You look lovely,” he said. “I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.”

“I feel like a fraud,” she confessed.

“Not at all,” he said. “You’re my wife. You’re the Lady of Middleborough Manor. You belong here more than anybody else.”

“You don’t think they’ll resent me for being here? For finding a way into their world?”

“Remember what you told me?” he asked her. “You have to let people know you. Once they do, they’ll see what I’ve seen all along. Not a social climber, but a charming and clever young lady who fits perfectly into this society.”

She nodded and extended her arm, taking heart from his words. Perhaps he was right to put his faith in her. Perhaps all would finally be well.

As he led her down the stairs and into the foyer full of people, conversations stopped. Everyone looked up to see the reclusive Lord Middleborough and his mysterious wife, about whom so little was known. Astrid could feel their eyes picking her apart.

They're looking for something wrong, she thought. They're looking for flaws in my attire, flaws in my hairstyle. Flaws in the way I carry myself. They're looking for something to set me apart and prove that I'm not one of them, that I don't truly belong here.

"Lady Middleborough?"

She turned. A man she didn't know stood at her elbow.

"My name is Lord Balfour," he said, holding out his hand. When she took it, he kissed her fingers as her husband had done moments earlier. "I know Lord Middleborough by reputation, of course," he added.

"Do you?" Astrid raised her eyebrows. What reputation might he be referring to? Would he actually be rude enough to bring up the unsavory things people had said about Conor in Conor's own home?

"But certainly," Lord Balfour said with a little laugh. "Lord Middleborough was the one to establish the wonderful club my friends and I so enjoy. Why, we spend three nights a week at The Arc. What an enjoyable place it is. My compliments," he said, shaking Conor's hand. "I've long hoped to see you there."

"I don't frequent the place myself," Conor admitted.

“Well, I suppose it must be old hat you!” Lord Balfour said. “You can see it any time you like!”

Astrid wondered whether Conor was thinking the same thing she was—that never seeing the inside of The Arc again would be too soon.

Conor smiled. Astrid was impressed by how genuine the expression on his face was. He didn’t look bothered at all by Lord Balfour’s sentiments. “I’m very glad you’ve found it so enjoyable, Lord Balfour,” he said. “As for you and I, perhaps we can meet at a different establishment, one where I can relax and enjoy myself as nothing more than a patron.”

“A fine idea,” Lord Balfour agreed. “I know a charming little place. The Golden Duck, it’s called. Have you heard of it?”

“I haven’t,” Conor admitted.

“Ladies are welcome too,” Lord Balfour said, inclining his head toward Astrid. “I don’t know whether an outing like this would appeal to you, Lady Middleborough?”

“Indeed, it would,” Astrid said, hoping her answer wouldn’t reflect badly on her husband. It was the truth. “I very much enjoy seeing different parts of our fair city. I never got out of the house much before I was married.”

“I had heard that about you,” Lord Balfour admitted. “Perhaps you should meet my wife. I think the two of you would get along splendidly.”

He extended a hand and appeared to pluck a lady from the crowd. She was tall and slender, with hair so pale it was almost white. She smiled when she saw Astrid and Conor.

“My Lord,” she said, “and Lady Middleborough as well. It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Lovely to meet you as well,” Astrid said.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:51 pm

“Lady Balfour enjoys a night out as much as any lady I’ve ever met,” Lord Balfour said with a smile. “Perhaps the four of us could make plans to visit the Golden Duck sometime in the near future.”

“Oh, that would be splendid,” Lady Balfour said.

“I agree,” Conor said, smiling.

Astrid felt warm all over. She hadn’t let her husband down. Her first real social interaction with members of the ton had been a rousing success, and they had even made plans to go on an outing together. Perhaps this party will have the effect I had hoped it would, she thought happily. Maybe when it’s over, Conor and I will both find ourselves better able to integrate with the people who should be our peers.

The rest of the evening continued in a similar fashion. At supper, Astrid was seated next to Lord Mowbray and his wife. They were older than she, both in their forties, a jolly couple with big voices and big appetites. Lord Mowbray took large portions of every dish on the table and boomed out compliments to his hosts. Lady Mowbray told Astrid all about her three children.

“How many children do you hope to have?” she asked Astrid.

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Astrid confessed.

“Have three,” Lady Mowbray advised. “It really is the best number. You’re quite likely to get both a boy and a girl, and even if you have three girls, your odds are good that one of them will be a beauty and will make a good match. Then you’ll have

someone to look after you in your old age.”

“Why not have seven?” Lord Mowbray boomed.

Lady Mowbray rolled her eyes and leaned closer to Astrid. “He would,” she said. “He would if I’d let him!”

Astrid wondered how many children Conor wanted. It was something she hadn’t thought about until now. Did he want children at all? They had never discussed the matter. And he was seated across the room, talking to Lord and Lady Trowbridge, so she couldn’t ask him.

Maybe I shouldn’t ask him, she decided. Not until I know my own answer to the question, at any rate.

But it wasn’t something that needed to be decided tonight. Tonight, she would focus on the new people she was meeting, on the beautiful rooms of her beautiful manor, on the fine food and the fine dresses.

I never thought this would be my life, she thought. I never thought to find myself the wife of an earl. And yet here I am, as Conor says, the Lady of Middleborough Manor.

The bell rang, signaling the end of supper. The guests rose to their feet as one and proceeded into the ballroom.

Suddenly, Conor was at her side. “May I have the honor of the first dance?” he asked her.

She smiled up at him, charmed. “Of course.”

The musicians struck up a waltz. Conor took Astrid by the hand and pulled her onto the dance floor and into a whirl of color, of skirts lifting and ladies flying in the arms

of their husbands.

Astrid's feet hardly seemed to touch the ground as Conor spun her around and around the dance floor. In his arms, she felt freer than she ever had in her life. It wasn't until the song came to an end and the spinning stopped that she felt the pounding of her heart, the excitement that had taken hold of her.

"Oh, my goodness," she whispered.

"We ought to socialize with our guests," Conor said. But he was still holding her.

"Maybe just one more dance," Astrid suggested, and Conor nodded and gave her a smile.

The next dance was a slow number. This time, instead of spinning and whirling, Conor held Astrid close to his chest. She imagined she could feel his heart beating against hers. He gazed into her eyes the whole time as they slowly rotated. and the people around them seemed to disappear.

"Have I ever told you," he said quietly, "that I am so glad to have married you?"

"I feel exactly the same way," Astrid said quietly.

"I don't know what would have happened to me if it hadn't been for you," he said. "But I imagine I would have been spending tonight completely alone, with only DuBois for company. You have opened up my life in ways I could never have imagined, Astrid."

When the dance came to an end, they separated and moved on to dance with other guests. Astrid was passed from one set of arms to the next. She surprised herself with how easy she found it to make conversation with the members of the ton. They were pleasant people and pleasant to talk to.

All too soon, the last song of the evening was coming to an end and the guests were moving toward the door. Everyone seemed to want to shake Conor's hand or bestow a kiss on Astrid's cheek. "It was a lovely party, my dear," Lord Mowbray said as he took his leave. "I certainly hope to see more of you on the social scene in the future."

"I feel certain that you will," Astrid said with a smile.

When the last of the guests had gone, Astrid and Conor stood alone in the foyer, watching as the servants began to clean up around them.

"Well?" Astrid said, turning in Conor's arms so that she was facing him. "Was the party a good idea?"

"I think it was the first of many good ideas to come," he said, and bent to kiss her.

The End?