



# Not the Duke's Virgin

**Author:** *Scarlett Osborne*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "Tasting your lips was the biggest mistake of my life..."

Blackmailed with a family secret, Victoria has no choice but to pretend she loves the Duke's brother. Yet with just one look from the Duke, her defenses begin to crack...

Ruthless Duke Simon must unveil his brother's scam, no matter the cost. Even if his accomplice is the most beguiling vixen he has ever seen.

To prove their deceit, Simon needs to seduce her. But just one taste of her lips is all it takes for everything to come crashing down around them...

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *Not the Duke's Virgin* is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 73

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## PROLOGUE

“Father,” Victoria began tentatively, setting down her teacup. “Might I ask what news has you so distracted this morning?”

Lord Newton peered at his youngest daughter over his newspaper. “Nothing that would interest a young lady,” he said gruffly.

“Oh, come now, you mustn’t keep me in suspense!” she cajoled. “Tell me, what has happened?”

With a resigned sigh, her father folded his paper neatly beside his plate. “Very well, if you must know, there is increasing talk of unrest in the colonies. It’s those impudent Americans and their protests against our control.”

“How worrying,” Victoria murmured. “Though surely it is just idle chatter?”

The Earl harrumphed again. “Let us hope so. But I fear they grow more defiant, spurred on by rabble-rousers and agitators, wanting the whole country for themselves.” He lifted his teacup and took a long sip before continuing. “Mark my words, it will come to no good if they continue down this treacherous path.”

Victoria glanced up at her father again, who had returned to rustling his newspaper irritably. She wished Aurora were here. But her elder sister remained sequestered at their country estate.

“I do hope Aurora continues to regain her health,” Victoria ventured. “The house

feels rather empty without her, does it not?"

The Earl peered at her over his spectacles with a frown. "Your sister's welfare is being seen to. We must be patient."

"Of course, Father," Victoria murmured, dropping her gaze. Patience had never been her strong suit. She missed Aurora fiercely.

With a soft rustle of footsteps, a footman entered the breakfast room. He bore an engraved silver salver piled with the morning post. Approaching the Earl, he offered a small bow before holding out the platter.

"The post, My Lord."

"Yes, yes, put it here." The Earl impatiently flapped a hand at the table, not glancing up from his paper.

The footman slid the salver onto the pristine tablecloth. Then with another bow, he noiselessly exited the room.

The Earl set aside his newspaper and drew the salver toward him. He rifled through the assortment of letters and ornate invitations, flipping through them one by one.

"Banker... merchant... modiste... confounded bills, bills, bills..." he grumbled under his breath as he sorted the post into piles. He set a few personal letters at his elbow to read later when he had time.

Victoria occupied herself by spreading marmalade atop a delicate toast triangle, unconcerned with the post. Any letters addressed to her would not be with her father; they would be delivered by her lady's maid. Indeed, she half expected Charlotte to arrive any moment with correspondence from Aurora, hungering for word from her

beloved sister.

“Ah, what’s this now? Something for you, my dear.” The Earl plucked a cream-colored envelope off the array and extended it toward her.

She noticed the ornate letter H embossed on the front.

“Hayward, it would seem.” Her father quirked a bushy eyebrow.

Victoria set down her toast, suddenly losing her appetite. She took the proffered letter reluctantly. Any communication from that particular family was unlikely to be a matter of joy. Not after her interaction with Lord Oliver at the ball a fortnight ago. The memory of Oliver’s crude insinuations still made her stomach churn.

She slid a butter knife beneath the wax seal and unfolded the heavy vellum within. The invitation was addressed to her father, requesting the pleasure of their company at Hayward Manor for dinner in one week. At the bottom, Lord Oliver had penned a personal note welcoming them to meet his elder brother, the Duke of Hayward.

Victoria’s frown deepened. This seemed like another move in some nefarious game Lord Oliver was playing, though she did not yet grasp the rules or motives. Victoria knew only that she wished to avoid him entirely. But refusing such a direct invitation from his family would be unpardonably rude.

“The Duke of Hayward himself! What an honor.” Her father’s pleased exclamation interrupted her brooding. “We shall have to visit the modiste straight away, have her run up something new for you. I’ll not have you looking anything less than your best for this grand occasion.”

Victoria suppressed a sigh. “Yes, Father.” She tried to inject a note of cheer into her tone, though her stomach churned.

Whatever Lord Oliver was plotting, she could not avoid this visit without casting impertinent suspicion on his family's gracious motives.

Setting aside the elaborate invitation with its veiled menace, Victoria reached for the next letter on her father's salver. Plain white paper this time, but her name was inscribed across the front in bold black ink. An unfamiliar hand, she noted, though insidiously confident.

Slitting it open, she quickly scanned the contents.

My dear Lady Victoria,

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I trust this letter finds you well. I am very much looking forward to furthering the acquaintance we began at Lady Wentworth's ball. The upcoming dinner will provide an excellent opportunity to solidify our new friendship. Do be on your most charming behavior for my family. I would hate for this happy occasion to become less pleasant due to any unfortunate misunderstandings between us.

Yours, Oliver Reynolds.

Victoria read it twice, a furrow slowly etching itself between her eyebrows. Beneath the solicitous language lay a thinly veiled threat. She ought to have expected such after their last unsettling conversation when he had seemed to take unseemly delight in her discomfiture. This letter smacked of the same mocking malice.

"Is something the matter?"

Victoria started. Her father had paused, letter opener in hand, watching her from across the table.

Hastily, Victoria folded the unpleasant missive and reached for her cold tea. "No, not at all," she murmured before taking a bracing sip. The porcelain cup rattled ever so slightly against the saucer. "It is only a brief welcome from Lord Oliver." She strove to keep her tone light, as though the letter had merely expressed anticipation of their visit. "He looks forward to our visit."

"Hmm." The Earl did not seem entirely convinced, but he returned to opening his correspondence.

Victoria bit the inside of her cheek, vexed with herself for reacting so transparently.

Whatever Lord Oliver was scheming, she could not refuse the family invitation without casting impertinent suspicion on the Duke and Dowager Duchess. Which had likely been Lord Oliver's very aim. She would simply have to endure the visit, and his company, with as much poise as she could muster. And try to determine what fresh trouble the younger Reynolds brother was concocting before she found herself mired too deep in it.

The rest of breakfast passed uneventfully. Once the dishes had been cleared away, Victoria prepared to leave her father to his business and seek out her lady's maid. She wished to pen a quick letter to Aurora before their modiste appointment.

Movement caught her eye as she reached the door, and glancing back, she saw her father unfurl a scroll with an intricate seal. His estate business frequently involved such documents.

With a rustle of her skirts, Victoria departed, weighing whether or not to mention the imminent visit to Hayward Manor in her letter. She disliked worrying Aurora needlessly during her convalescence.

## CHAPTER1

Victoria sat rigidly in the carriage as it bumped and jostled its way down the long drive leading to Hayward Manor. She clasped her hands tightly in her lap to keep them from trembling. This was it. The moment she had been dreading for weeks.

"My, what a grand estate this is!" her father exclaimed as he peered out the window. "The Duke has done well for himself."

Victoria glanced up at him, surprised by this sudden exclamation. Her father sat, with

his newspaper forgotten on the bench, gazing out at the manicured lawns and gardens of the Duke's sprawling country manor.

Madeline, her cousin, nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, yes, I've heard Hayward Manor is one of the finest in the county. We're so fortunate to be invited!"

Victoria said nothing. She knew the real reason they were here. The false courtship she had been blackmailed into by the horrid Oliver. Just thinking about that manipulative snake made her blood boil. She glanced down at the ostentatious ruby ring on her finger, a prop for their charade. How she wished she could hurl it out the window.

The carriage rolled to a stop. A footman opened the door, and her father nearly leapt out in his excitement. Madeline followed, straightening her gown. Victoria took a deep breath. It was time to face the music.

Oliver awaited them at the entrance, wearing a charming grin that made Victoria's skin crawl. "Welcome, welcome!" he cried jovially, clasping her father's hand.

As predicted, the Earl became putty in his hands.

"Magnificent to see you again, Lord Oliver!" her father gushed. "I must say, your brother keeps an extraordinary estate."

Oliver smiled. "Why, thank you. I shall give him your compliments." His eyes flicked to Victoria. "Come, my darling. Let us go inside."

Victoria forced herself to take his arm. She felt sick at his touch. Madeline shot her a sympathetic look as they entered the grand foyer.

"Brother!" Oliver called out. "Our guests have arrived."



A tall figure emerged from a side parlor. Victoria's breath caught in her throat. So, this was Simon Reynolds, the Duke of Hayward, Oliver's older brother.

He was perhaps the most imposing man she had ever seen. Broad-shouldered and chiseled, with dark hair and piercing dark brown eyes. Everything about his demeanor oozed power and arrogance. When his dark stare fixed on her, she had to suppress a shudder.

"Welcome to Hayward Manor," the Duke said coolly.

Her father practically tripped over himself greeting the Duke. Madeline dropped into a deep curtsy.

Victoria managed the briefest of curtsies, struggling to find her voice. "A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace," she finally managed.

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The Duke glanced her over with an inscrutable expression. “Hm. Yes.”

Victoria bristled at his brusque dismissal. The allure of status and wealth had gone straight to the man’s head. She decided then and there that she did not like the Duke of Hayward one bit.

Oliver guided them into an elegant sitting room. Her father immediately launched into enthusiastic praise of the manor. Madeline awkwardly tried to make conversation with the aloof Duke.

Victoria found herself watching Simon closely. What sort of man was he really, beneath the noble polish? Did he know of his brother’s scheming nature? She longed to wipe that arrogant look off his face.

“Come, Victoria, sit by me,” Oliver said, patting the space beside him.

Victoria forced a smile and sat, allowing him to take her hand. She noticed the Duke’s eyes flick down to the gesture, his expression unreadable.

“My darling has been eager for this chance to meet our family properly,” Oliver told his brother. “Haven’t you, my sweet?”

“Oh, yes,” Victoria said through gritted teeth. “I have been counting down the days.”

The Duke let out a humorless chuckle. “Is that so? Funny, you seem rather less than eager to me.”

Victoria's eyes widened in surprise. There was more perception behind that aloof facade than she had guessed. Before she could respond, Oliver jumped in.

"Do not mind my brother," he said lightly. "I'm afraid he knows little of affairs of the heart."

Victoria noticed a muscle in the Duke's jaw tighten ever so slightly. "On the contrary, dear brother, I understand a great deal more than you know." His intense gaze seemed to pierce right through her.

Her pulse quickened despite herself.

Just then, the Dowager Duchess entered the room, saving Victoria from having to respond. The aging noblewoman looked bemused at their presence. Her silvery hair was elegantly coiffed, and she wore a lavender day dress that likely cost more than most people made in a year. Still, there was a weariness in her eyes that spoke of someone who had seen too much.

"Mother, allow me to present our esteemed guests," Simon said. "The Earl of Newton, his daughter Lady Victoria, and his niece Miss Russell."

The Dowager Duchess looked Victoria up and down critically, then let out a derisive sniff. "Charmed, I'm sure."

Victoria bristled. Just like her son, this woman judged her unworthy after nothing more than a glance. What she wouldn't give to tell the arrogant Dowager Duchess exactly what she thought of her. But she held her tongue.

Oliver laughed lightly. "You'll have to forgive my mother. I'm afraid she is rather protective of me, her darling boy." He shot his mother a roguish wink.

Simon frowned. “Mind your manners, Oliver. We are in polite company.”

“Polite company,” the Dowager Duchess scoffed. “Is that what we call arrivistes like these now?”

“Mother!” Simon said sharply.

Victoria flushed in embarrassment and anger. Her father looked equally incensed.

Oliver stepped in swiftly. “Come now, Mother, let us not say anything we might regret.”

Victoria sat fuming as Oliver smoothed over the situation with his glib charm. The nerve of that woman, insulting her family so brazenly. And the Duke was hardly better. The only thing getting her through this torture was imagining the looks on their faces when the truth of this sham came out.

The Dowager Duchess departed, leaving an awkward tension hanging in the air. Victoria avoided the Duke’s gaze, though she could feel it lingering on her.

To her relief, a servant entered the room, announcing that tea was ready in the garden. As they went outside, Victoria hung back to walk beside Madeline.

“This is a nightmare,” she whispered furiously. “They are all horrid people.”

Madeline nodded sympathetically. “The Dowager Duchess was quite rude. But take heart, this charade cannot last forever.”

Victoria sighed. “I suppose you are right.” She glanced ahead to where the Duke strode beside Oliver. “I only hope I can bear their company that long.”

Just before Madeline could respond, Oliver interrupted them. “Come, I will show you to the solar while tea is prepared,” he said, ushering them along.

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As they walked, her father kept up a constant litany of admiration. “Remarkable corbels! Such exquisite stone tracery. Oh, do look at the leaded glass in those mullioned windows, my dear!”

“Indeed. The Haywards are leaders in architecture and design,” Oliver boasted.

As they followed along, Victoria said nothing, struggling against a rising sense of unease. There was something ominous in the atmosphere of this house. She was relieved when they finally entered the pleasant, sunlit solar. Oliver guided her to a floral-patterned settee and went to speak with a footman.

Taking a deep breath, Victoria smoothed her skirts and reminded herself she needed only endure this visit long enough to maintain appearances.

Returning, Oliver took the seat beside her while her father and Madeline admired the scenic vistas from the window. Victoria sat stiffly until Oliver leaned close.

“Do attempt to look less like I am torturing you, my dear,” he murmured, wearing that sly grin she was coming to despise.

Victoria narrowed her eyes but forced a smile as he took her hand in both of his own and patted it in a show of affection.

“There now, much better,” he approved.

Victoria wanted to snatch back her hand, yearning to slap that smug expression off his face. But she refrained, her spine rigid. She would not cause a scene or give him

the satisfaction of seeing how much his schemes unsettled her.

At that moment, the Duke strode into the solar, his presence dominating the space. Victoria inhaled sharply before she could prevent it, a skittering sensation racing across her nerves. He was imposing in a way his brother was not, quietly commanding with an air of unshakable certainty.

When his dark gaze landed on her, she had to suppress a shiver. His eyes were cold, shuttered, as though a steel door barred entrance to any deeper emotion. But she sensed the keen intelligence behind that impassive facade.

“Lady Victoria.” He lifted her limp hand in his firm grasp. “I have heard so very much about you.”

His tone implied that none of it was flattering.

Victoria’s back stiffened. “I hope you have not allowed your opinion of me to be swayed by idle gossip, Your Grace,” she replied evenly.

His dark eyebrows flicked upward. “Not swayed, no. Merely... informed.”

The subtle warning made Victoria’s temper flare, but before she could fashion a retort, Oliver reclaimed her attention.

“Come, my dear, let me show you the music room while we wait for tea.”

Victoria allowed him to lead her out of the solar, though irritation simmered in her chest. The Duke thought her some fortune-hunting social climber. Well, let him. She would not demean herself by trying to convince him otherwise. Still, the injustice of it stung. What right had he to look down on her with such contempt?

In the corridor, Victoria freed her hand from Oliver's grasp. But he seemed not to notice, expounding on the history of several ancestral portraits as they walked. His blithe self-absorption further ignited her simmering temper.

Halting abruptly, she rounded on him. "I do not know what manner of deception you plan, My Lord, but I will not be party to it any longer." Eyes flashing, she continued in a fierce undertone, "Tell your brother plainly that I am here under duress. I will not have him slandering my character or my motives."

Oliver's eyes narrowed, his tone silky. "Careful, My Lady. We wouldn't want this little drama to become... unpleasant."

Victoria lifted her chin. "I assure you, it cannot become more unpleasant than it already is."

With that, she swept away down the hall, back rigid. Let the arrogant Duke think what he would, for now. She refused to feign further devotion to his despicable brother when their farce of a courtship was based on threats and secrets.

Reentering the solar, she found it empty save for the Duke. At her approach, he turned from contemplating the landscape portrait above the fireplace.

Victoria took a deep, steadying breath before speaking. "You have misunderstood my intentions, Your Grace."

She held the Duke's gaze, hoping he would grasp her meaning.

The Duke's dark brown eyes narrowed, flicking over her tense posture. "Then what are your intentions, my lady?"

Victoria bit her tongue in frustration. "That, I cannot answer."



His expression remained impassive, though she sensed the keen assessment behind his studious gaze. “So it would seem.”

Before she could attempt further explanation, Oliver breezed back into the solar, all easy charm and compliments as he urged them to walk in the garden before tea. Victoria trailed after the brothers, hands clenched in her skirts. She had tried to shed a little light on her predicament, but could not tell the full truth. Not yet.

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Just then, a servant walked in to inform them that tea was ready.

Oliver led them to the garden for tea.

Victoria accepted a delicate china teacup from a servant, noting that even the tea service likely cost a small fortune. The Earl and Madeline oohed and aahed over the garden.

Oliver kept up a steady stream of mindless small talk. “The roses are looking quite spectacular this year, are they not? The gardener has outdone himself. Though of course, I’m certain Newton House has equally fine roses.”

Victoria murmured something noncommittal, taking a sip of tea.

“And how are you finding the weather lately?” Oliver prattled on, adding an obscene amount of sugar to his tea. “Seems summer has arrived early. Perfect for picnics and garden parties and such.”

“Yes, the weather has been lovely,” Victoria said flatly.

She found her gaze drawn to the Duke. He sat ramrod straight, observing the proceedings with a detached air. What was he thinking behind that inscrutable mask?

“You have scarcely said two words, Lady Victoria,” the Duke suddenly remarked, fixing her with his intense stare. “I hope you are not too disappointed by Hayward Manor.”

Victoria bristled at his mocking tone. “On the contrary, Your Grace, everything is quite charming. I am simply overcome by the... delightful company.”

She saw a muscle twitch in the Duke’s jaw. Her barbed words hit their mark. Good, let him stew on that.

Oliver cleared his throat. “Come now, darling, no need for shyness.” He took her hand and brought it to his lips in an overly familiar gesture. “We are among friends, are we not?”

Victoria forced herself not to jerk her hand away in disgust. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Duke frown.

“Tell me, Lady Victoria,” Simon said abruptly. “How did you and my brother become acquainted?”

Victoria tensed. This was dangerous ground. “Oh... we met at a ball.”

At least that part was true.

Oliver jumped in. “She quite stole my heart that first evening. Isn’t that right, my sweet?”

Victoria managed a tight smile. “Yes, it was all... quite swift.”

The afternoon passed in tense trivialities, the conversation dominated by Oliver’s glib commentary and her father’s obsequious queries.

“You must invite me some time to tour the stables,” the Earl gushed at one point. “I’ve heard you have the most impressive racing horses.”

“But of course, we would be delighted to have you visit again soon,” Oliver replied smoothly, though his eyes glinted with condescension.

Victoria remained mostly silent, responding only when required.

The Duke spoke little, his dark gaze often drifting her way. Though his countenance remained impassive, she sensed his keen assessment, and it kept her tea cup rattling nervously on its saucer. What must he think of her, after her cryptic confession? That she was some desperate social climber clinging to a tenuous connection?

If only she could explain fully without endangering Aurora’s reputation.

When the last crumb of cake had been consumed, Oliver suggested they adjourn inside to settle for dinner. As the rest of the party moved ahead, he firmly took Victoria’s elbow. She tensed, her nerves jangling. His breath was hot against her ear.

“You will be on your most charming behavior this evening, I trust.” His grip tightened until she nearly winced. “One word of your little rebellion over tea, and your sister’s indiscretion becomes fodder for gossip.”

Victoria’s heart stuttered. She should have known he would be watching, listening.

Oliver released her arm, and she had to force herself not to rub the aching spot. His smile was cold. “Come now, Lady Victoria. Let us enjoy the hospitality of my family.”

He offered his arm once more. Lips pressed into a thin line, she laid her hand on his sleeve. Catching a glimpse of the Duke’s tall figure, an impulse seized her.

Making a show of adjusting her slipper, she lingered behind. “My Lord, please go ahead. I fear a pebble is lodged in my shoe.”

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Oliver's eyes narrowed, but with the others so near, he merely inclined his head. "Do not tarry overlong."

The soft threat lingered as he continued ahead.

The Duke had already started up the wide stairs, but Victoria hastened toward him, hiking up her skirts delicately.

"Your Grace, a moment please." At his questioning look, she continued, voice lowered. "Forgive my boldness, but I must speak plainly..."

Victoria hesitated, twisting her hands nervously. She longed to confess the truth, to expose Oliver's vile blackmail and plead for help. But the Duke's stern countenance gave her pause. He had made his poor opinion of her character abundantly clear.

No, appealing to him would only backfire. The contempt in his sharp gaze warned that he would likely think her lies a ploy to gain sympathy and attention.

She swallowed back the urge to unburden herself. The Duke was not an ally in this. Voicing her plight would only bring further torment upon herself and her family.

No, for now, discretion was paramount. She must bear this burden alone, continuing the loathsome pretense for Aurora's sake.

Steeling herself, Victoria smoothly excused herself from the Duke's presence. She could not risk his wrath and skepticism. Her sister's future depended on maintaining this hateful ruse, no matter how it tortured her soul.

For endless moments, the Duke simply studied her.

Heart pounding, she dropped into a grateful curtsy before gliding up the stairs after Oliver.

The Duke's steady footsteps followed after.

They entered an elegant dining room. The scraping of chair legs heralded their arrival. The Dowager Duchess was already seated. Her expression was haughty as she observed Victoria over her wine glass.

Once seated, Victoria found herself between Oliver and his mother. The Dowager Duchess looked pointedly past her when remarking on the fineness of the meal. Trying to ignore the insult, Victoria took small bites, her corset cinching already-knotted innards.

"This salmon is superb," Oliver proclaimed. "My dear Victoria has a weakness for the dish. I shall have the cook prepare it often once we are wed."

Victoria choked on her wine. Madeline shot her a worried look from across the table.

"Yes, you must establish the menu early when you become the mistress of your own home," the Dowager Duchess pronounced, still without glancing Victoria's way.

Victoria bristled slightly at the dismissal but held her tongue. She knew the skills required to run the household of a great estate like Hayward Manor.

Mortification heated Victoria's cheeks. Even Oliver had the grace to look mildly uncomfortable at his mother's bald rudeness.

From the head of the table, the Duke frowned. "I do not think Lady Victoria's

education deficient,” he said mildly. “Indeed, her conversation earlier showed a singular intelligence and perception.”

Surprise pierced through Victoria’s embarrassment. It was the first even semi-complimentary remark she had heard him make regarding her. The Dowager Duchess looked equally astonished.

“Truly? Well, I suppose impressions may vary. We shall see soon enough if she measures up.” She sipped her wine with a sour downturn to her thin mouth.

Victoria’s head was beginning to ache abominably. She picked at her food, wondering when she would get a chance to escape for some fresh air outside. There, at least, she could breathe freely, without the Reynolds watching for any crack in her performance, eager to peck out more pieces of her dignity.

She had known this visit would be an ordeal. But the reality of it had proven worse than even her grim imaginings.

## CHAPTER2

Victoria fidgeted nervously with the napkin in her lap, intensely aware of the awkward dynamic between the two brothers. Though they made polite conversation over the first course, it was clear from the odd glances and veiled barbs that there was no love lost between them.

“Dinner is cooked to perfection as always,” Oliver commented. “Hayward Manor has always employed the most talented cooks. Father made sure of that.”

Simon’s jaw tightened, nearly imperceptibly. “Yes, he spared no expense for your comfort and pleasures.”

“Come now, you make it sound as if I was his only concern,” Oliver replied lightly, but his eyes glinted.

“Of course not. He had the estate’s best interests at heart, though we may have... disagreed on what that entailed.”



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Oliver opened his mouth to respond but seemed to think better of it with guests present. The rest of the meal passed in stilted silence.

Victoria filed away the cryptic remarks. Some unresolved issues festered between the brothers, though they kept their references vague. She wished Oliver had prepared her better for navigating this web of familial discord. She would need all her wits about her.

As the footmen cleared away the soup bowls and returned with the next course, Oliver made a show of smiling affectionately at Victoria and patting her hand. “My dear, you simply must try Cook’s roast duck. It’s superb.”

Victoria forced a smile in return. “Why, thank you, darling,” she said through gritted teeth, the term of endearment feeling foreign on her tongue.

Across from her, Simon coolly appraised the interaction, one dark eyebrow raised skeptically. Victoria felt her cheeks grow warm under his scrutiny and focused intently on her plate.

“So, Brother,” Oliver said, turning his attention to Simon. “Have you given any more thought to the issue we discussed earlier? It seems only right that we cooperate, as Father would have wanted.”

Victoria’s head shot up, a questioning look on her face, but Oliver ignored her, his gaze fixed challengingly on Simon.

The Duke’s expression darkened. “I’ll thank you not to bring my personal affairs into

this, Oliver. My business dealings are no concern of yours.”

“Oh, come now, surely family should support each other,” Oliver persisted casually. “After all, cooperation is so important, don’t you agree?”

Victoria stiffened, sensing the insinuation behind his words.

Across from her, Simon’s eyes flashed. “I don’t respond well to manipulation,” he said coldly. “And I’ll remind you that my affairs are entirely my own as the current Duke.”

“Of course, of course,” Oliver said lightly. “I just hope you make wise choices, that’s all. It would be a shame if a lack of cooperation led to unfortunate consequences.”

Victoria felt faint, gripping the edge of the table for support. Fury washed over her. How dare Oliver threaten to force the Duke to cooperate!

The rest of the meal passed in frigid silence, broken only by the footmen as they served and cleared away each course.

She had just begun to relax when Oliver and Simon got into a heated debate yet again.

“You know, I’m rather surprised Father didn’t divvy up the landholdings evenly between us,” Oliver commented, as if thinking aloud. “As brothers, it only seems fair we each receive an equal share.”

Simon’s eyes flashed. “The entire estate has been passed down from Duke to Duke for generations. I see no reason to break with tradition and divvy it up now simply because you feel entitled to land that is not yours.”

“Come now, Simon, no need to be petty,” Oliver chided. “I’m sure Father would have wanted us to cooperate. He always did have a soft spot for me, being the baby of the family. I daresay if he’d made his will later in life, after seeing what a disappointment you turned out to be, he might have left the entire estate to me!”

Simon took a deep breath, resisting the urge to return his brother’s petty insults. “The will clearly states the estate goes to me, regardless of any love match,” he said evenly. “I intend to manage it responsibly, as Father would have wanted.”

Oliver laughed derisively. “We both know you’re incapable of love. Father saw it too, which is why he tried to force your hand with that clause. What a shame his plan failed.”

Simon’s jaw tightened, but he held Oliver’s mocking gaze without reaction. After a tense moment, he replied calmly, “I loved and respected our father, whatever you may think. For now, I’ll hear no more.”

Oliver slowly set down his napkin. “As you wish, Your Grace,” he said mockingly with a small bow.

An ugly silence descended over them, broken only by the clink of cutlery. Victoria sat rigid, unsure what to make of this rancor between the brothers. Glancing at her father, she found him obliviously enjoying his meal. Madeline, however, looked acutely uncomfortable.

When the footmen came to clear away the dishes, Victoria released a discreet breath.

At that moment, Oliver grabbed Simon’s arm as he turned to leave, leaning in close. “A word, Brother? We need to discuss something.” He tilted his head subtly toward the balcony doors across the room.

Simon stiffened, then gave a curt nod. "If you insist."

The two brothers made their way through the dining room. Oliver slid open the balcony doors and stepped outside into the night air.

"Well?" Simon demanded crisply, joining him and letting the doors swing shut behind them. "What is so pressing that you couldn't say in there?"

Oliver took a deep breath, gazing out at the estate grounds sprawling darkly below them. "You cannot keep denying me my rightful inheritance!" he said hotly.

Simon's response was an angry hiss. "Rightful, you say?"

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Oliver gave a scathing laugh. “Since when did you care about what is right, dear brother? You always were Father’s favorite, the heir groomed to perfection. What did I ever receive but his scorn?”

“You brought that on yourself with your behavior,” Simon bit out. “You think you are ready to be master of the estate? You could not control your gambling or drinking habits long enough to show any capability.”

Oliver seemed to seethe with rage. “And you think you are so much better? What do you know of passion or joy, sequestered here alone with your ledgers?” His tone turned taunting. “Take care that rod does not remain stuck so far up your arse, or you might forget what the sunlight looks like.”

Simon moved swiftly, seizing his brother’s by his shirt. “You go too far.”

Oliver knocked his hand away. “Or perhaps not far enough. But we shall see who goes farthest in the end.”

With that cryptic remark, he stormed off.

Simon remained motionless as a statue.

\* \* \*

After the awkward, tension-filled dinner, the ladies rose from the table to adjourn to the drawing room. Victoria was desperate for a respite from the stifling atmosphere. As the other ladies filed out, she paused in the doorway and turned back.

“Pardon me,” she said, “but I’m afraid I must freshen up after that large meal. I’ll join you shortly.”

Without waiting for a response, she slipped out a side door and into a small hallway. Glancing around furtively and seeing no one, she hurried toward the back of the manor.

Emerging into a moonlit courtyard, she let out a breath. The grand manor loomed large around her, but she spotted an empty path leading off to one side. It appeared to lead to the gardens.

Clutching her shawl against the night air, Victoria hurried down the garden path, gravel crunching under her slippers. The path twisted past manicured hedges and over a burbling stone fountain. Finding a secluded bench tucked into an alcove, she sat down gratefully, head leaning back against the hedge.

Out here, alone under the stars, the knot in Victoria’s chest finally loosened as she breathed in the fragrant night air deeply. The peaceful beauty of the gardens soothed her frayed nerves after the wretched dinner. Gazing up at the moon, she vowed not to forget the good in this world still worth fighting for.

A snap of a twig jerked Victoria out of her thoughts. Heart leaping to her throat, she whirled to find Simon emerging from the shadows, imposing in his black evening attire.

She pressed a hand to her chest. “Your Grace! You startled me.”

“Did I?” His tone was mocking as he approached with effortless grace.

Victoria shrank back against the hedge. “I just needed some air?—”

“I’m sure.”

Simon braced one hand on the hedge above her shoulder, bringing his tall frame dangerously close. His eyes glinted like steel in the darkness. Victoria’s pulse quickened.

“I know precisely why you’re out here, my dear,” he purred, leaning in until she could feel the heat of his breath. “This engagement of yours is merely a ruse, concocted so you can slither your way into my inheritance.”

Victoria gaped, outrage momentarily choking her words. When she found her voice, it came out heated.

“How dare you accuse me of such deception! I have no designs on your fortune.”

Simon slammed his other hand on the hedge, caging her in. “Come now, let’s not pretend. Why else would my rake of a brother propose to a woman he barely knows?”

Victoria trembled but refused to cower. She lifted her chin defiantly. “My reasons are none of your concern, Your Grace.”

Simon grinned wolfishly, undaunted by her show of courage. He leaned in closer until their faces were just inches apart. Victoria could see the dangerous glint in his dark brown eyes.

“Oh, I think they are my concern, Lady Victoria,” he purred. “You see, when it involves my family’s inheritance, I make it my business to know everything.”

Victoria’s pulse was racing now, but she refused to back down. “I want nothing that belongs to you or your family,” she insisted. “This engagement was not of my design.”

Simon tilted his head, studying her intently. “Is that so? Forgive me if I find that hard to believe.”

Victoria tried to slip under his arm, but he blocked her effortlessly. “Let me pass, Your Grace,” she demanded.



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“Not just yet.” Simon trailed a finger slowly down her bare shoulder, making her shiver. “First, I want the truth.”

Victoria slapped his hand away, her eyes flashing. “I already told you the truth! I’m not after your fortune or your estate or anything else that is yours. Now, stand aside and let me pass.”

Instead of complying, Simon threw his head back and laughed. The rich sound made Victoria’s stomach flutter.

“You are a fiery one, aren’t you?” Simon said appreciatively. “I do enjoy a woman with spirit.”

Despite herself, Victoria felt her cheeks grow warm at the compliment. She lifted her chin higher, determined not to let him rattle her.

For a long moment, they stared at each other, the tension simmering. A muscle ticked in Simon’s jaw, and his nostrils flared. Then, abruptly, he stepped back with a dry chuckle.

“Such spirit,” he mused. “Almost enough to make me believe your act of innocence.”

Victoria folded her arms over her chest. “It is not an act. Despite what you may think, I am not after your precious dukedom.”

Simon smiled then, a mocking twist of his lips that made Victoria bristle. “We shall see. A cunning serpent often hides behind a fair face.”

Victoria clenched her fists, outraged at the insult. “How dare you! I am no deceitful serpent.”

“Aren’t you?” Simon reached out and trailed a finger slowly down her neck in a feather-light caress. Despite herself, Victoria shivered. “Then convince me of your sincerity,” he challenged silkily.

Her breaths came faster, and she knocked his hand aside. “I do not need to convince you of anything. If you refuse to believe the truth, that is your misfortune.”

Simon let out a low, dangerous chuckle that seemed to reverberate through her. “You are a fearless one. I admire that.”

Before she could react, he suddenly grasped her waist and pulled her flush against him. Victoria gasped, her palms landing flat on the solid wall of his chest. His clean, woody scent enveloped her.

“Unhand me at once!” she demanded, even as her treacherous heart started to race at their sudden proximity.

“Give me one good reason why I should.” Simon’s voice was low and silken as he tilted her chin up. His eyes dropped briefly to her lips, and Victoria felt herself tremble.

Surely he wasn’t going to...

At the last moment before their lips could meet, Simon paused, his eyes searching hers intently. Victoria sensed he was giving her the chance to pull away. But some reckless impulse kept her rooted to the spot, her pulse thundering in her ears.

Just as she was melting further into him, Simon wrenched himself back abruptly.

Victoria stared at him, her lips tingling and her chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. His eyes had darkened with undisguised want. But his jaw was taut with restraint.

“Forgive me,” he bit out. “It was inappropriate to be so close to you.”

Raking a hand through his hair, he turned away, looking uncharacteristically flustered.

Victoria sagged back against the hedge, pressing her hands to her burning cheeks. What had come over her? She had almost allowed him to kiss her. She was betrothed, however falsely, to his brother!

At that reminder, she gathered her scattered wits. “I believe it would be best if you took your leave, Your Grace,” she managed crisply.

Simon glanced back at her, his expression shuttered once more. “Yes, of course.” His lips twisted sardonically.

Victoria lifted her chin. “Good night, Your Grace.”

With a mocking bow, Simon melted back into the shadows. As his footsteps faded, Victoria released a shuddering breath.

How dare he take such liberties and stir up such unwanted feelings inside her! Clenching her fists, she silently cursed the arrogant Duke. She could not allow him to unravel her so easily.

One reckless encounter was already more than she could afford. The stakes were too high to lose focus over some brooding Duke, no matter how perilously he made her pulse race.

## CHAPTER3

“Victoria, my dear,” Lord Newton began, clearing his throat meaningfully. “I wished to speak with you about a matter of some importance.”

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Victoria merely nodded, spearing a bit of sausage with more force than necessary.

“As you know, securing your match with Lord Oliver is of the utmost priority.” The Earl peered at her over his spectacles. “I do hope the courtship is proceeding smoothly?”

Victoria’s grip on her fork tightened until her knuckles whitened. How she detested discussing her sham engagement, as if it were a business transaction to be managed. But she merely gave a noncommittal “Mm,” and took a sip of tea.

Her father’s eyes narrowed. “I need more assurance than that, my girl. The success of our family depends on this union. Surely I have impressed that upon you.”

Victoria bit back a sharp retort. Calmly setting down her teacup, she adopted her most sincere tone. “Of course, Father. I understand completely.”

The Earl nodded approvingly. “Good. Then you know how essential it is that this betrothal be formalized with haste.” He took a bite of toast, apparently oblivious to her simmering resentment across the table. “Lord Carmichael has expressed interest in investing in a new venture of mine, but his support depends on you making an advantageous match.”

Victoria’s head snapped up. “You cannot think of business affairs when Auro?—”

Her father interrupted her before she could mention her sister’s name.

His eyes darkened. “I beg your pardon? I can think of whatever I please.” He set

down his fork sharply. “Do not mention your sister in this matter. Or have you forgotten that the fortune of this entire family rest upon your shoulders now?”

Victoria flushed, chastened. But anger still churned in her gut. As if status and wealth were all that mattered, rather than her sister’s well-being!

Taking a breath to calm her rising temper, she tried again. “Father, surely there are other considerations that should take priority?—”

But the Earl slammed his palm on the table, making the china rattle. “Enough!” he thundered. “We will have no more talk of other considerations. You have a duty to uphold.” His eyes bored into hers like flint. “Or do your flesh and blood mean so little to you?”

Stung, Victoria looked down, blinking back tears. Madeline touched her arm consolingly under the table but remained prudently silent.

For a long, fraught moment, the only sounds were the Earl’s aggressive cutting of his sausage and the ticking of the mantel clock. Victoria attempted to discreetly compose herself.

At last, her father seemed to cool his temper. Dabbing at his mouth with his napkin, he said gruffly, “Come, Victoria, let us speak no more on these unpleasant matters. Your union with Lord Oliver will solve everything, in due time.”

When Victoria did not respond, he prompted impatiently, “Do we understand one another?”

Swallowing down the angry words crowding her throat, Victoria replied dully, “Yes, Father, of course.”

“Good.” The Earl smiled, his good humor instantly restored now that she had acquiesced. “I knew you would do what’s best for this family. You’re a good girl.”

He patted her hand fondly before he left the table, and Victoria had to resist the urge to recoil from his touch. Forcing a smile that felt more like a grimace, she managed to get through the rest of the meal without losing her composure. But inside, she was seething.

Victoria squeezed her cousin’s hand, willing her to stay silent. They could not afford to rouse her father’s suspicions. Not when Aurora’s fate hung in the balance.

Madeline pressed her lips together, her eyes stormy. She had argued fiercely against acquiescing to Oliver’s ploy when Victoria revealed her plight.

“We cannot let that snake win!” Madeline had declared hotly, pacing the room in her agitation. “Your father must be told the truth!”

“No!” Victoria had cried, seizing her cousin’s hands. “You know we cannot risk Aurora’s reputation being ruined.”

Even now, her heart clenched to think of her gentle, caring sister.

Their father, sadly, cared not one whit for his daughters’ happiness. He only cared about how it would affect his standing.

Thus, Victoria found herself bound to silence. If Oliver carried out his threat to publicly expose Aurora, their family’s reputation would be shattered beyond repair. Their father’s longed-for business venture with Lord Carmichael would be over before it even began.

No, challenging Oliver openly was too dangerous. Better to appease him for now, at

least until she found a way to reveal the truth on her terms.

Madeline had raged against the idea. “We cannot allow that villain to control you, Victoria! Who knows what other indecencies he shall demand?”

“I know,” Victoria soothed. “But Aurora’s well-being must come first. Surely there is a way to outmaneuver Lord Oliver. We simply need time to discover it.”

At last, Madeline nodded reluctantly. “Then we shall seek it together, Cousin. Take care, though, for Lord Oliver has already proven himself a serpent. He will not surrender his leverage easily.”



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Victoria knew the wisdom of Madeline's words. Even now, seated across from her at breakfast, Madeline radiated disapproval of the Earl's actions. Her cousin loathed artifice and deception. She would demand the truth be told, all consequences be damned.

It was that recklessness that drove Victoria to beg for Madeline's discretion. "Swear to me you shall stay silent for Aurora's sake," she had implored. "We cannot endanger her further."

Madeline had given her oath, though with great reluctance. Now Victoria felt that reluctance simmering beneath her cousin's composed exterior. Madeline's protectiveness warred with her promise to guard her silence. It would take very little provocation to pierce through that thin veil of restraint.

So, Victoria kept hold of Madeline's hand, hoping the physical touch would reinforce caution. They could not afford even the smallest crack in their facade. Not with her father already suspicious that something was amiss with his wards.

With an effort, Victoria turned her attention back to picking at her breakfast. If she could not eat much, at least she could give the appearance of an unaffected appetite. Maintaining normalcy in front of her father was imperative.

They finished the rest of the meal in silence.

As soon as a servant cleared the table, Madeline released a long breath. "Insufferable man," she muttered. "How could he be so callous toward his daughters?"

Victoria sighed. “You know how he is, Cousin. Appearances above all else.”

“Even his children’s happiness and well-being?” Madeline shook her head. “He does not deserve you and Aurora’s devotion.”

“Perhaps not, but he has it nonetheless.”

Victoria pushed back from the table. She needed to change her gown and ready herself for the day ahead. No doubt more scrutiny awaited her when she ventured out into Society.

Madeline followed as Victoria ascended the stairs toward her bedchamber. “What shall we do, Victoria? You know I cannot bear sitting idle while that snake tightens his grip.”

Victoria’s steps slowed. “I know, dear. But we must be cautious.” She turned toward her cousin, her expression pleading. “Can you stay your hand a little longer? Give me a chance to turn the odds in our favor?”

Madeline wavered. “I shall try, Cousin. But my patience is not without limits.” Her voice hardened. “If Lord Oliver dares harm you further, I will see him pay, no matter the cost.”

Impulsively, Victoria hugged her. “I know. Your loyalty means the world to me.” Drawing back, she forced a teasing note into her voice. “But let us not invite trouble prematurely, hmm? We ladies must use finesse to outmaneuver Lord Oliver.”

Madeline huffed. “Finesse. Just say you wish me to hold my temper.” But her lips twitched into a reluctant smile.

“A blunt demand, but accurate.” Victoria chuckled. Her mirth faded. “Truly though,

Madeline. Please keep our secret a little longer.”

Madeline squeezed her hand. “For you and Aurora, anything.” Her eyes glinted. “But take care. Even my patience has limits.”

Victoria nodded. She knew well the steel beneath Madeline’s gracious exterior. Hopefully, Oliver did not make the mistake of provoking that protective fierceness. Victoria rather thought her coarse cousin would handily trounce the villain, given sufficient cause.

But such notions were fanciful, born of her frustration and fear. No, the burden of outwitting Oliver fell squarely on her shoulders. She must match his cunning with her cleverness.

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, the sunlight filtered through the expansive windows of the Duke’s study, filling the masculine space with a warm, honeyed light. But the atmosphere between the two brothers seated inside was anything but warm.

Simon sat stoically behind his large oak desk, his piercing dark brown eyes fixed on his younger brother, who was sprawled lazily across the tufted leather chair opposite him. An air of tense hostility simmered between them.

“Well, Brother?” Oliver drawled, a sly smile playing on his lips. “Have you finally come to accept that I have fulfilled dear Father’s edict at last?”

Simon remained still as a statue, his expression shuttered. “And what edict might that be?”

Oliver scoffed. “Come now, let’s not play games. You know very well I refer to the

clause in Father's will stating whichever of us makes a love match first shall inherit the vast majority of his fortune."

He examined his cuff nonchalantly. "As you are now well aware, I have become quite enamored of the charming Lady Victoria. Our attachment grows stronger by the day." He flashed a wolfish grin. "Indeed, I will propose before long. And then..." he trailed off meaningfully.

Simon was silent for a long moment, his dark gaze trained on his brother's smug face. At last, he spoke.

"Tell me, Oliver, what precisely is the nature of your acquaintance with Lady Victoria thus far?"

Oliver's smile dimmed slightly at Simon's even, implacable tone. "Well, we have... spent much time together these past weeks, of course. Dinners, rides in the park, musicales—all the usual entertainments." A shadow of uncertainty flickered in his eyes.

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Simon remained unmoved. “I see. And in all this ‘time together,’ have you learned anything meaningful about her? Her character, her dreams, her innermost thoughts and feelings?” He leaned forward. “Or have your interactions consisted merely of empty flirtations and frivolous amusements?”

Oliver’s confident expression wavered. “I—well, that is?—”

“Yes?” Simon arched an eyebrow.

Oliver straightened his spine. “You underestimate the strength of the connection between Lady Victoria and me. Ours is a true understanding of the minds and hearts.”

Simon merely looked at him silently until he flushed.

“Blast it, Simon!” Oliver burst out angrily. “I don’t have to prove a damned thing to you! I know what Lady Victoria and I share, and I’ll not have you questioning it.”

Simon remained infuriatingly unruffled. “Calm yourself, Brother. I merely make the point that a handful of polite outings hardly constitute a love match. At least not to any objective observer.” He added pointedly, “If you wish to establish the validity of this attachment, much more will be required.”

Oliver’s hands clenched at the implied challenge in Simon’s words. “Rest assured, I intend to do precisely that,” he bit out. Rising, he braced his hands on Simon’s desk and leaned in aggressively. “Mark my words, Lady Victoria and I will soon announce our betrothal. And there is not a blasted thing you can do to stop it.”

Simon met his glower steadily. “We shall see.”

With a noise of frustration, Oliver pushed off the desk and began pacing. “Damn it, Simon, I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn about this. You’re certainly not in love with the girl.” He shot his brother a shrewd look. “Could it be you’re afraid I may succeed in securing both Father’s fortune and a pretty bride in one stroke?”

Simon answered coolly, “As I have no designs on Lady Victoria, her charms are irrelevant to me. No, I am simply holding you to the terms of Father’s will, as is my duty.”

Oliver threw up his hands. “Ever the dutiful one, aren’t you? Well, go on doubting all you like. You’ll see soon enough that Lady Victoria and I are the very picture of love’s young dream.”

His mocking tone made Simon’s jaw tighten. But all he said was, “We shall see.”

Sneering, Oliver turned away. But then he paused, a sly gleam flickering in his eyes once more.

“Although...” He glanced back over his shoulder. “Perhaps you’re right that a handful of polite outings is hardly a foundation for true love.”

Simon tensed warily as Oliver sauntered back toward the desk.

“It occurs to me,” Oliver continued lightly, “that you’ve scarcely had a chance to make Lady Victoria’s acquaintance yourself.”

Simon remained silent, mistrusting his brother’s suddenly affable demeanor.

Oliver spread his hands expansively. “How can you judge the sincerity of our

attachment when you do not even know the lady? Why, she might completely charm you, were you to spend time in her company.”

Simon was unmoved by this transparent ploy. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“But you cannot know for certain, can you?” Oliver pressed. “No, clearly the only solution is for you to meet Lady Victoria properly. Become better acquainted.” He smiled like a cat who got the cream. “I believe a small house party here would be just the thing to clear the air.”

Simon went very still. He saw the calculating glint in Oliver’s eyes and understood his true aim. His brother meant to use this party to stage a performance with Victoria, believing the manufactured intimacy would convince him at last.

Leaning back, Simon steepled his fingers, quickly considering his options. Refusing the party outright would only lend credence to Oliver’s claims that he was being obstinate. Clever of his brother to maneuver him into this position.

But perhaps Simon could turn the scheme to his advantage. He had suspected from the start that Victoria was a fortune hunter colluding with Oliver. If he had the opportunity to observe them together at close range, their deceit would be that much easier to uncover.

Yes, he decided, permitting this little charade for now might prove illuminating. But Oliver would find that Simon was no fool.

Having reached this conclusion, Simon met his brother’s expectant gaze. “A house party is not a bad idea,” he conceded mildly. “It would afford me a chance to get to know Lady Victoria... more intimately.”

Oliver’s smile faltered slightly at the subtle emphasis. But he rallied quickly.

“Precisely! So we agree, then?”

Simon inclined his head. “It appears so. I shall make the arrangements.” He paused, then added casually, “Do extend a warm invitation to Lady Victoria on my behalf. I look forward to... becoming better acquainted with her.”

Unease flickered in Oliver’s eyes, but his tone remained nonchalant. “Of course. I’m sure she will be delighted.”

Simon suppressed a grim smile. No doubt Victoria would prove willing enough if she thought it gained her access to the family fortune.



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Oliver made a show of consulting his pocket watch. “Well, I’m off to the club. So much to do now that our little party is decided on.” With a mocking half-bow, he turned around and sauntered out.

Alone again, Simon rose and moved to stand by the window, gazing out unseeingly as he considered this new development. Having Victoria at the manor could well prove a double-edged sword.

\* \* \*

Simon entered The Lion’s Den unannounced—one of Oliver’s most favorite bars. He hoped to find Oliver there. As he entered, he wrinkled his nose at the choking cigar smoke.

It did not take long to spot Oliver’s blonde head bent over a glass at the far end of the bar, a half-empty bottle of whiskey nearby.

Simon strode over and took the stool next to his brother, who looked up in surprise.

“Well, look who it is,” Oliver drawled, his words already slightly slurred. “Come to lecture me again, Brother?”

“I expected to find you here at such an hour,” Simon said.

“A gentleman’s allowed some diversion,” Oliver replied, taking another swallow.

Simon gestured to the bartender for a glass of brandy he had no intention of drinking.

“This is beyond some diversion,” he said calmly. “You’re drinking yourself into oblivion most nights. It will destroy you if it continues.”

Oliver scowled, color rising on his face. “It’s my life to live as I please. I don’t interfere with your burying your head in your books.”

“Dreary or not, my work maintains this family’s lifestyle,” Simon retorted. “Your habits threaten to unravel it. As your brother, I can’t stand by silently.”

“As my brother, you should support me as I am!” Oliver snapped.

The club quieted, eyes turning in their direction. Simon kept his voice low, hoping Oliver would follow suit. “True support sometimes requires difficult truths. I want only the best for you.”

Oliver stood up abruptly, swaying slightly on his feet. “Spare me your self-righteousness. I’m leaving.”

Simon watched his brother shove through the crowd toward the exit, his heart sinking. Oliver was determined to go down this path of destruction, it seemed. Unless...

An idea came to his mind. If he followed Oliver discreetly, he may be able to intervene at the gambling halls he was known to frequent after drinking. They preyed on men in their inebriated state. If Simon could prevent him from losing more money, it might make him see reason when sober again.

Leaving a few coins on the bar, Simon slipped out and spotted Oliver climbing into a carriage down the block. He quickly waved down his carriage.

“Follow that carriage. But hang back some distance.”

As they trundled after Oliver, Simon questioned if this was wise. But it was his only chance to intervene before his brother caused permanent damage to the family.

The carriage jolted to a stop half an hour later. Peering out, Simon recognized they were at the edge of a rather disreputable neighborhood lined with gambling halls and brothels. He watched Oliver disappear into a nondescript building, its small sign reading Scarlet's in peeling paint.

Simon told his driver to wait and climbed out of the carriage.

Inside Scarlet's, the thick air was choked with pipe smoke. Men crowded around felt-topped card tables, dice clattering. In the rear, Oliver was already seated, buying into a poker game with a mound of notes.

Simon moved discreetly to an empty table nearby, pretending to observe the game while keeping his brother within sight. A barmaid sashayed by, and he ordered a whiskey to avoid suspicion.

Over the next hour, Oliver drank steadily, losing hand after disastrous hand. His mood visibly deteriorated, his face red, and he cursed loudly. Simon itched to intervene but knew it wasn't yet the right moment.

Finally, Oliver shoved back from the table with a snarl. "Enough!" He turned, and Simon shrank into the shadows as his brother stormed toward the exit.

After watching Oliver storm out of the gambling hall, Simon quickly paid his bill and left as well. He waved down his carriage and instructed the driver to take him home, his mind churning with concern over his brother's destructive habits.

Arriving at Hayward Manor, he lit a single lamp in the study and sat pensively, waiting.

Nearly an hour later, the front door banged open. Heavy footfalls and muttered curses signaled Oliver's return. Simon steeled himself for the inevitable confrontation.

Oliver stumbled into the study, reeking of spirits, his coat askew. He was startled at seeing Simon. "Hell and damnation, you're lying in wait now, Brother?" he slurred angrily.

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“I had hoped we could talk, once you’d returned,” Simon said evenly.

Oliver collapsed into a chair, glaring. “Come to plead again for my reform? Spare your breath.”

“I witnessed your losses tonight, Oliver,” Simon pressed on. “It pains me to see you squandering our money so recklessly. For what? Fleeting thrills and momentary escape?”

Oliver’s hand clenched on the arm of the chair. “My choices are none of your affairs. I’m not beholden to your stringent standards.”

“But you are beholden to those sharks at the gambling halls!” Simon retorted, struggling to remain calm. “By tomorrow, your debts will be sold to whoever will grant an extension of credit. Is this how you wish to live?”

“You know nothing of my reasons,” Oliver snarled and walked away to his chambers.

Simon watched him stumble out the door, his jaw clenched. Once more, his efforts had been futile. More drastic action would soon be required, for the family’s sake.

## CHAPTER4

Victoria sat in the drawing room, lost in thought when a knock sounded at the door. A footman entered, presenting her with an elegant letter on a silver tray.

“A letter for you, Lady Victoria.”

“Thank you, William,” Victoria said, setting aside her book to take the letter.

She recognized the Duke of Hayward’s seal and quickly broke it open, scanning the contents of the letter. A flush rose to her cheeks as she read the invitation to a small house party.

Later, as her lady’s maid, Sarah, helped prepare her for the ball, Victoria pushed aside her worries over the letter.

“You look lovely tonight, Lady Victoria,” Sarah remarked as she arranged Victoria’s dark brown hair.

“Thank you, Sarah,” Victoria replied with a smile.

Once alone again, Victoria’s thoughts swirled. Whatever could the imposing Duke want with her, a mere earl’s daughter? She felt sure it must be related to the sham courtship between her and his ne’er-do-well brother. But how could he have uncovered the truth? No, it was impossible, her secret was closely guarded.

The notion was absurd, and yet no other explanation presented itself. Unless...

Victoria’s stomach sank. Unless the Duke had somehow uncovered her family’s closely guarded secret and meant to use it against her. But no, she reassured herself, that was surely impossible. Only her cousin Madeline knew the truth of why she had allowed herself to become entangled in Oliver’s schemes.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Madeline herself bustled into the room in a rustle of skirts. One look at Victoria’s pale, drawn face had her rushing to her side in concern.

“Dear cousin, whatever is the matter? You are white as a sheet!” Madeline peered anxiously into her face, pressing a hand to her forehead. “Are you unwell, Cousin?”

Mutely, Victoria passed her the engraved invitation with the Duke's bold, masculine signature across the bottom. As Madeline quickly scanned the heavy card stock, her eyes went wide.

"The Duke requests your presence himself? At a house party?" She grasped Victoria's hands. "Oh, heavens, what can it mean?"

Victoria shook her head helplessly. "I confess I do not know, save that it bodes ill. Surely the Duke intends to expose me before his peers as a conniving fortune hunter."

Madeline began pacing across the carpeted floor, wringing her hands fretfully. "This is a disaster! If His Grace learns the truth of your association with that blackguard Oliver..." she trailed off, her face paling.

Though she shared her cousin's fears, Victoria forced herself to remain outwardly calm. "Peace, Madeline. We do not know the Duke's motives." She tried to make her voice soothing and reasonable, though her heart was racing. "Perhaps he merely seeks better acquaintance."

But privately, she shuddered at the thought of spending more time under the intense scrutiny of the powerful, intimidating Duke. Those penetrating dark brown eyes seemed to strip away all pretense and falsehood. Victoria had never felt so exposed as when in his presence, as if he could see into the vulnerable places of her soul. It unnerved her greatly.

Madeline, however, was not so easily placated. "I do not trust this, not one bit," she insisted, her brown eyes stormy with worry. "What if that snake Oliver reveals our precious secret to his brother? It would mean utter ruination!"

Victoria blanched, her gut clenching at the mere thought of her closely guarded family secret being so cavalierly revealed. Hastily, she grasped Madeline's arm and

steered her into the dressing room, shutting the door firmly behind them.

“Hush now, we must take care!” she whispered urgently.

Madeline looked stricken, clearly regretting her impulsive words.



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Victoria softened her tone and squeezed her hand. “Worry not, you meant no harm. But we must be cautious, even here.”

It would not do at all for a careless word to reach the servants’ ears. Gossip spread faster than wildfire in the servants’ hall.

Abashed, Madeline nodded. “You are right, of course. My loose tongue nearly compromised us.” She gripped Victoria’s hands beseechingly. “Promise me you won’t attend this house party! It is too perilous.”

Victoria wavered, sorely tempted. Distancing herself from the Duke was by far the safer course. But she was no coward. Refusing his invitation could only rouse his suspicions further.

Gently freeing her hands, she said, “Your concern warms my heart. But I must face this danger head-on.” Seeing Madeline’s dismay, she hurriedly added, “Yet, I will not be reckless, I promise you. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say. I will proceed with the utmost caution.”

Though still anxious, Madeline nodded reluctantly. “Very well. But take care, Victoria, the Duke and his brother are not to be trusted.” She shuddered. “I wish we could flee this nest of vipers.”

Victoria hugged her fiercely, hiding her trepidation. “All will be well, you shall see. Have faith.” Drawing back, she mustered a teasing smile. “But come now, we have far happier matters to occupy us this night, do we not?”

As if on cue, the clock on the mantel chimed the hour, breaking the somber atmosphere. Victoria laughed and linked her arm with Madeline's, leading her back into the bedchamber.

“Quickly now, help me get my dress perfect! We shall be dreadfully rude if we arrive too late.”

Together, they managed to get Victoria ready just in time to depart for the ball. As the carriage rolled through the lamp-lit streets toward the magnificent estate hosting the ball, Victoria gazed unseeingly out at the passing townhouses.

The Duke's ominous invitation still weighed heavily on her mind, though she tried her best to hide it. She did not know what he intended by requesting her presence, but she could not afford to show any weakness. She must face him with courage and cunning, for more than just her future was at stake.

Squaring her shoulders, Victoria banished all thoughts of the Duke from her mind as the carriage swept through the grand gates. Tonight was for dancing and merriment. She would not let his machinations ruin her enjoyment, no matter how disquieted she felt.

Turning to Madeline with a brilliant smile that barely felt forced, she declared gaily, “Come, Cousin! Let us dazzle them all.”

\* \* \*

The grand ballroom of the palatial estate glittered with the light of a thousand candles, casting everything in a warm, golden glow. Silks rustled, gems glittered, and light laughter echoed through the cavernous space as members of the ton mingled and danced.

At the top of the marble staircase, Victoria paused to take in the magnificent scene, Madeline at her side. Though dread still coiled in her belly after receiving the Duke's ominous invitation that day, she was determined not to let it ruin her evening.

Squaring her shoulders, she descended gracefully into the swirling sea of London's high society. She was a daughter of an earl, groomed from birth to shine at events like this. She would not falter now.

Madeline, bless her heart, seemed to share Victoria's resolve, greeting acquaintances with easy smiles as if nothing troubled her. Though her grip on Victoria's arm belied the underlying tension.

"Have courage," Victoria murmured encouragingly as they exchanged pleasantries with Lady Carmichael and her daughters. "All will be well."

Madeline's answering smile was strained but determined. Linking arms, they continued navigating the glittering ballroom. Despite her breezy demeanor, Victoria found herself scanning the crowd for a head of tousled dark hair or piercing dark brown eyes. But neither Oliver nor his imposing older brother were there.

The first dance was just being called when a now-familiar voice purred in Victoria's ear, "Good evening, my dear Lady Victoria. Don't you look ravishing tonight?"

Whirling, she came face to face with Oliver, resplendent in a well-cut tailcoat, his green eyes glinting. Her spine stiffened, but she bobbed a graceful curtsy.

"Lord Oliver. What a... surprise to see you here this evening."

"Is it?" He flashed a roguish grin. "Surely you know balls provide unparalleled opportunities for a gentleman to show his lady every courtesy."

Victoria tried not to recoil as he took her hand and bowed over it, his lips brushing her knuckles. At her side, Madeline radiated quiet fury.

“If you will excuse me, I see an acquaintance I must greet,” she muttered before gliding off, not even sparing Oliver a glance.

Victoria watched her cousin depart longingly before turning back to Oliver’s smug smile.

“Shall we take a turn about the room?” he inquired, tucking her hand in the crook of his arm and leading her into the swirling mass of guests.

Victoria allowed him to guide her along the periphery, nodding politely as they passed familiar faces. Oliver seemed content to preen under the curious glances they attracted. For her part, Victoria kept scanning the crowd, simultaneously anticipating and dreading the appearance of his imposing older brother. But the Duke was nowhere to be seen.

After a seeming eternity of stilted small talk, the opening notes of the next set began. With practiced charm, Oliver bowed. “May I have the honor, Lady Victoria?”

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Gritting her teeth behind a bland smile, Victoria accepted, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor. She went mechanically through the graceful steps of the quadrille, Oliver's hand pressing rather too firmly against her waist. Mercifully, it was a short set, and Victoria extricated herself from his grasp with relief.

"You are a sublime dancer, as always," Oliver praised glibly as he led her out of the dance floor.

Victoria forced a smile, ready to make her excuses and escape. But they had no sooner joined Madeline at the edge of the room than the music swelled into a waltz.

Out of the crowd stepped a man who could only be the Duke of Hayward himself, looking like some fallen angel swathed in black velvet and pristine white linen. An audible murmur rippled through the room at his unexpected presence.

With his harsh, handsome features set in their customary scowl, the Duke looked as cheerful as a storm cloud. He headed straight for Victoria with relentless focus, the crowd parting the red sea. Victoria's heart stuttered in her chest. What was he doing here?

Halting before her, the Duke executed a perfect, if abrupt, bow. "Lady Victoria, can we have one dance?" His dark brown eyes bored into hers, daring her to refuse.

Victoria hesitated, unnerved by his sudden appearance and the barely-leashed intensity rolling off him in waves. But with all eyes on them, she had no choice but to drop into a curtsy.

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Ignoring Oliver’s sputtering, the Duke grasped her hand and waist and whirled her into the sea of dancing couples. Despite her trepidation, as they moved through the elegant steps, Victoria could not help but acknowledge that the Duke was an exquisite dancer, his hand sure at her back, guiding but not trapping her. And this close, with his sculpted features softened by the flickering candlelight, he was dangerously handsome, indeed.

Then his dark brown eyes met hers, cold and assessing, and her budding awareness withered. This man was not her friend or her lover. He was an adversary who likely meant her ruin. She must not lose sight of that.

Silence stretched out between them until the Duke finally spoke, his rich voice low, “Quite the performance you and my brother did this evening. Tell me, does he think prancing about with you in public proves the sincerity of his so-called attachment?”

Victoria bristled, matching his icy stare with one of her own. “Your brother has been naught but a gentleman. Which is more than can be said for you at this moment.”

The Duke arched a sardonic eyebrow. “Playing the innocent will win you no favor with me. I am no wide-eyed schoolboy to be taken in by feminine wiles.” He surveyed her critically. “Although I will admit that you play your part convincingly. My brother chose his actress well.”

Victoria nearly stumbled, catching herself just in time. So he thought her a deceitful coquette, a willing conspirator in Oliver’s schemes. Indignation momentarily loosened her tongue.

“You are quite mistaken about me, Your Grace. Perhaps if you troubled yourself to look beneath the surface, you would see that not everything is as it appears.”

The Duke looked briefly surprised by her bold retort, before his expression hardened once more. “Is that so? Then by all means, enlighten me as to what lies beneath this facade.”

When she hesitated, he smiled coldly.

“As I thought. You put on a fine show, Madam, but it will take more than veiled words to convince me of your innocence.”

Victoria felt her cheeks burn. How dare this arrogant man condemn her, knowing nothing of the truth? But she bit back an angry response. She must not let him goad her into some telling outburst.

Instead, she merely inclined her head. “Think what you will of me, Your Grace. I know my own heart.” Looking deliberately away from him, she added, “Lord Oliver and I... understand each other quite well.”

She peeked cautiously back at the Duke. For just a moment, his stony facade seemed to crack, something that looked oddly like disappointment flickering in his eyes. But then it was gone, and he let out a grim chuckle.

“Is that so? Well then, perhaps you will not mind enlightening me as to the precise nature of this understanding.” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “What promises has my dear brother made to you, I wonder?”

Victoria’s step faltered at his scathing tone. Wrong-footed, she grasped for a convincing reply.

“Why, he... he has made no specific promises as yet, only showered me with courtesies. As any gentleman would when enamored of a lady.”

Even to her ears, the words rang hollow.

A muscle flexed in the Duke's jaw. "Courtesies? Is that what you call allowing a lady's reputation to be compromised through a sham attachment?" His eyes bored into hers. "What about riches and titles? Or has he merely capitalized on your feminine timidity and trusting nature?"

Stung, Victoria jerked her chin up. "You misjudge me, Your Grace. I am neither weak nor desirous of riches." She faltered only a moment before adding softly, "I care for your brother. From the heart."

Instantly, she regretted the lie, feeling it sear her very soul. She couldn't bring herself to meet the Duke's piercing gaze. Surely he saw right through her feeble ruse.

But all he said was, "Look at me."

The quiet command compelled her to lift her eyes to his. Their unrelenting depths seemed to spear right through to her core. Victoria felt stripped bare before him, utterly exposed.



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When the Duke spoke again, his tone was lethal in its softness. “I know not what sort of viper Oliver has become. But if you think to assist in his schemes and come out unscathed, you are gravely mistaken.”

### CHAPTER5

The strains of the orchestra faded as Victoria slipped through the French doors and onto the moonlit veranda, desperate for a respite from the cloying heat and scrutiny of the ballroom. Wrapping her arms around herself against the slight chill, she moved to lean heavily against the balustrade, head bowed as she tried to calm her rioting emotions.

The Duke’s cruel insinuations during their dance still rang in her ears. He was utterly convinced of her duplicity and sinister motives. And though she told herself his poor opinion ought not to matter, in truth it cut deeply.

“Get a hold of yourself,” she muttered, dashing away the tears pricking her eyes.

Crying would help nothing. She had no choice but to bear the Duke’s disdain for now, until she could find a way to reveal the real truth. If she could but make him understand why she allowed Oliver to put her in this compromising position...

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupted her roiling thoughts. Alarm ripped through her as she caught sight of a large, masculine figure striding purposefully toward her across the veranda. It could only be the Duke.

In a panic, Victoria darted behind a topiary planter, pressing herself into the shadows.

She was in no fit state for another confrontation. Heart pounding, she watched from her hiding spot as the Duke halted at the railing, withdrawing a thin cheroot from his coat pocket.

Shielding the end with one broad hand, he struck a match and breathed the cheroot to life in a bloom of fragrant smoke. He seemed oblivious to her presence. But as Victoria cautiously shifted to retreat inside, his deep voice broke the silence.

“I know you are there. Come out where I can see you.”

Victoria froze, cursing inwardly. How on earth had he sensed her? Stiffening her spine, she stepped out from behind the topiary planter, head held high in a show of bravado she did not feel.

The Duke’s piercing gaze fixed unerringly on her. “Lady Victoria,” he said blandly, as though her hiding from him was the most natural thing in the world. “I thought I detected a hint of jasmine perfume.”

He glanced pointedly at the delicate blossoms wound through her coiffure. Victoria barely resisted the urge to rip them out of her hair. Drat it all, she should have realized they would give her away!

Clearing her throat, she approached the railing, taking care not to stray too close to the Duke. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I did not mean to... intrude upon your solitude.”

He regarded her silently through a veil of smoke. “Think nothing of it,” he said at last, tone bored. “I was merely... admiring the moonlight.”

Victoria got the distinct feeling he was mocking her. She bristled, forgetting her caution. “As was I. It is rather warmer in the ballroom than I prefer.”

“Hmm.” The Duke leaned casually back against the railing. “Well, do carry on admiring. Don’t let my presence disturb you.”

Victoria eyed him warily. Was this some ploy to goad her into another reckless outburst? She remained stubbornly silent.

After a moment, the Duke spoke again, his voice deceptively idle. “Tell me, does my brother know you are out here, unchaperoned with another gentleman?”

Victoria stiffened. “I fail to see how that is any concern of yours.”

The Duke shrugged. “Merely an observation. Some men can be rather... possessive... of their betrothed’s attentions.” He shot her an assessing glance. “But then again, perhaps decorum is irrelevant in a match made because of mutual greed.”

Victoria sucked in an outraged breath. Even knowing it was likely calculated to provoke a response, the insult still stung.

“I see you have made up your mind to despise me, Your Grace,” she said sharply. “I imagine nothing I say could change your opinion, so I won’t waste my breath trying.”

She made to sweep past him in a huff, but quicker than a snake, his hand shot out to grasp her wrist, halting her retreat. Victoria froze, pulse leaping.

“Let go of me,” she hissed, trying vainly to pull free. But his grip was strong.

“Not just yet.” The Duke studied her coldly, all pretense of indifference gone. “I find myself curious, Lady Victoria. Why do you persist in this farce with my brother when you so clearly detest his attentions?”

Victoria faltered. “I never said?—”

“You did not have to.” The Duke’s eyes bored into hers. “I am no fool. I saw your poorly veiled dislike of Oliver’s fawning tonight. It rather contradicts your claim of affection for him.” His lip curled derisively. “So I ask again, what is your purpose in this scheme of his?”

When she remained mulishly silent, he leaned closer, until she could feel the heat of his breath on her upturned face. “Come now. We both know you are no lovesick ingénue. What is Oliver blackmailing you with?”

Victoria froze. He did not know—could not know—and yet his words came dangerously, perilously close to the truth. Too close.

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Wrenching herself from his grasp, she snarled, “You go too far, Your Grace! I’ll not stand here and endure such insult.”

But even as the words left her lips, despair flooded through her. He would never believe her protests now. She had as good as confirmed his suspicions with her reaction.

Sure enough, triumph flickered briefly in the Duke’s eyes. “So that’s his hold over you. Well, well.”

Victoria wrapped her arms around herself as if to ward off his accusatory stare. “Why must you persist in vilifying me?” she cried, abandoning all pretense. “From the moment we met, you have made it abundantly clear you think me grasping and deceitful. But you do not know me at all!”

The Duke’s stare did not waver. “I know well enough from watching you and Oliver together?—”

“You know nothing!” Victoria shot back. Reason told her to hold her tongue, but her injured pride pushed the words out. “If you think of me as some fortune-hungry coquette, you could not be more mistaken.”

The Duke went very still, caught off guard by her outburst.

Sensing she had little left to lose, Victoria pressed on recklessly. “I am no saint, I know, but neither am I the villainess you take me for.”

Let him make of that what he would. She could say no more.

Shoulders slumping, she asked wearily, “Why must you think the very worst of me because of such scant information?”

For a long, taut moment, the Duke just looked at her, his brow faintly furrowed. Though his expression remained guarded, she sensed the subtle shift, the cracks forming in his opinion. Victoria held her breath, scarcely daring to hope she had planted even a seed of doubt.

Then he lifted one hand slowly, hesitantly, as though to touch her face. Victoria shrank back instinctively, and he froze, dropping his hand. The shutters came down over his eyes once more.

“My apologies for distressing you, Lady Victoria,” he said stiffly. “You should return inside before you catch a chill.”

He turned away, a clear dismissal. Victoria remained rooted in place, staring at his broad back. Then frustration surged hotly through her veins. How dare he be so cold, after such an emotional confession from her!

Stepping around to face him again, she planted her hands on her hips. “Oh, so you’ve said your piece, and now it’s back to lofty disdain, is it?” She knew she sounded shrill, but she didn’t care. “Saints, I finally bare a glimmer of the truth to you, and this is how you respond?”

The Duke’s expression darkened ominously, but Victoria would not be cowed.

“For someone supposedly devoted to unmasking deception, you cling quite stubbornly to your preconceived notions,” she accused hotly. “Do you imagine it easy for me to make such admissions? I have tried to sow some small seed of

understanding between us, yet you will not meet me even halfway!”

His jaw clenched. “And what would you have me do? You tell me my brother coerces you, yet you give no details. You expect me to take your word that it is not by choice, yet you provide no evidence.” He shook his head scornfully. “I deal in facts, Lady Victoria, not sentiment or speculation.”

Stung, Victoria drew herself up, rallying the last of her dignity. “You mistake me, Sir. I ask no declaration of faith from you.”

The Duke moved closer, and Victoria had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze. He seemed to tower over her, his presence overwhelming. She caught the scent of cigar smoke and brandy as he reached out to take her chin in a firm grasp, forcing her to look him in the eye.

His mouth descended on hers before she could utter a word of protest. Victoria froze in shock as his lips claimed hers with bruising force. It was nothing like her first kiss with Edmund, the neighbor’s son, stolen in the kitchens of Newton House. That had been furtive, childish, and awkward.

This was something else entirely. Unthinking, she leaned into him, her hands coming up to grip the lapels of his coat. The Duke made a low noise in his throat and deepened the kiss, one arm snaking around her waist to haul her against him.

For a dizzying moment, Victoria forgot herself entirely, lost in the taste and scent of him, the heat of his body pressed against hers. When at last they broke apart, she could only stare at him, stunned, one hand coming up to touch her swollen lips.

“You are a peculiar creature, Lady Victoria,” he murmured, leaning down until she could feel his breath warm against her cheek. “Such a skilled dissembler. Why, I almost believed you for a moment there.”

Reality came crashing down on Victoria like a plunge into icy water. She stepped back, glaring at the Duke, her cheeks flaming with embarrassment and fury.

“You are despicable, Sir,” she spat.

Gathering the torn remnants of her dignity, she fled back into the ballroom, leaving the Duke alone on the veranda. She prayed with all her might that she would not have to partner with him again this evening. Her nerves could not take another such encounter.

She must be more cautious in the future. The Duke was even more dangerous than she had realized.

Her lips were still tingling from their forbidden embrace. What had come over her? She could not let herself be swayed by emotion, not when her family’s future depended on her.

Lost in thought, she rounded the corner, and stopped short. There, regarding her with icy eyes, was Oliver.



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“Well, well,” he said, his voice dangerously soft. “Getting rather cozy with my brother, aren’t we?”

Victoria’s heart hammered, but she kept her tone light. “We were merely conversing, that is all.”

“Do not play coy with me.” Oliver moved closer, backing her up against the wall. “I saw the way you looked at him.”

Victoria flushed crimson. “It was nothing... just a friendly talk,” she stammered.

Oliver slammed his hand against the wall, causing her to jump. “Do not lie to me!” he snarled. “I saw the lust in your eyes, clear as day. You forget yourself.” He leaned in, so close that she could smell the brandy on his breath. “Need I remind you, your virtue is promised to me. If you cannot control your whorish impulses, perhaps I should find another young lady more... disciplined.”

Victoria’s stomach twisted at his crude words. “Please,” she whispered. “It was a foolish mistake. It won’t happen again.”

Oliver grabbed her chin roughly. “See that it does not. You are treading on thin ice, my dear. Give me any more trouble, and your family will pay the price.”

To Victoria’s dismay, angry tears pricked her eyes.

Oliver’s lip curled at the sight. “Pathetic,” he snarled. “Crying will not help you. This is not a game, it is your family’s future at stake. Or have you forgotten why you

agreed to this engagement?"

Victoria blinked back her tears and lifted her chin. She would not let Oliver see her cowed. "I have not forgotten. My family is everything to me."

"Good," Oliver said. "Then I trust you will not let your... affections... lead you astray again." His grip on her arm tightened painfully. "Seduce my brother further, and you will bring ruin on everything you hold dear. Do you understand?"

Victoria met his icy gaze unflinchingly. "Perfectly."

After a tense moment, Oliver released her. "See that you remember." He glanced around casually. "You'd best compose yourself before returning to the party. We wouldn't want people talking."

With that, he sauntered off, leaving her shaken. She took a deep breath and dabbed at her eyes, willing her resolve to harden. She could not let Oliver intimidate her. Too much depended on her playing her part in this ruse.

Victoria gathered herself and headed back to the ballroom, his threats echoing in her mind. She knew Oliver was ruthless enough to follow through on his threats if she defied him. She would have to be more careful around Simon from now on. No matter how he made her feel, she could not let it show.

Plastering a smile on her face, Victoria rejoined the party as if nothing were amiss. But inside, her thoughts were in turmoil. She was playing a dangerous game, and one misstep could spell disaster for all she held dear.

Victoria found her father and Madeline, and informed them she was ready to leave. Her father seemed distracted, deep in conversation with a gentleman she did not recognize. Likely trying to make a connection that would boost his fortune and

station. Her heart ached for him—if only he knew the truth about Oliver’s schemes, he would be appalled. But for now, she must keep silent.

They said their goodbyes to their hosts and made their way outside. As their carriage clattered down the lamp-lit streets, Madeline gave Victoria a searching look.

“Is everything all right? You seem out of sorts this evening.”

Victoria attempted a smile. “Just tired, that’s all. These social gatherings can be so dreary.”

Madeline looked unconvinced. “Come now, dear cousin. I know when something is bothering you. Did something happen tonight?”

Victoria hesitated. She yearned to unburden herself to Madeline, but how could she admit what almost happened with Simon?

“It’s nothing, truly,” she said, avoiding Madeline’s gaze. “Simply feeling a bit under the weather.”

When at last they arrived home, Madeline followed Victoria to her room. She reached over and squeezed her hand. “You know you can tell me anything, Victoria. I only want to help.”

Victoria felt her resolve weakening. She had never been able to keep secrets from Madeline. And the weight of Oliver’s threats, coupled with her confusing feelings for Simon, felt like too much to bear alone.

“Oh, Maddie,” she whispered. “Everything is such a mess. This arrangement with Lord Oliver is suffocating me. And yet I cannot break free, not if I wish to protect my family.”

Madeline nodded sympathetically. "I cannot imagine the pressure you must feel. But you are so strong, Victoria. Stronger than anyone knows."

Heartened by her words, Victoria continued, "There's more. This evening, I found myself... drawn to the Duke. I know it's foolish, but when our eyes met, I... I forgot myself." She lowered her voice. "He kissed me, Maddie, just for a moment, but it stirred feelings inside me that I did not know I possessed. I cannot explain it."

Madeline's eyes widened, but she quickly composed herself. "Oh my. That is quite a development." She paused. "And does the Duke lust after you as you do him, do you think?"

Victoria sighed. "I pray he does not, for both our sakes. Nothing good can come out of it."

Madeline squeezed her hand again. “Do not lose hope. If this is meant to be, you will find a way.”

Victoria did not see how. But Madeline’s calm presence soothed her anxieties.

Victoria injected some cheer into her voice, hoping to steer the conversation to safer grounds after confiding in Madeline about the turmoil of the evening.

“Enough of my woes,” she said. “How was your evening, dear cousin? Meet any intriguing gentlemen?”

Madeline laughed, a musical sound that lifted Victoria’s spirits. “Oh, you know these Society events are not much to my taste,” she replied. “I much prefer the simplicity of the countryside to these stuffy London balls.” Her expression turned bashful. “Although... I did have a pleasant conversation with Lord Ashford. He was quite charming. And ever so handsome.”

A becoming blush rose to her cheeks.

“Lord Ashford?” Victoria arched an eyebrow. “I did not realize you were acquainted.”

“We were introduced tonight by Lady Dalrymple,” Madeline explained. “He is a childhood friend of her son’s, newly returned from abroad.” She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Rumor has it he will soon be inheriting his uncle’s estate up north, which includes a rather substantial fortune.”

Victoria smiled and patted Madeline's hand. "How delightful for you, dear. Perhaps a summer romance is in the cards?"

Madeline's blush deepened. "Oh, heavens, it is much too soon for such talk! We only shared one dance and a brief stroll through the gardens." She gave Victoria a playful look. "Although... he did ask permission to call on me. So we shall see what comes of it."

"How exciting!" Victoria said. "We must discuss fashion and help prepare you for his calls. I shall delight in living vicariously through your courtship if one ensues."

"You tease me so," Madeline protested with a laugh. "Tell me, did any gentlemen catch your eye this evening?"

Victoria's smile faltered. "Alas, no. My dance card remained woefully empty, aside from one requisite set with His Grace." She tried to keep her tone light, though the mention of his name made her stomach churn.

Madeline gave her a sympathetic pat. "Do not lose heart. Once your engagement with Lord Oliver is announced, you shall have many suitors clamoring for your hand."

"One can only hope," Victoria replied wistfully.

In truth, her only hope was escaping this engagement with Oliver. But she put on a brave smile, determined not to dampen the mood.

Though still troubled in her heart, Victoria felt lighter for having confided in her dear cousin. She knew not what the future held, but with Madeline by her side, she felt she could face it with courage.

Victoria bid Madeline goodnight and retired to her room. There, she removed her

dress and unpinned her hair, considering all that had transpired that evening.

Letting down her hair and preparing for sleep made her vaguely aware of the girl she had been not long ago—youthful, trusting, and innocent. Life had shifted so suddenly, and she wondered if things would ever be simple again.

As Victoria drifted off, the image of piercing dark brown eyes lingered in her mind. A pair of lips against her own. And a feeling she dared not name, even in the silence of her heart.

## CHAPTER 6

Simon strode purposefully through the dimly-lit London streets, his boots clicking sharply against the cobblestones. He drew his cloak tighter against the chill of the night air as he made his way toward the most dangerous part of the city—Whitechapel.

It was no place for a gentleman, much less a duke. Yet, desperate times called for desperate measures. Ever since overhearing his brother's blackmail scheme against Lady Victoria Hatcher, Simon's mind had been racing, plotting, and scheming.

Two could play at that game. Simon was determined to outmaneuver his scoundrel of a brother, no matter the cost.

The echo of Oliver's threats spurred Simon onwards into the seedy neighborhood of Whitechapel. Though he hadn't heard the vile comments toward Lady Victoria directly, they proved to him beyond doubt that his brother had become deeply unsuitable, requiring intervention.

He wound his way through narrow alleys reeking of refuse, keeping a wary eye out for cutpurses and footpads. At last, the glowing windows and raucous noise of The

Black Rat gambling hall emerged from the gloom.

Simon hesitated only a moment before pushing through the doors into the main hall. It was just as crowded and debauched as he remembered from his rare visits here during his youth. Back when he was foolish enough to be tempted into vice. Shaking off the memories, he stalked toward the back, ignoring the dice games, prostitutes, and general air of dissolution.

Two burly men blocked the way to the private rooms. “You’re a long way from Mayfair, Milord,” one rumbled with a leer. “What’s your business?”

Simon fixed the brute with an icy stare. “The Duke of Hayward is here to see Mr. Dalton. Now step aside.”

The guard’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, but he nodded and turned to mutter to his companion. After a moment, the second man disappeared through the doors to the back rooms. His name still carried some weight, even in the underworld. Simon waited, radiating impatience, until the guard returned and gestured for him to follow.



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Passing through the doors, the noise faded behind him. Simon followed the guard down a dim, ramshackle hallway until they reached an office. The man knocked once.

“What?” an irritated voice barked.

“The Duke of Hayward here for you, boss.”

A pause. “Show him in.”

Simon stepped into the office, his keen gaze rapidly taking in details. It was sparsely furnished, dominated by a large desk strewn with ledgers and papers. Behind it sat a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a calculating gleam in his eyes that put Simon on edge. This had to be Mr. Dalton, owner of the Black Rat and rumored to have his fingers in many other unsavory enterprises throughout London’s underworld.

“Your Grace,” Dalton said smoothly, rising from his chair. “To what do I owe the... honor?” His tone made it clear he was surprised, but not particularly impressed.

Simon stepped forward to meet the other man’s gaze directly. “I’ve come to discuss a business arrangement that I believe will prove quite mutually beneficial.”

Dalton’s eyebrow quirked upward. “Is that so? Well, I’m always open to new opportunities.” He gestured to the chair across from the desk. “Please, have a seat and enlighten me.”

Once seated, Simon took a moment to gather his thoughts. This was his first move in a very dangerous game, but he refused to let any doubts show.

“Let me be direct,” he began. “I find myself in need of your particular talents and resources. Specifically, the men who can do a task quickly and discreetly.”

Dalton sat back, steepling his fingers contemplatively. “How do you want us to do it?” he asked.

Simon’s jaw tightened, but he kept his tone even. “I leave the methods to your discretion. Results are what matter.”

“Bold words,” Dalton mused. “What need does a duke have for such cloak and dagger business?” His sharp gaze bored into Simon.

Simon returned the stare steadily. “My reasons are my own. But I can make it worth your while.”

Humming thoughtfully, Dalton rose and went to a liquor cabinet in the corner. He poured two glasses of brandy, handing one to Simon. The Duke took it warily as Dalton sat back down.

“A toast,” Dalton declared, raising his glass, “to a productive new partnership.”

Simon hesitated, then reluctantly lifted his glass to meet Dalton’s. The dye was cast now. There could be no going back.

After drinking, Dalton fixed Simon with an intent look. “Tell me what you need. The more information I have to work with, the better.”

Haltingly, reluctantly, Simon provided the barest outlines of what he needed, holding back any names or details that were not essential. Dalton listened closely, only interrupting occasionally to probe for clarification. Simon remained vague but emphasized the need for utmost discretion.

“Your Grace,” Dalton cajoled. “How else can I be of service?”

“I have told you all I intend to,” Simon replied coldly.

Dalton’s eyes narrowed briefly before his unctuous smile returned. “Very well, very well.”

Simon left uneasy but resolute. The bargain was struck, there could be no turning back now. He alone knew his true motivations and aims. The less Dalton guessed, the better.

Walking slowly home, Simon considered his options. The dye was cast, for good or ill...

## CHAPTER 7

The morning sun streamed through the windows of the breakfast room at Newton House, filling the space with a warm, cheerful glow. Victoria Hatcher sat at the large mahogany table, idly pushing the food around her plate with a fork. She had little appetite this morning, her stomach tied up in anxious knots at the thought of the day ahead.

It was the day for the Duke of Hayward’s grand country house party. She would be expected to play the devoted fiancée. Just the idea made her want to retch.

As she picked at her breakfast, her father breezed into the room, already dressed impeccably in a well-tailored coat and breeches.

“Good morning, Victoria,” he said briskly, taking his seat at the head of the table. “I trust you slept well? You’ll need your rest for the festivities at Hayward Manor.”

“Yes, Father,” Victoria replied politely. Inside, her stomach churned with unease.

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Her cousin Madeline entered then, giving her a sympathetic smile as she joined them at the table. “Lord Newton,” she said respectfully with a slight curtsy before taking her seat.

“Good morning, Madeline,” the Earl replied. “Are you prepared for the house party? I’m sure all the ladies have been hard at work, selecting their best gowns and bonnets.”

Madeline nodded. “Oh, yes, Uncle. It shall be a splendid event, I’m certain.”

The Earl turned his attention back to Victoria as the footmen brought out dishes of eggs, sausage, toast, and kidneys. “Now then, Victoria,” he said, fixing his daughter with an intense stare. “Your behavior today is of the utmost importance. This house party provides the ideal setting for you and Lord Oliver to deepen your attachment and make it known to our peers.”

Victoria nearly choked on her tea but quickly composed herself. “Of course, Father,” she said quietly. “I am prepared to do my duty.”

The Earl seemed satisfied with her response. “Good. Ensure that you remain by Lord Oliver’s side as much as possible. Dance with him, take turns about the room, show everyone the happy couple you are.”

Victoria gripped her napkin tightly in her lap, forcing a smile. “Yes, Father, I will.”

“Excellent,” he declared before turning his attention to his breakfast plate.

Victoria met Madeline's sympathetic gaze, trying to convey her inner turmoil through her expression alone.

Madeline gave her arm a discreet, reassuring pat beneath the table. "Do take care today, Cousin," she said gently. "I hope you find some joy amidst the festivities."

Victoria managed a weak but grateful smile. "Thank you, Madeline. I shall try."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Victoria still too unsettled to do more than pick at her food.

At last, Lord Newton dabbed at his mouth with a napkin and rose from his seat. "Right, I'm off to the club to meet with Lord Fairmont," he announced. "I shall see you ladies this evening at the ball. Madeline, kindly accompany Victoria to Hayward Manor when it is time."

With that, he strode briskly out of the room, leaving the two young women alone.

As soon as he had gone, Victoria let out a heavy sigh, her shoulders slumping. "Oh, Madeline, I dread this day with my whole heart!" she exclaimed woefully. "Being paraded about as the betrothed of that horrid scoundrel... it fills me with shame and misery."

Madeline's expression was full of sympathy as she reached over and grasped Victoria's hand. "There now, do not despair just yet. We shall get through this day together."

Victoria gave her a small, half-hearted smile. "Dear Madeline, whatever would I do without you? You are the only one I can truly talk to."

Madeline gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. "I swear to you, Cousin, we shall

find a way through this.”

For the next hour, Madeline did her best to cheer her cousin up with amusing stories and the latest of the ton. Though still anxious, Victoria felt bolstered by her support.

Later that evening, Victoria and Madeline were up in Victoria’s bedchamber, preparing for the Duke’s upcoming house party.

“Hold still, Maddie,” Victoria gently chided as she styled her younger cousin’s hair. “I’m trying to fix your hair.”

Madeline fidgeted nervously on the vanity stool. “I’m sorry, Victoria. I’m just so anxious about tonight. What if I say or do the wrong thing?”

Victoria sighed, setting down the hairbrush and resting her hands reassuringly on Madeline’s shoulders. “You must try to stay calm. I know this is one of your first social events in the ton, but you have nothing to worry about. Just remember what we discussed—keep quiet, be demure, and don’t draw unnecessary attention to yourself.”

“I’ll try my best,” Madeline replied anxiously.

“That’s all I can ask of you,” Victoria said with an encouraging smile, before picking up the brush again to continue styling Madeline’s hair.

Inwardly, though, Victoria’s nerves were frayed. She had to ensure everything went perfectly this evening. Too much was at stake. Madeline had no idea of the precarious situation they were in, and Victoria meant to keep it that way. Her sweet younger cousin didn’t need such burdens placed upon her. This was Victoria’s responsibility alone to bear.

“There,” Victoria finally declared, securing the last pin in Madeline’s elegant updo. “You look absolutely beautiful.”

Madeline examined her reflection appreciatively. “Thank you, Victoria. You did a wonderful job.”

A knock sounded at the door, and then a maid entered, carrying two gowns, freshly pressed and hanging delicately from their hangers.

“Your dresses, My Lady,” the maid announced, carefully laying them over the back of the vanity chair.



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“Thank you, Jane,” Victoria replied kindly. She waited until the maid had departed before holding up the two gowns side by side. “Well, what do you think, Maddie? The blue or the green one?”

Madeline considered them both critically for a moment. “The green one complements your eyes beautifully. And it will look lovely alongside my blue dress.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Victoria took the emerald green gown behind the changing screen in the corner. As she dressed, her mind went back to the tumultuous events of the past few days. How swiftly her world had been upended by just one letter. A letter that filled her with equal parts fury and fear.

She thought of her sister, alone and vulnerable. If only Aurora were here now, instead of?—

Victoria shut down that train of thought sharply. Later. She would deal with it all later. Right now, she had to focus on getting through this party unscathed.

Emerging from behind the screen in her gown, she moved to the vanity, so Madeline could assist with fastening the long row of tiny buttons up the back.

“You look wonderful, Victoria,” Madeline remarked as she deftly fastened the buttons. “The Duke won’t be able to take his eyes off you tonight.”

Victoria suppressed a derisive laugh. “Somehow I doubt that. But let him look all he wants, as long as it convinces him the engagement is real.”

Madeline met her gaze worriedly in the mirror. “Do you think you can fool him?”

“I must try. Too much depends on it.” Victoria straightened her shoulders resolutely. “But don’t fret over it, dearest. I’ll handle the Duke. You just focus on enjoying your first Society ball.”

She turned and took Madeline’s hands in her own, giving them a reassuring squeeze. Her cousin still looked uncertain, and Victoria wished she could unburden her mind and confess everything. But it would not be fair to place such a weight on Madeline’s tender shoulders. This was Victoria’s problem to solve.

Another knock was followed by a footman poking his head into the room. “Your carriage is ready, Lady Victoria, Miss Russell.”

“Thank you, we’ll be right down,” Victoria replied.

She checked her appearance one final time in the mirror and took a deep, bracing breath. She hoped her nerves didn’t show on her face. With determined effort, she fixed a convincingly pleasant smile in place as she linked arms with Madeline.

“Shall we?” she prompted brightly.

Together they descended the grand staircase and exited through the front doors, where an open carriage awaited to drive them to the Duke’s estate. Liveried footmen handed them up and they settled onto the plush velvet seats.

As the carriage clattered down the drive, Madeline squeezed Victoria’s hand tightly. “I wish you would tell me what is happening. I’m sure I could help.”

Victoria patted her hand gently. “You are helping, just by being here with me. I promise to explain everything soon. But for now, please just follow my lead tonight.”

Madeline still looked uncertain but nodded. "I trust you, Victoria."

The carriage rolled through the gas-lit London streets, the sounds of string quartets and genteel laughter spilling from the lighted windows of the stately townhouses they passed along the way.

\* \* \*

The clock on the mantel chimed two o'clock as Simon sat at his desk, surrounded by ledgers and letters bearing ill tidings of financial burdens on the estate.

Rubbing his throbbing temples, Simon mulled over the situation for the hundredth time. His father's hastily amended will remained the crux of the problem.

A knock interrupted his brooding. Straightening, Simon bid whoever it was to enter. His friend and solicitor Percival Carter entered.

Simon rose to greet him. "Percival, thank you for coming on such short notice," he said, shaking his hand firmly before gesturing for him to sit.

"Of course, Your Grace. Is all well?" Percival asked.

Resuming his seat, Simon frowned. "I'm afraid not. Several urgent matters have arisen, which I hope to discuss with you."

Percival nodded gravely. "Go on."

"Percival, as you know, my father's will was amended to grant a substantial inheritance to the son who marries first." Simon stood up abruptly, pacing toward the window in agitation. "A foolish clause, no doubt meant to motivate me and Oliver to abandon bachelorhood and become more responsible."

Halting, he turned back to Percival. “Thus far, I have ignored it. But it seems Oliver has become determined to fulfill the terms by proposing to Lady Victoria.”

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Percival furrowed his brow anxiously. “Yes, rumors of an engagement are swirling. But Lord Oliver does not seem the marrying type. You suspect an ulterior motive?”

Simon nodded. “The family’s finances have suffered since Father’s passing. I believe Oliver aims to claim his prize and seize control of the estate.” Resuming his seat, he continued grimly, “You and I both know he is ill-suited to managing finances responsibly. He would run the estate into the ground within a year.”

Percival shifted uneasily. “What will you do? Once they wed, Lord Oliver will gain immediate access to the inheritance. There will be no reversing the transfer of assets.”

Simon pressed his fingers together contemplatively. “You confirm there are no legal measures to prevent it?”

“None,” Percival affirmed regretfully.

Simon was silent for a long moment before finally speaking, “Then I am left with only one possible solution—I must personally intervene and stop this engagement.”

Percival’s eyes widened. “Your Grace, what exactly are you proposing?”

Rising, Simon clasped his hands behind his back. “It is simple. To prevent the money from defaulting to Oliver, I must prove this engagement is a fraud, utterly devoid of real affection.” He pinned Percival with an intense stare. “And I aim to do so by making Lady Victoria fall for me instead.”

Percival lurched forward in alarm. “Simon, seducing Lady Victoria could bring grave

scandal!”

“Calm yourself, Percy,” Simon said. “I know what I am doing. Have faith, I do not intend to ruin her.” Beginning to slowly pace, he explained, “If Lady Victoria so easily transfers her affections to me upon our first meeting, it will confirm neither she nor Oliver have any true feelings toward each other, as opposed to what the amended will requires.”

Halting before the fireplace, he turned back to Percival. “I aim only for some light flirtation. A few passionate words, a daring embrace perhaps. Nothing compromising.”

Percival still appeared extremely uncertain.

Simon resumed his seat and adopted a casual, congenial tone. “Come now, it is merely a bit of sport, however much I act the scoundrel. Lady Victoria’s honor will remain intact, you have my word.” Leaning forward intently, he continued, “The truth is, Lady Victoria is likely a willing conspirator in this deceit. What woman of virtue would accept a fake engagement? No, she is after wealth and status.”

Reclining back, he took a nonchalant sip of brandy. “Therefore, she cannot be allowed to make a fool of me. I will expose their ruse and send her packing.”

Setting his glass down, he addressed Percival earnestly. “I promise you, Lady Victoria will not be irrevocably compromised. Once their deception is revealed, she will return home unharmed.”

Percival still appeared troubled.

Rising, Simon came around the desk to grasp his shoulder reassuringly. “My friend, you know me to be a man of honor. This is merely a necessary measure to protect the

estate and the Reynolds legacy. Please, put your faith in me.”

After a prolonged hesitation, Percival finally nodded reluctantly. “Very well. I cannot claim to approve of your methods, but I trust your intentions are honorable. Only promise me you will take great care.”

“You have my word,” Simon vowed solemnly.

Just then, the mantel clock chimed three.

Simon straightened. “But come, we have talked long enough. I must ready myself for this evening.”

Moving toward the door, Simon added gravely, “I want you to understand, Percival. I did not decide on this course lightly. I take no pleasure in such maneuvers.” Pausing, he turned back to Percival. “But I see no other way to uphold my duties as the Duke and guardian of the estate’s welfare, which currently teeters on the brink.”

Percival rose slowly. “I understand. Desperate times can sometimes warrant difficult decisions. Let us hope cooler heads prevail.”

Simon smiled warmly, shaking Percival’s hand. “Thank you for your wisdom and support, my friend. Wish me luck.”

With an uneasy smile, Percival took his leave. Alone again, Simon moved to stand before the large portrait of his father hanging above the mantel.

Gazing up solemnly, he spoke, “Father, I apologize for the unseemly methods I must employ tonight. But I promise you, I will protect our family legacy and restore dignity to the Reynolds name.”

Turning, Simon straightened his dinner jacket and headed for the door, shoulders set with determination.

The night's events would require a delicate balancing act—just enough roguish charm to turn Victoria's head without causing irredeemable scandal.

Simon scoffed under his breath. Women were rarely immune to his charms for long. A few flattering words, a smoldering look, a strategically placed caress... this would all be over swiftly.

Still, as he descended the grand staircase, the echo of Percival's warnings lingered in his mind. He shook his head, casting the doubts away. Poise and self-assurance were vital now.



\* \* \*

Making his way to the grand foyer, Simon called for his butler, Mr. Graves.

The dutiful butler promptly appeared. “Your Grace, how may I be of service?”

“Graves, kindly assess whether all is ready for this evening’s events. I want no detail overlooked that could impact the experience of our esteemed guests,” Simon instructed.

Bowing slightly, Graves replied, “Of course, Your Grace. I shall conduct a thorough inspection immediately.”

As his butler hurried off, Simon wandered into the ornate drawing room, surveying the space. Footmen were busy arranging furnishings to optimal positions for conversation circles and refreshments. Simon noticed that the red damask curtains appeared slightly faded.

“Andrews,” Simon addressed one of the senior footmen. “See that these curtains are replaced with the emerald brocade drapes immediately.”

“Right away, Your Grace,” Andrews responded before heading off to execute his master’s order.

Satisfied so far, Simon continued his rounds, scrutinizing every aspect from the lighting to the floral arrangements. In the dining room, he sampled the menu options for the evening, suggesting a heavier soup alongside a lighter basil bisque. The

kitchen staff hurried to oblige their demanding master.

Simon knew expectations for a party hosted by a duke were high. He would accept nothing less than perfection. Fortunately, years spent fastidiously attending his father's extravagant social events had well prepared him to organize tonight's affair.

After thoroughly surveying the ballroom being prepared for dancing later, Simon took a turn about the gallery. Pausing before a painting of his father, a pang of sadness momentarily tempered his detachment. His presence was sorely missed, especially now as he prepared to welcome potential new family members. If only...

"Your taste in decor has improved, I see." A mocking voice jolted Simon out of his reverie.

Turning, he saw Oliver strolling toward him, whiskey tumbler already in hand.

"I keep abreast of the latest styles," Simon replied coolly. "Our guests expect nothing less."

"Of course," Oliver drawled, glancing at the newly hung paintings with disinterest. "Appearances above all else."

Simon bristled slightly at the implication. "And how would you have us present ourselves? In threadbare furnishings and peeling wallpaper?"

Oliver shrugged, taking a long sip of whiskey. "Simply making an observation, Brother. Play the Duke however you wish."

Clenching his jaw at the condescending tone, Simon changed topic. "The house looks well, I believe. What brought you here?"

“I noticed Percival stopped by,” Oliver said casually, but his green eyes remained fixed on Simon’s face. “Rather an odd time for a social visit with your solicitor, is it not?”

Keeping his expression neutral, Simon replied, “We are friends as well as business associates. I merely thought to invite him this evening.”

“How gracious of you,” Oliver said, swirling his tumbler pensively. “Though Percival has never seemed the party type.”

Simon shrugged. “I supposed a change of pace might do him good. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must?—”

“Not so fast,” Oliver interrupted, stepping closer as his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Percival looked unusually tense when I passed him on the stairs. Now, why would that be, I wonder?”

Maintaining an air of nonchalance with effort, Simon countered, “You know how anxious Percival can get over the smallest matters. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“Hmm, perhaps,” Oliver said, though he still appeared unconvinced. Downing the rest of his drink, he moved toward the door. “Well, I best make myself presentable for my dear Lady Victoria’s arrival.” Pausing, he glanced back. “I shall be keeping close watch over her tonight. Lady Victoria is rather... precious to me. See that she is treated appropriately.”

“Of course,” Simon replied with a cordial smile that did not reach his eyes.

With a last warning look, Oliver departed.

Alone again, Simon allowed himself a small scowl of frustration. His cagey brother

suspected there was more afoot than an impromptu guest list addition. He would need to take extra care around Oliver this evening.

Resuming his inspection, Simon eventually ended up back at the foyer just as Graves approached with his report.

“All is in order, Your Grace. The household staff awaits only your final approval,” the butler declared with proper dignity.

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Simon gave an approving nod. “Well done, Graves. You have outdone yourself.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Graves replied, nodding deferentially. “I live only to please.”

Peering out the window, Simon saw carriages beginning to line the drive. “It seems the guests are arriving. Give the footmen their final orders.”

“Right away, Your Grace,” Graves responded before marching off, his back ramrod straight as he prepared to receive the prestigious visitors.

Alone again briefly, Simon took a deep, steadying breath and schooled his features into an impassive mask.

The dye was cast. Time to greet the players in this evening’s drama.

Squaring his shoulders, Simon turned and strode toward the drawing room, where voices indicated the first attendees had begun filtering in.

Showtime.

As Simon entered, a false smile perfectly painted, he already felt exhaustion creeping in around the edges of his facade. How long until he could seek respite? Still, duty called now.

“Lady Pembroke, delighted you could come,” Simon addressed a young lady warmly.

Time passed in a blur of pleasantries, polite laughter, and pandering to egos. Simon played his part flawlessly, the elegant host entertaining with practiced charm. Yet, his gaze continually drifted to the ornate doors, awaiting the arrival of the lady of the hour.

## CHAPTER 8

The carriage rattled down the winding country road, carrying Victoria and her family toward Hayward Manor for the Duke's weekend house party. Victoria gazed out the window, taking in the lush green countryside and trying to ignore the knot of anxiety in her stomach. In just a few hours, she would need to pretend to be happily betrothed to the vile Oliver Reynolds, all to protect her dear sister Aurora's secret.

"Oh, I do hope the Dowager Duchess is in good spirits," Madeline said nervously across from her. "I've heard she can be quite... particular."

Victoria squeezed her cousin's hand reassuringly. Madeline had spent her life in the countryside and was unaccustomed to the grandeur and scrutiny of high society.

"I'm sure Her Grace will be an excellent hostess," Victoria said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. The Dowager Duchess had a reputation for being cold and severe, much like her son, the Duke. What a pair they made.

Lord Newton sat beside Madeline, scowling out the window. He had barely spoken since they left Newton House, no doubt brooding over Aurora's situation.

Victoria bit her lip. Their family's future depended on her playing this part convincingly. She must not fail.

As the manor came into view, rising majestically above sculpted gardens, Victoria straightened her shoulders. This was it. Time to begin the charade.

The carriage rolled to a stop by the front steps. Liveried footmen rushed forward to open the doors and unfold the steps. Victoria allowed one to assist her down, then turned to take in her surroundings.

Hayward Manor was even grander than she had imagined, a sprawling Elizabethan structure of warm gray stone and leaded windows that glittered in the morning sun. Ivy crawled up the walls, and topiaries dotted the lawns and gardens. It looked like something from a fairy tale.

Madeline's eyes were wide. "Oh my, it's splendid!"

Victoria gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. "Indeed. Now, remember, back straight and chin up. You are the niece of an earl."

Madeline nodded, squaring her shoulders.

The Earl descended behind them, top hat in hand and walking stick tapping on the drive. He looked around skeptically as if searching for flaws.

Victoria bit back a sigh. The Earl always seemed to think he had something to prove, a chip on his shoulder from not being born to a higher title. It was that insecurity that had driven him to promise Aurora a lofty match, one that now seemed impossible.

The great double doors opened, and their host emerged. Victoria's breath caught at the sight of him.

Simon, The Duke of Hayward cut an imposing figure, broad-shouldered and powerful in a dark jacket and trousers, his dark hair gleaming in the morning sun. His face was classically handsome but aloof, jaw tight, and dark brown eyes unreadable as they swept over his guests.

When those eyes met Victoria's, she had to suppress a shiver. It was like staring into two endless pools.

The Duke bowed. "Lord Newton, Lady Victoria, Miss Russell. Welcome to Hayward Manor."



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His voice was deep and cultured, but there was an edge to it that put Victoria on guard. They would have to be cautious around him.

Her father bowed in return. “Your Grace. A pleasure.”

“Come inside. The other guests are eager to meet you.” The Duke turned on his heel and strode into the manor.

Exchanging a glance with Madeline, Victoria lifted her skirts and followed after him, doing her best to appear calm and collected.

They stepped into a wide entrance hall decorated with tapestries and suits of armor. A magnificent staircase swept upward, and corridors branched off in several directions. Servants in black and white livery hurried about, carrying luggage and directing footmen.

“Your rooms are prepared,” the Duke said briskly. “I will have McGillicuddy show you to them so you may refresh yourselves before lunch.”

An older footman inclined his head.

Victoria gave him a polite smile before turning back to the Duke. “You have a lovely home, Your Grace. We look forward to enjoying your hospitality this weekend.”

The Duke’s eyes remained cold. “Yes. I was quite... intrigued by your sudden acceptance of the invitation. I do not recall you being so... eager in the past.”

Victoria's pulse quickened, but she kept her expression neutral. "Perhaps I have turned over a new leaf, Your Grace."

His eyes narrowed slightly, but just then Lady Harriet Knolles descended the stairs in a flutter of silken skirts. "Why, Your Grace! How delightful you could join us!"

The Duke turned to greet the new arrival, and Victoria released a shaky breath. This was going to be even more difficult than she had anticipated. The Duke was no fool—they would have to proceed very carefully.

She turned her attention to Lady Harriet, forcing a warm smile. "Lady Harriet, how wonderful to see you again. Allow me to present my cousin, Miss Madeline Russell."

As Madeline dropped into a curtsy, Victoria glanced around the hall. Somewhere in this crowd, a viper was lurking, waiting to strike if she misstepped. Where was Oliver?

"Lady Victoria."

A chill ran down her spine at the sound of that smooth, cultured voice.

Bracing herself, she turned and dipped into the most superficial of curtsies. "Lord Oliver. What a... delightful surprise."

Oliver bowed, a small smirk playing on his lips. He was as handsome as ever, blonde and green-eyed, with his brother's strong features, but there was a mocking gleam in his eyes that had not been there before. He knew he had power over her now, and he enjoyed it.

"The delight is mine, Lady Victoria." He took her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles, the touch making her skin crawl. "I could hardly contain my excitement

when I learned you would be joining us. We have such a delightful few days planned.”

Victoria suppressed a shudder at the hidden warning in his words. “Indeed,” she managed to say. “How... thoughtful of you.”

His eyes glinted with wicked amusement, a look that made her stomach churn. But she had no choice but to play along.

Turning, she forced a gracious smile. “Madeline, you already know Lord Oliver, His Grace’s younger brother?”

Madeline curtsied. “Always a pleasure, Lord Oliver.”

“The pleasure is mine, Miss Russell.” Oliver’s smile reminded Victoria of a crocodile eyeing prey. “Welcome to our humble home. I do hope you enjoy everything we have... in store.”

Victoria’s fingers tightened on Madeline’s arm. They could not let him rattle them.

Fortunately, McGillicuddy intervened. “Pardon me, My Lords, My Ladies. If you would please follow me, I shall show you to your rooms.”

“Thank you.”

Giving Oliver a polite nod, Victoria steered Madeline toward the stairs. She could feel the weight of his gaze following them up.

Their bedrooms were located in the family wing, next to the Dowager Duchess’s rooms. Victoria’s was a charming chamber decorated in rose silks and gilt furnishings. The canopied bed looked heavenly and inviting after the long journey.

“Oh, Victoria, what a lovely room!” Madeline exclaimed, crossing to the window that overlooked the gardens. “What an adventure this shall be. I vow I have never seen such grandeur, except perhaps when we visited Lord Chesterfield’s estate as children.”

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A knock sounded at the door, and she turned expectantly, hoping the visitor was a friendly face. Her hopes sank when Oliver strolled in without waiting for a response.

Madeline looked startled. “Lord Oliver!”

“Do forgive the intrusion, Miss Russell,” he said smoothly. “I simply wished to give Lady Victoria a small token of my regard.”

From behind his back, he produced a small posy of wildflowers.

Madeline’s expression softened with delight. “How romantic!”

Victoria had to force herself to accept the flowers. She wanted nothing more than to hurl them back at his smirking face. “You are too kind,” she said stiffly.

Oliver lifted one golden eyebrow. “I hope you will think so when you see what else I have arranged.”

His meaning was not lost on her. The charade must convince his family, or there would be consequences.

Victoria lifted her chin. She refused to show fear. “I shall reserve judgment until then.”

His jaw tightened, the smile fading. “See that you do.”

With a short bow, he turned and left the room.

The moment the door closed, Victoria let out a shaky breath, crushing the delicate petals in her fist.

She stared down at the ruined bouquet, anger and frustration simmering within her. How dare Oliver force her into this twisted game!

With an effort, she smoothed her expression and turned to Madeline, who was watching her curiously. “Forgive me, dear. It has been a long journey, and I find myself quite fatigued.”

Madeline’s eyes filled with concern. “Of course, you poor thing. I shall let you rest before luncheon.” She started for the door, then paused. “Victoria... is everything all right? Only you seem a bit out of sorts today.”

Victoria forced a smile. “Everything is fine. Merely road weary, as I said.”

Madeline still looked uncertain. “If you need to confide in me...”

“You are a true friend. But there is nothing to tell.” The lie burned Victoria’s tongue.

At last, Madeline nodded. “I shall see you at luncheon, then.” With an encouraging smile, she left.

Alone again, Victoria sank onto the silken bed and buried her face in her hands. How was she to get through this visit without exposing them all? The Duke already seemed suspicious of her change of heart, and Oliver was like a viper waiting to strike if she faltered. She would need to be at her very best to pull this off. But did she have the strength?

A knock interrupted her despairing thoughts. Rising swiftly, she called, “Yes?”

A maid, Alice, entered with Victoria's luggage. "Pardon me, Lady Victoria. Shall I help you unpack and change for luncheon?"

"Yes, thank you."

Victoria moved behind the dressing screen and donned a simple day gown of ivory muslin. Alice arranged her hair into an exquisite upsweep, then helped affix a locket bearing a miniature of her mother. The familiar heirloom would give her strength.

Casting one last look in the mirror, Victoria raised her chin. She could do this. For Aurora's sake, she must.

Drawing a deep breath, she left the room and made her way downstairs. Most of the other guests were already assembled in the drawing room, mingling over glasses of Madeira. Victoria accepted a glass from a footman and joined Madeline by the windows overlooking the back lawn.

"There you are," Madeline said with obvious relief. "Are you feeling more revived?"

"Yes, much better now, thank you."

Victoria gazed out at the gardens, where gardeners were hard at work, pruning rosebushes and raking the gravel paths. How she envied their simple, unscrutinized lives.

"What did Lord Oliver want earlier?" Madeline asked. "He seemed rather eager to give you flowers."

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Victoria tensed but managed to keep her tone light. “Oh, he was merely being polite.”

In her heart, she loathed Oliver with every fiber of her being.

“Well, I think it’s promising,” Madeline said with an approving nod. “He is quite handsome, even if his manner is a bit... severe.”

Victoria choked back a bitter laugh.

Further conversation was forestalled by the entrance of their host. All eyes turned to the Duke as he strode into the room, commanding attention without effort. Today, he wore black breeches and a coat paired with a stark white cravat, the monochrome accentuating his imposing height and bearing. He truly looked every inch the powerful aristocrat. Victoria shivered under his cold gaze.

“Thank you all for coming.” The Duke’s voice easily carried to every corner of the room. “Luncheon is served.”

He led the procession from the room in perfect order of rank and precedence. Victoria walked with Madeline, hyper-aware of Oliver’s presence just behind them. She could feel the weight of the brothers’ stares, one cold and calculating, the other seething with malice.

Victoria was seated a few places down from the head of the table, where the Duke presided over the lavish spread. Madeline sat across from her, looking rather wide-eyed at all the grandeur.



The Dowager Duchess sat beside her eldest son, looking bored and irritated. She cast an occasional scathing look over the noisy guests but mostly kept her gaze on her wine glass, which seemed to require frequent refilling by the vigilant footmen.

“Must we suffer these braying guests? Their chatter is giving me a headache,” she grumbled to her son.

The Duke sighed. “Patience, Mother. We must keep up appearances.”

Victoria’s heart sank at the sight. She had hoped the Dowager Duchess might take her side if things went poorly. But it seemed the woman was lost in her haze of bitterness and drink.

At last, the Duke set down his napkin and stood up. The gentlemen likewise rose, leaving the ladies to retire to the drawing room for tea while the men enjoyed port and cigars.

Victoria walked slowly amidst the rustling silks and satins, dreading being cornered alone. Her worst fears were realized when a hand grabbed her wrist, yanking her into a secluded alcove. She found herself pressed against the wall, trapped by Oliver’s hands on either side of her head.

“Well, my dear Lady Victoria...” His eyes blazed with anticipation. “Shall we give them a glimpse of our supposed affections?”

Revulsion rose in Victoria’s throat, but she forced herself to meet his gaze steadily. “Not yet. Your brother already doubts my sincerity. We must proceed carefully, or he will never believe it.”

Oliver’s jaw tightened, his breath hot on her face. For a moment, she thought he might strike her. But finally, he released her and stepped back.

“You had best be convincing,” he warned darkly, “or your darling sister will pay the price.”

Victoria lifted her chin in defiance, hoping he could not see her trembling. “I am well aware of what is at stake.”

Holding his gaze long enough to prove she would not be cowed, she stepped around him and continued down the corridor, her pulse racing.

Somehow, she had to maintain control of this situation, or they would all be ruined.

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, the guests gathered in the sculpture garden behind the manor for the first planned activity of the house party—navigating an ornate hedge maze.

“Oh, how perfectly delightful!” Madeline exclaimed, clutching Victoria’s arm as they stared up at the towering hedge walls. “I adore mazes ever so much. Don’t you, Victoria?”

“Indeed,” Victoria replied, though her stomach churned with anxiety.

A maze would provide ample opportunity for Oliver to corner her again out of sight. She must be on her guard.

Lady Harriet fluttered her fan dramatically. “Lord Henry, you simply must accompany me! I shall be ever so lost without a gallant gentleman to guide me.”

Lord Henry bowed. “It would be my pleasure to ensure you do not stray, My Lady.”

Other guests began pairing off as well to enter the maze. Victoria hesitated, unsure

who would be least troublesome as a companion.

“Might I have the honor, Lady Victoria?”

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She turned with resignation to find Oliver offering his arm, his eyes glinting. Forcing a polite smile, she had no choice but to take it. “You are too kind, Lord Oliver.”

As they passed the Duke, who was standing grim-faced at the maze entrance, Oliver leaned closer. “Play along now, darling. We must give a good show.”

Victoria stiffened but said nothing, determined not to let him goad her. Madeline and Lord Alfred Chauncey entered the maze ahead of them, chattering happily. Victoria envied their carefree attitude.

They strolled down the gravel path, hedge walls looming overhead. It was a true puzzle, with countless twists and turns that obscured any sense of direction. Madeline’s delighted exclamations floated back to them as she and Lord Alfred explored.

When they reached the first fork, Oliver suddenly pulled Victoria down the left-hand path. She resisted, casting a nervous glance back at the main trail.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere we can speak privately,” he murmured, quickening his pace. Victoria hurried to keep up, uneasy at leaving the group behind.

After several more turns, Oliver stopped in a secluded cul-de-sac. Victoria turned to retrace their steps, but he caught her arm, yanking her close.

“Let go of me!” she cried, trying to twist free.

He pushed her against the hedge, caging her there. “Not until you convince me you are taking our arrangement seriously throughout this house party and the planned activities.”

Victoria turned her face away from him. “I told you, we must be subtle for now. If I fawn all over you, the Duke will never believe it is real.”

Oliver grabbed her chin roughly, forcing her to look at him. “I don’t recall asking for fawning. But you will show me affection, or else?—”

“There you are!” Madeline’s voice rang out brightly as she appeared around a corner. “Oh, gracious, I didn’t mean to interrupt...”

She blushed as Oliver hastily released Victoria and stepped back.

“You weren’t interrupting anything,” Victoria said quickly, silently blessing her cousin’s timely appearance. “Lord Oliver was just... pointing out a unique feature of the hedge.”

Oliver flashed his most charming smile. “Indeed. Let us rejoin the others before they think we are lost.”

He headed back toward the main path.

Madeline gave Victoria a reassuring squeeze before following. Victoria trailed behind, her heart pounding. The maze had been even more treacherous than she had anticipated. But she had survived this round.

As they left the shadows of the hedge, she blinked in the late afternoon sunlight. Across the lawn, the other guests were emerging from various maze entrances, laughing and chatting happily. But one dark figure stood apart, watching her

intensely.

The Duke's piercing gaze seemed to see straight through to her soul. Victoria shivered despite the warm sun on her skin. Somehow, she must convince him of this courtship, or all would be lost.

Squaring her shoulders, she joined Madeline to walk back to the manor, acutely aware of both brothers' eyes following her every move.

\* \* \*

The drawing room of Hayward Manor buzzed with genteel chatter as the guests gathered for evening tea. Victoria sat primly amidst the flock of chattering ladies, half-listening as Madeline prattled on brightly about the lovely weather they were having.

"Don't you agree, Victoria?" Madeline asked, turning her cheerful gaze toward her.

"Oh, yes, quite," Victoria murmured absently, forcing a polite smile.

In truth, she felt restless and desperate for a moment alone to gather her tangled thoughts. Between maintaining the charade and resisting the unwanted attraction she felt toward the Duke, Victoria felt constantly on edge. The inane small talk of the ladies only grated on her nerves further.

As a footman offered them refreshments from an ornate silver tray, Madeline helped herself to a cucumber sandwich and continued conversing in her bubbly fashion. "The grounds here are just lovely. Why, only this morning, I took a long walk through the gardens and saw the most delightful blooms. The irises were in full bloom, such a gorgeous shade of violet-blue..."

Victoria nodded along mechanically, making the appropriate noises of agreement while subtly looking for any opportunity to slip away unnoticed. Fortunately, Madeline was too absorbed in her chatter to notice Victoria's distraction.

Madeline was mid-ramble, going on about the burdens of societal expectations for young ladies. "Oh, it's just so tiring to always be polite and proper! I wish I could speak my true thoughts sometimes instead of making boring small talk!"

Just then, Lady Pemberton approached her with a warm smile. "Good day, my dear! How lovely to see you again."

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Madeline's demeanor instantly shifted as she greeted the older woman cheerfully. "Lady Pemberton! The pleasure is mine. How are you finding the gathering so far?"

"Quite amusing. Many intriguing rumors are swirling about this Season, it seems," Lady Pemberton replied conspiratorially.

Madeline's eyes lit up. "Oh, yes, you simply must share the latest gossip! I've been dying for something scandalous to liven up these stuffy events..."

The two eagerly delved into a discussion about the rumor mill, Madeline momentarily forgetting her previous complaints.

Seizing her chance, Victoria quietly set down her teacup and rose gracefully from her seat while Madeline was preoccupied. "You'll have to excuse me for a few moments," she murmured, not waiting for a response before gliding out of the room.

Once in the hallway, Victoria breathed a soft sigh of relief. The constant scrutiny and inane gossip in the drawing room had been stifling. She needed a respite to gather her thoughts, even just a brief one. Moving through the grand manor house, she made her way to the rear terrace doors that opened onto the sprawling gardens.

Stepping outside, Victoria was greeted by the tranquil ambiance of early evening. The sun had begun its descent toward the horizon, casting a warm glow on the well-manicured lawns.

Meandering slowly down the garden path, Victoria inhaled the peaceful air, willing the tension to leave her body. Being out of doors, away from the chattering guests



and the pretense she was forced to maintain in their presence, felt rejuvenating.

Lost in thought, Victoria did not hear the approaching footsteps on the gravel path behind her until a voice spoke, “Lady Victoria.”

She turned to see Simon striding toward her, his tall figure silhouetted by the setting sun. Her pulse quickened involuntarily at the sight of him.

“Your Grace,” she greeted apprehensively.

“Please, there is no need for such formality when it is just the two of us,” he said gently as he drew up beside her. “Call me Simon.”

Victoria tensed slightly. Calling the Duke by his given name felt uncomfortably intimate. But she merely inclined her head in acquiescence. “As you wish... Simon.”

An awkward silence descended between them then. Victoria averted her gaze, avoiding the intensity of his stare. Ever since their arrival, conversing normally with Simon had proven... difficult. The ruse aside, his nearness never failed to put her ill at ease. There was an undercurrent between them, an unwanted but undeniable attraction that left her feeling unsettled.

But Simon seemed determined to put her at ease. “It is a lovely evening, is it not?” he remarked. “I often find that the fresh air of the gardens clears my mind after so much socializing.”

“Yes, it is quite refreshing,” Victoria answered politely, hoping he would not press her for further small talk.

Fortunately, Simon appeared sensitive to her desire for silence. For a few moments, they simply walked together down the winding path, the only sound the crunching of

gravel beneath their feet.

As they rounded a hedge, arriving at a stone bench tucked into an alcove of flowering bushes, Simon paused. “Forgive me, but you seem troubled about something. I do not mean to pry, but if there is anything I can do to set your mind at ease...” he trailed off, regarding her with an earnest expression.

For a brief, mad moment, Victoria imagined confessing the truth to him. But she dared not take the risk, not when Aurora’s future hung in the balance.

“You are kind to be concerned,” she said carefully. “But I assure you, I am quite all right.”

Simon eyed her in that piercing way he had, as though trying to peer into the secrets of her soul. “Somehow, I suspect there is more weighing on your mind than you feel able to divulge,” he said gently. “I understand there are likely things you cannot or will not confide in me. But I hope, in time, you will come to see me as a friend, Lady Victoria.”

Hearing her given name on his lips sent an involuntary shiver through Victoria. She wavered, torn between her longing to unburden herself and the fear of what might happen should she let down her guard.

Sensing her indecision, Simon went on in a low, compelling tone. “In truth, there is much I wish to say to you that cannot be said in front of the others. From the moment we met, I tried to deny the connection between us, but it is undeniable.”

He moved closer as he spoke, and Victoria’s breath grew short, her heart racing treacherously.

“Simon, I don’t know what you mean...” s

He gave her a smoldering look. "I think you do. This potent attraction we share but both attempt to suppress." Reaching up, he gently caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "You are an extraordinary woman, Lady Victoria. Since you arrived, I can think of little else but you."

Victoria trembled beneath his touch, her body's traitorous response to him warring with her rational mind's warnings. "You should not say such things," she managed breathlessly. "It is not proper."

Simon's eyes blazed. "Proper or not, it is the truth. I have never met someone who affects me the way you do. When we are together, I find I cannot resist wanting?—"

It was the distant sound of laughter carrying on the evening breeze that finally broke through the haze of desire.

Victoria pulled back sharply, flushed and trembling. What was she doing? She had allowed this to go much too far.

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“Forgive me, Your Grace, I don’t know what came over me,” she stammered, avoiding his heated gaze. “Please, let us return to the house.”

Before he could respond, she pulled away, fleeing back up the garden path on shaky legs. Her mind spun as she tried to make sense of what almost happened.

She slipped back into the crowded drawing room and rejoined her cousin.

“There you are!” Madeline exclaimed. “I was wondering where you disappeared to.”

“Just needed some air,” Victoria murmured, reaching shakily for her tea.

Madeline prattled on as Victoria tried calming her nerves. How would she face Simon normally after their heated tryst?

As if summoned by her thoughts, Simon entered. Victoria kept her eyes down but felt his burning gaze from across the room. Her pulse raced. Needing a distraction, she poured herself another cup of tea.

As Simon socialized with the guests, Victoria risked glancing up. Outwardly, he was the picture of courtesy. But when their eyes briefly met, the raw hunger in his eyes made her immediately lower hers once more.

## CHAPTER9

The grand dining hall of Hayward Manor was alight with the warm glow of candles, their flames dancing merrily against the dark polished wood paneling. An elaborate

mahogany table took center stage, laden with fine bone china plates edged in gold filigree, and crystal goblets that captured the candlelight in their many facets.

At the head of the long table sat Simon, the Duke of Hayward himself. Despite the warm and convivial atmosphere in the room, a perpetual air of gravity surrounded the Duke. His piercing eyes swept over the assembled dinner guests, lingering for a moment on Victoria, who sat to his right, looking resplendent in an emerald gown.

To Simon's left, the Dowager Duchess drained her wine goblet in one long swallow before holding it out impatiently for the footman to refill it. "Come along boy, I'm parched!" she declared in a slightly slurred voice.

Further down, Lord Newton was droning on about the fine weather they had been having, stopping every few moments to dab at his brow with a handkerchief. Beside him, Oliver constantly shifted in his seat, his eyes darting about the room restlessly as he twirled a fork between his fingers.

"Turtle soup to start!" Madeline exclaimed as the first course was served. "How delightful. I do believe Cook has outdone herself this evening."

Victoria gave her cousin an indulgent smile. "I'm pleased you are enjoying it, dear, though do save some room. We have many more courses to come."

Madeline nodded enthusiastically as she dipped her spoon back into the bowl. "Of course. Oh, but it is hard not to fill up on such tasty fare!"

Meanwhile, the Dowager Duchess was grumbling under her breath about the soup being dreadfully over-salted and not at all to her liking.

Simon ate slowly and methodically, seeming to take no pleasure in the carefully prepared meal.

“Come on, Duke, you must keep your strength up,” the Dowager Duchess admonished. “Eat, boy!”

“Yes, Mother,” Simon replied tonelessly before forcing himself to take another spoonful.

As the next course was served, a lightly baked trout with lemon and herbs, Madeline piped up again, “Cousin look! This fish is simply divine. It melts in one’s mouth like butter!”

Victoria smiled graciously. “It does look quite delicious. Are you enjoying the fish, Your Grace?” she asked Simon politely.

He dabbed at his mouth with a linen napkin before meeting her gaze. “It’s perfectly cooked. My compliments to the Cook.”

Though his words were cool and detached, Victoria detected a glimmer of warmth in his dark brown eyes.

“Marvelous party you have planned, Your Grace!” Lord Hampshire, one of the guests, complimented enthusiastically. “Why, it shall be the event of the Season, I daresay. Everyone who is anyone shall be in attendance. It is so very generous of you to host.”

Simon inclined his head slightly. “You are too kind. I hope the party proves enjoyable for all.”

“Oh, yes! I cannot wait!” Madeline exclaimed, nearly bouncing in her seat. “My uncle has permitted me to have a new gown made specially for the occasion. I shall be the belle of the party, don’t you think, Cousin?”

Victoria patted her hand affectionately. “Indeed you shall be the loveliest one there, my dear.”

The Earl cleared his throat importantly. “Yes, we are most honored by the invitation, Your Grace. This shall be Madeline’s first Season, you know, after...” He faltered, his face reddening.

An awkward hush fell over the table. Oliver’s grip on his wine glass tightened until his knuckles turned white.

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Victoria quickly tried to smooth over the uncomfortable moment. “Madeline has looked forward to her first Season for ages,” she said brightly. “I just know she will be the shining star of the ton this year.”

Madeline beamed gratefully at her cousin for diverting the unwanted attention. “You are too kind, Cousin. I confess, I am quite nervous. There is so much to learn about London Society! I should be lost without your guidance.”

“It is my pleasure to offer whatever advice I can,” Victoria replied sincerely. “Though it seems not so long ago I was navigating my first Season. How quickly the time passes.” A wistful expression crossed her face as she reminisced.

As dinner progressed, the courses flowed one after another—succulent roasted meats, buttery potatoes, delicate pastries, and decadent chocolates. Finally, the ladies rose en masse to depart for the drawing room while the gentlemen lingered over port.

Madeline glanced anxiously at Victoria. “Must we leave the dining room? Can I not stay a little longer?”

Victoria touched her shoulder reassuringly. “You go on ahead, dear. I will join you in just a moment.”

With obvious reluctance, Madeline followed the other ladies out. Victoria noticed Oliver draining glass after glass of port in quick succession, his cheeks growing ruddier by the minute. Her father seemed not to notice or care about his companion’s increasingly inebriated state.



Satisfied that all was well, Victoria glided out of the room in a rustle of emerald silk. She paused outside the drawing room, overhearing Madeline's bright voice recounting a humorous childhood tale that sent the other ladies into peals of laughter. Victoria smiled to herself, picturing the scene.

Her pleasant musings were interrupted by the echoes of unsteady footsteps followed by a muffled crash. Frowning in concern, Victoria hurried to investigate. She nearly collided with Simon, who was storming down the corridor, his jaw set and his eyes smoldering.

"Your Grace! What has happened?"

"It is nothing," he bit out tersely. Seeing her stricken expression, he softened slightly. "Merely a little row with my drunken fool of a brother. Do not be alarmed."

Before she could respond, Simon disappeared down the passage. Victoria stared after him, her stomach knotting with anxiety. She suspected Oliver was responsible for the commotion, and it did not bode well. With a troubled sigh, she returned to join Madeline in the drawing room.

Upon entering, Madeline immediately rushed to her side. "There you are, Cousin! Is everything quite all right? I thought I heard a commotion."

Victoria schooled her features into a calm smile. "All is well, my dear. Are you enjoying the music?" She gestured to the young lady who was playing a lively country reel.

Madeline seemed momentarily distracted by the cheerful tune, then turned back to Victoria with renewed concern. "Please, Cousin, do not think you can keep the truth from me. I know something is amiss, I can see it troubles you."

Taking Madeline gently by the arm, Victoria led her to a secluded corner of the room where they could speak more privately. In a hushed tone, she said, “You are right, I have not been entirely forthcoming. But let us leave further discussion for the morrow, when we are rested. Tonight has been... trying.”

Madeline opened her mouth as if to protest, then thought better of it. “Very well. I shall hold you to explaining all on the morrow.” She yawned. “But I confess I am thoroughly exhausted from the day’s events.”

“Then let us retire so you can recover your strength.” Victoria linked her arm with Madeline’s, and together they ascended the grand staircase.

Once tucked away in their bedchamber, Madeline turned to her cousin expectantly. “We are alone now. Will you not share what troubles you so?”

Victoria wrung her hands, pacing the room anxiously. “Oh, Madeline, I can bear it no longer! The secrets are too heavy on my heart. I must unburden myself to you.”

She sank onto the bed, and Madeline immediately grasped her hands supportively. “Please, Cousin, you know you can tell me anything. I only wish to help ease your distress.”

Taking a deep breath, Victoria confessed, “It is about Lord Oliver. Earlier today, in the garden maze, he cornered me and made it clear the blackmail over Aurora still stands. He is determined to see this engagement through against my wishes.”

“Your loyalty to Aurora is remarkable, though I regret Lord Oliver exploits it so cruelly,” Madeline said, giving Victoria’s hands a gentle squeeze. “Surely there must be some way to outwit his scheme without compromising Aurora’s reputation?”

“If only I knew how!” Victoria cried in anguish. “For now, I feel well and truly

trapped, with no choice but to play the role he has dictated. But it weighs heavily on me, I confess.”

Madeline was silent for a moment. “There must be some solution. We need only clear minds and open hearts to find it.” She hesitated. “But, Cousin, there is something more troubling you still, I can see it plain on your face.”

Victoria turned away, a fiery blush staining her cheeks. In a barely audible voice, she confessed, “When Lord Oliver accosted me in the maze... you came upon us. So he stopped pestering me as soon as you showed up.” She shuddered at the memory.

“So I saved you?” Madeline asked gently.

Victoria gave a small nod, still facing away in embarrassment. “Yes. And later, in the garden just before dinner...”

“Yes? What happened in the garden?” Madeline probed.

“We nearly...” Victoria twisted her hands in her lap. “His Grace was seducing me. We very nearly kissed,” she admitted in a rush. “I know it is foolish, but at that moment, all I wanted was to feel his lips on mine. Propriety be damned!”

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Madeline's eyes went wide. "Do you care for him then? Despite everything?"

"I cannot deny there is a powerful attraction between us," Victoria confessed. "Though it likely means nothing to one such as him. I am but a trivial amusement, a moth drawn to his flame."

"Do not underestimate yourself so!" Madeline admonished. "Perhaps His Grace harbors feelings more genuine than you know."

Victoria shook her head ruefully. "I dare not presume to think so. In any case, it matters not. Any attachment between us is impossible while under Lord Oliver's thumb."

Madeline embraced her cousin reassuringly. "We will find a way through this, Cousin, have faith. No blackguard can triumph over true affection."

Victoria clung to her words like a lifeline, praying they could somehow prove true. For now, the day's revelations had exhausted her. She fell asleep wondering about her fate in the next day's party events.

\* \* \*

Sunlight streamed in through the opened curtains, rousing Victoria from slumber. She blinked awake slowly, momentarily disoriented in the large canopied bed. Then the events of the prior day came flooding back—the uncomfortable dinner, Oliver's menacing words in the hedge maze, her charged encounter with Simon in the moonlit garden...

“Good morning, Cousin!” Madeline’s cheerful voice broke through her reverie. “Did you rest well?”

Victoria sat up, rubbing the last vestiges of sleep from her eyes. “Well enough, I suppose.” She smiled weakly at her cousin’s ever-sunny disposition.

Madeline perched on the edge of the bed. “Did His Grace come to speak with you privately at night?” She leaned forward eagerly.

“We did not converse again last night, no.” Victoria felt her cheeks flush, recalling how tempting it had been to steal more clandestine moments with him.

“What a pity.” Madeline sighed dramatically. “There is an attachment between the two of you. I am certain of it!”

Victoria busied herself folding back the bedcovers. “I appreciate your faith in me, dear cousin, but I caution you not to get carried away with romantic notions. My... association with His Grace is complicated.”

A knock on the door forestalled further discussion. A maid entered, carrying a heavy silver tray laden with fragrant breakfast foods—flaky croissants oozing with jam, towers of buttery toast, plump sausages sizzling on a platter. The aroma was heavenly.

“Compliments of the cook this morning, Lady Victoria, Miss Russell.” The maid deposited the feast on a table and curtsied before swiftly departing.

Madeline needed no further prompting to dig in heartily. Between mouthfuls, she exclaimed, “Delicious! Cook has truly outdone herself. Please eat, Cousin, or I shall devour everything myself!”

Despite her unsettled mood, Victoria had to laugh. She prepared a cup of tea and nibbled at a slice of toast, acknowledging Madeline's wisdom in keeping up her strength for the day ahead. There was no telling what new trials it might bring.

As Victoria sipped her tea, gazing pensively into the hearth's dying embers, her cousin broke the silence once more. "I do wish you would confide in me about what is weighing so heavily on your mind. Does it relate to why Aurora is away in the countryside?"

Victoria nearly choked on her tea. She should have known that Madeline would detect that something was amiss. Setting down her cup firmly she replied, "It is about Aurora and the forced engagement with Lord Oliver."

Madeline looked distressed. "Forgive me, Cousin, I do not mean to press you. Only, I can see you are carrying a heavy load, and I desire nothing more than to help lighten it if you would but allow me to."

Victoria softened, clasping Madeline's hand gratefully. "You are a true and steadfast friend. For now, take solace that I am unharmed. Someday, God willing, all will be made clear."

"I understand." Madeline squeezed Victoria's hand. "I only pray that you are not made to suffer unduly for the sake of secrets that are not your own."

Victoria smiled sadly. "As do I. But come now! Let us ready ourselves to face this day with spirit. Ring for the maid, so she can assist us."

In lighter spirits, the two ladies donned day dresses and had their hair arranged fashionably for the day's activities. Victoria chose a flattering cream muslin gown printed with tiny violet flowers. Surveying her reflection, she hoped she appeared far more cheerful than she felt.

As Victoria and Madeline descended the grand staircase, sounds of chatter and clinking silverware drifted from the open doors of the breakfast room. They found the rest of the house party guests already assembled.

The Earl sat at one end of the long table, a half-eaten plate of kidneys and toast before him as he nodded along to some inane comment that the gentleman beside him made. At the opposite end, the Dowager Duchess picked sullenly at a bowl of porridge, her wrinkled face screwed up in displeasure.

Oliver looked to be in a foul temper, glowering at a mug of black coffee. When Victoria took her seat, he glared in her direction, but she purposefully avoided meeting his stormy gaze. She could feel the animosity radiating off him in waves.

In contrast, Simon was the picture of tranquil nobility, neatly working through a platter of poached eggs and roasted tomatoes. He paused upon the ladies' entrance and stood up politely, inclining his head in greeting.

“Good morning, Lady Victoria, Miss Russell. I trust you both slept well?” His tone was courteous, if reserved. But Victoria detected a glimmer of warmth in those dark eyes as they lingered on her face.

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“Very well, thank you, Your Grace,” Madeline replied brightly, oblivious to any subtle undercurrents.

“And you, Lady Victoria?” Simon prompted. “Are you well rested after yesterday’s busy events?”

Victoria lowered her gaze demurely. “Quite well, Your Grace. I look forward to today’s activities.”

His eyes searched her face for a moment longer before he gave a brisk nod and resumed his seat. Victoria let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Being near Simon always left her unsettled in the most beguiling way.

She had just begun delicately spreading marmalade on a slice of toast when Oliver’s mocking voice addressed her. “Why, Lady Victoria, you are very quiet this morning. Cat got your tongue?”

She glanced up to see him flashing a venomous smile. “Forgive me, I am still adjusting to country hours. I find I am at my best later in the day.” She kept her tone light, denying him the reaction he sought.

Oliver’s expression soured. He opened his mouth, no doubt to say something cutting when Simon intervened.

“What matters the hour? We have a full day of activities planned.” Addressing the table, he continued, “First, I thought we might enjoy a vigorous horseback ride around the estate. Does that suit everyone?”



A general murmur of assent rose. Victoria nodded along, avoiding further interaction with Oliver.

Soon the guests were bustling about to ready themselves for the impending ride. Victoria found herself intercepted by Oliver as she moved to follow Madeline out of the breakfast room. Gripping her elbow tightly, he steered her to an alcove just outside the door.

“Just what game do you think you are playing?” he demanded in an angry hiss.

Victoria wrenched her arm free. “I know not what you mean.”

Oliver’s eyes blazed. “Do not toy with me, Lady Victoria. You are to be my betrothed, not make eyes at my brother where anyone can see.”

Victoria drew herself up defiantly. “Your wretched scheme will not compel me to act in any particular manner. Now, let me pass.”

For a moment, she thought Oliver might strike her. But then the sound of approaching voices made him step back, jaw clenched. “We shall speak later,” he bit out as she swept past him dignifiedly.

Her legs were trembling, but she held her head high as she joined Madeline outside. She refused to let Oliver’s threats cow her so easily. She was no timid maid to be bullied into submission.

Soon they were all on their mounts and following Simon across the verdant, sun-dappled landscape. Victoria guided her mare deftly through clusters of wildflowers and gnarled oaks. The exercise helped settle her spirits and clear her head.

Madeline looked about wide-eyed at the natural splendor surrounding them. “Oh,

how perfectly picturesque! I vow England's beauty takes my breath away."

Victoria smiled indulgently at her cousin's enthusiasm. Madeline's innocent joy was a refreshing tonic from her troubles.

They slowed to a leisurely walk as they crested a hilltop overlooking the valley. Simon guided his stallion next to Victoria and asked quietly, "Is everything all right, Lady Victoria? You seemed distressed when I glimpsed you earlier with my brother."

Though his eyes remained forward, his tone was laced with concern.

Victoria gazed out at the sweeping vista before them. "Merely a trivial disagreement, Your Grace, nothing to worry about."

He seemed unconvinced but only said, "If my brother ever bothers you unduly, I trust you will inform me."

"That is kind of you to offer, but unnecessary. I can manage Lord Oliver."

Even as the bold words left her lips, Victoria wondered at their veracity. Still, she could not burden Simon with the ugly truth. This tangled web was of her own weaving.

The morning's exhilarating horseback ride eventually gave way to a more leisurely pace as the estate grounds opened up into a sprawling meadow. Bright wildflowers swayed gently in the breeze coming off the shimmering lake situated at the far end.

Madeline reined her mare alongside Victoria's and exclaimed, "Oh, what a perfectly picturesque spot for a picnic! Might we stop there by the lakeshore?"

Victoria smiled at her cousin's enthusiasm. "I don't see why not. It looks most

inviting.” She glanced over at Simon for confirmation.

He surveyed the area and gave a nod. “Yes, this spot should suit our needs nicely. We shall take a repast here before continuing our ride later.”

Soon their small party was dismounted and reclining on blankets spread out under the dappled shade of a towering oak. Livery-clad servants unpacked wicker baskets, laying out a mouthwatering assortment of cold roasts, vegetable pancakes, fresh fruits, and decadent little cakes. Madeline gasped in delight.

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As they feasted alfresco, Victoria felt some of the morning's tension leave her body. It was hard to dwell on troubles, with such idyllic scenery surrounding her. She chatted lightly with Madeline about inconsequential things, enjoying her cousin's animated responses.

On Madeline's other side, Oliver lounged against the tree trunk, moodily picking at a chicken leg and swigging wine directly from the bottle. He seemed determined to avoid socializing with them.

Across from them, Simon reclined on one elbow, observing more than participating. Though his expression was inscrutable, Victoria sensed his gaze linger on her frequently. Each time his dark eyes flicked her way, it sent a subtle thrill through her veins.

When the last crumb had been devoured, Simon rose decisively. "As there is still ample daylight left, shall we play a game of croquet before continuing our ride?"

The suggestion was met with general enthusiasm.

Victoria was no expert at croquet, but Madeline looked delighted. "Oh, yes, please! I should enjoy that above all things."

Soon mallets and hoops were fetched from the manor and positioned on the flat, well-trimmed lawn near the lake's edge. Victoria found herself paired against Simon, while Madeline and Oliver reluctantly teamed together.

As the game commenced under the warming midday sun, Victoria quickly forgot any

restraint. Something about matching wits and skill against the Duke brought out her competitive side.

They traded good-natured barbs back and forth as the colored balls ricocheted through hoops. Victoria took particular pleasure in thwarting Simon's carefully aimed shots, sending his ball bouncing far afield with a few well-placed strikes of her mallet.

"Come now, Your Grace," she teased after spoiling one of his attempts. "Surely croquet cannot be so difficult for a man of your abilities?"

Simon's eyes glinted dangerously, though his lips quirked upward. "Careful, Lady Victoria, or I shall be forced to demonstrate my full talents."

"Please do, I should welcome the challenge." She flashed him a bold smile even as her heart beat faster.

Their heated exchange was not lost on Oliver, whose mood blackened visibly with each playful taunt. When Victoria managed to hit Simon's ball into a tricky out-of-bounds spot, Oliver slammed his mallet down.

"Enough! This pointless game wearies me." His eyes flashed with fury.

Victoria stepped back warily. Even Madeline looked askance at her partner's sudden temper.

"Come, Brother," Simon soothed. "One more round only. Though I vow revenge for Lady Victoria's last clever play." He winked at Victoria, defusing the tension.

With poor grace, Oliver snatched up his mallet and stalked to the starting point. As Simon bent to line up his shot, Oliver drew his arm back and then swung with

excessive force. His mallet struck Simon's ball, sending it rocketing forward wildly. Victoria gasped as it flew straight into the lake with a tremendous splash.

For a stunned moment, no one spoke or moved. Then Simon straightened slowly and pinned his brother with a murderous glare. "How dare you, Oliver," he bit out in a lethally soft voice. "Was that your idea of sportsmanship?"

Oliver shrugged carelessly, though his eyes still flashed with fury. "Merely an errant stroke. Do lighten up, Brother."

Victoria realized her hands were clenched into tight fists. She forced herself to relax and plastered a smile on her face. "Do not trouble yourself, Your Grace. It was merely an accident, I am sure." She dared not provoke Oliver further by accusing him openly. "Please, let us simply enjoy this fine weather and scenery." With effort, she kept her tone airy and face pleasantly composed.

After a taut moment, Simon's posture loosened slightly. "Yes... you are quite right, Lady Victoria. It is only a trivial game." He turned his back to Oliver and moved to the lakeshore. "I shall retrieve the ball, and then I believe we have all had sufficient exercise for one afternoon."

Seeing his moment, Oliver stepped up behind Simon and forcefully shoved him between the shoulder blades. Victoria cried out in shock as Simon completely lost his balance and toppled forward into the lake with a tremendous splash.

Victoria stood frozen, her heart in her throat as Simon struggled to regain his footing knee-deep in the murky lake. His soaked clothing clung to every inch of his muscular frame, the fabric rendered nearly transparent.

Further response was forestalled as Simon strode back up the bank. Victoria's ire turned into something far warmer as she took in his disheveled state. His wet shirt

clung appealingly to the muscular planes of his chest and broad shoulders. Rivulets of water ran down his handsome, stubbled face.

Something about seeing the normally reserved Duke in such rugged disarray sent Victoria's senses reeling. When his eyes lifted to meet hers again, he slowly dragged his tongue across his bottom lip. Heat flooded Victoria's body in a dizzying rush.

With effort, she wrenched her gaze away from his mesmerizing form. What power did this man hold over her, to rattle her so easily? She trembled, but not from any chill.

Victoria released a pent-up breath as he walked out, the worst of the tension defused. Her relief was short-lived, however.

Oliver gripped her elbow and yanked her several paces away from Madeline, his breath hot against her ear. "Think you are so clever, don't you? Wrapping my brother around your finger as you smile and swoon." His grip tightened cruelly. "Need I remind you that you are bound to me in this charade? Play your part convincingly, or else you shall sorely regret it."

Victoria twisted out of his grasp, her cheeks burning with anger and humiliation. "Do not take that tone with me," she hissed. "I am no wilting flower to be pulled about against my will."

Oliver's lip curled derisively. "Aren't you, though? Seems you've forgotten just who holds the reins in our little arrangement." His smirk made her blood boil with impotent fury.

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Around them, the others were preparing to resume their ride. Victoria kept her eyes downcast and voice muted as they mounted their horses. But inwardly, her thoughts roiled. She both longed for and dreaded further time alone with Simon. This dangerous attraction between them could lead nowhere good under Oliver's looming threat.

The ride back to Hayward Manor was subdued after the tense encounter at the lake. Victoria kept her eyes downcast, avoiding any interaction with Simon or Oliver. Madeline prattled on inconsequentially, trying to fill the heavy silence.

Once back at the stables, the ladies gladly headed upstairs to freshen up while the gentlemen saw to their mounts. Safely ensconced in her room, Victoria sighed with relief and rang for warm water to wash away the day's dust and grime.

Madeline sank onto Victoria's bed, looking troubled. "Cousin, are you all right after what happened out there between you, His Grace, and Lord Oliver? I confess, I am quite confounded."

Victoria busied herself with pinning up loose strands of hair. "As am I, dear. Let us speak no more of it for now."

By unspoken agreement, they avoided any further discussion of the confusing undercurrents swirling around the brothers. Victoria was relieved when a maid arrived to help dress them for dinner. Focusing on mundane tasks helped settle her unsteady nerves.

But inner turmoil arose anew when they went down to the drawing room before



dinner and found Simon already present. He stood up gracefully to greet them, back to his usual pristine attire after changing from his disheveled lake ensemble.

“Good evening, Lady Victoria, Miss Russell. You both look lovely.” His deep voice sent a shiver through Victoria.

She curtsied politely, praying her face did not betray her attraction toward him.

Throughout the elegant dinner service, Victoria responded to Simon’s questions with cautious civility that belied her inner turmoil. His heated gaze made her all too aware of his strong, sinewy body hidden beneath a proper gentleman’s garb.

Mercifully, the ladies were able to retire early while the gentlemen lingered over port. Victoria released a shaky breath once safely ensconced in the drawing room with Madeline and the other women.

“Shall we play a game of whist?” Madeline suggested brightly.

Happy for any diversion, Victoria readily agreed.

They were a few hands in when the gentlemen joined them. Victoria tensed, seeing Simon make a beeline for their table. He pulled out the empty chair beside her and murmured, “Do you mind if I join?”

Without waiting for a response, he sat down and picked up the cards she had dealt him.

As the game progressed, Victoria began to relax slightly. Simon showed no untoward behavior that would raise suspicion. His hands moved gracefully as he played each strategic card. She found it hard not to stare at those long, deft fingers.

When he captured a trick, Simon casually brushed his knuckles against the back of her hand, lingering a second too long. Victoria jerked reflexively at the contact, cards falling from her grasp.

“Do forgive me, Lady Victoria. How clumsy of me.” Simon’s apology was smooth, but his eyes danced wickedly.

Victoria felt herself flush as she scrambled to gather the fallen cards.

Over Madeline’s head, Simon shot Victoria a roguish wink before playing his next card. She gripped the table tightly, struggling to maintain her composure. This insufferable man took entirely too much pleasure in unsettling her!

When she could endure no more, Victoria set down her cards and rose abruptly. “Please do excuse me a moment. I find myself in need of some air.”

Without meeting anyone’s eye, she hastened out of the room.

Outside on the terrace, she sucked in deep lungfuls of the cool night air. How long could she endure Simon’s teasing touches and smoldering looks before losing her precarious grasp on propriety?

Footsteps sounded behind her. She didn’t need to turn to know it was him. Simon came up beside her, leaning casually on the balustrade.

“Was the drawing room overly warm? You left rather suddenly.”

Victoria kept her face averted. “Merely needed a breath of fresh air. I shall return presently.”

“Hmm.” Simon edged closer. “Surely not on my account? I thought we were

enjoying a... stimulating game.”

Victoria straightened, finally looking at him. “You presume too much, Your Grace.”

Simon clasped her hand lightly. “Come now, Victoria. Do you not feel the attraction between us? This connection is too powerful to deny.” His thumb stroked her knuckles, sending tingles up her arm.

Victoria jerked her hand back. “You—you should not address me with such familiarity.”

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But even as she chastised him, she swayed closer, as if pulled by some invisible cord.

Simon's eyes darkened. Gently, he tucked back a loose curl, letting his fingers graze her cheek. "I think you will find, my dear Victoria, that I can take whatever liberties I please."

Victoria trembled at his husky tone but refused to back down. She stepped right up to him, her eyes blazing defiantly. "I belong to no man. Not you, nor your wretched brother."

Before she could react, Simon grabbed her waist and pulled her flush against him. "No? Then prove it," he challenged. "Show me you feel nothing."

Victoria's breath came fast and furious. How dare this arrogant man command her so! Indignant fury rose, poisoning all sensible thought.

Throwing caution aside, she grabbed Simon's cravat and pressed her lips to his. He was momentarily startled by her ferocity but soon responded in kind, his mouth moving urgently over hers.

When they finally parted for air, Victoria gave him a heated look. "There! Do you see? I can resist you perfectly well."

But even as she spoke the words, her fingers still clung tightly to his lapels.

Simon's eyes blazed with cobalt fire. "Is that so, my little hellcat?" In one swift move, he swept her into his arms, his strong embrace imprisoning her. "I rather think

it is you who cannot resist me.”

His head descended again, his hot mouth capturing hers once more. Victoria’s indignant protests died on her lips as he kissed her deeply and thoroughly. The taste and feel of him was intoxicating, scattering all thought.

Helplessly, she arched into him, fervently returning each burning kiss. Simon’s strong hands roamed down her back, pressing her ever closer. It was unlike any embrace she had experienced before.

When at last they parted, both were breathing raggedly. Victoria’s mind raced. She had never lost control so completely or taken such liberty with a gentleman.

Simon gazed down at her swollen lips and disheveled hair with undisguised male satisfaction. “What was that you were saying about resisting me, sweet?”

The endearment sent a new jolt of sensation through her.

Victoria pushed weakly at his chest. “I—this was... I did not...” she stammered.

At that moment, a voice called out from within. “Lady Victoria? Are you out there?”

Victoria’s eyes widened in panic. She tore herself from Simon’s embrace and frantically tried to tidy her appearance.

Simon stepped casually away just as Madeline appeared on the terrace. “There you are, Cousin! Are you quite all right?”

“Yes, fine!” Victoria winced at the unnaturally high pitch of her voice. She risked a glance at Simon, who appeared nonchalant.

“Forgive me, Miss Russell, I was just taking the air with Lady Victoria.” His smooth tone gave no hint of their passionate tryst.

Madeline smiled innocently. “Of course, Your Grace. I hope you are not catching a chill out here, Cousin?”

“No, let us go in. I have... regained my composure.” Victoria longed to escape further scrutiny.

As she allowed Madeline to lead her inside, she risked one last look over her shoulder. Simon watched her go with a smoldering gaze that promised this was far from over.

## CHAPTER 10

The third day of the lavish house party at Hayward Manor dawned clear and mild. Victoria awoke feeling refreshed, the past night’s turbulent passions settling into perspective with the new day’s light.

She rang for the maid to help her dress in a pretty day dress made of sunny yellow muslin, hoping the cheerful hue would lift her spirits. Madeline was already awake and chattering enthusiastically about the day’s diversions.

“I do so look forward to what His Grace has planned! Reading aloud and charades shall make for a delightful day.”

Victoria smiled indulgently as her cousin prattled on, thankful for her buoyant nature. It helped counterbalance Victoria’s disquiet. She tried to focus on the day ahead rather than replaying every detail of last night’s steamy encounter with Simon.

Soon they were descending the grand staircase, greeted by the scents of a sumptuous

breakfast wafting from the dining room. Fresh floral arrangements adorned the table, which was laden with platters of sizzling meats, towers of fluffy pastries, tureens of creamy porridge, and pots of fragrant coffee and tea.

Madeline immediately helped herself to sausages and rolls with jam. “I vow Cook’s fare is beyond compare! I shall have to be rolled out of here by the week’s end.”

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Victoria sipped her tea, her appetite not nearly so robust. But she managed some toast and fruit, knowing she would need strength for the coming day.

As more guests filtered in, lively conversations and discussions about the news and gossip of the day arose. Victoria was content to let the chatter flow around her. She noticed Simon enter, looking vital and handsome as ever in a dark green riding coat. Her wayward gaze lingered a moment too long, forcing her to drop her eyes as he took his place at the head of the table.

Eventually, the extravagant breakfast wound to a close, and Simon stood up to address the guests. "I hope you have all enjoyed the hospitality of Hayward thus far. I thought today we would spend the morning indoors, enjoying reading and playing games. Please adjourn to the drawing room at your leisure."

Chairs and sofas were arranged in a circle around the large, well-lit room. Simon led Victoria toward a settee, then seated himself in an armchair nearby. Madeline happily sat on Victoria's other side.

The Dowager Duchess was seated near the cold hearth, a snoozing greyhound at her slippered feet providing her only company. "Come now, boy, read us something diverting," she called imperiously, waving her hand. "I wish to be entertained."

Simon raised an eyebrow but complied, selecting a volume of poetry from a side table. He had a pleasing voice, rich and mellifluous, ideal for oral recitation. Despite herself, Victoria found her turbulent thoughts quietening as she listened to him read verse after verse.



After nearly an hour, Simon paused to take a drink of water. “I think that is enough poetry for one morning,” he pronounced, snapping the book shut decisively. “Let us play some charades to liven up the atmosphere.”

This suggestion was met with great enthusiasm. The guests rearranged themselves into teams. Madeline clasped Victoria’s hands beseechingly until Victoria laughed and agreed to be her partner. Simon’s eyes glinted with amusement, but he did not object, moving to pair with an older gentleman instead.

As the game commenced, Victoria found herself caught up in the lighthearted spirit.

Madeline clasped her hands eagerly. “Let us begin the charades! Who shall go first?”

“Allow me.” Simon stepped forward and held up two fingers.

“Two words!” called out a gentleman.

Simon nodded and proceeded to mime reading a book.

“Book, read, novel!” other voices rang out.

Simon shook his head and pretended to stir something.

“Cooking, baking, mixing!”

When no one guessed correctly, Simon combined the actions.

“Reading cookbook!” Madeline cried. “Well done!”

There was applause as Simon bowed and rejoined the group. He seemed more at ease, his eyes glinting with humor as he watched each performance.

When Madeline's turn came, Victoria whispered, "You can do this!" as her cousin took center stage.

Madeline acted out sewing.

"Knitting, embroidery, stitching!" Victoria shouted excitedly, then "Seamstress!" when Madeline mimed measuring cloth.

Madeline curtsied as everyone clapped. "Your turn, Your Grace!" she said.

Simon pantomimed drinking exaggeratedly.

"Ale, liquor, drunk!" everyone called out.

When he added weaving unsteadily, Victoria laughed. "Drunken sailor!"

Simon pointed at her, grinning roguishly.

Victoria blushed as others applauded.

Meanwhile, Oliver lingered alone in the corner, paying no heed to the game. He sipped broodingly on his wine glass, refilling it frequently from a nearby decanter. His stormy gaze remained fixed on Simon and Victoria's lively interaction.

After an enthusiastic round of charades, the party broke to refresh themselves before lunch.

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Simon caught Victoria's eye as she moved to exit. "Might I have a quick word, Lady Victoria?" He gestured discreetly to a secluded alcove.

Victoria hesitated, nerves skittering, but allowed him to draw her into the privacy of the window nook. She waited mutely, no idea what to expect after the kiss they had recently shared.

But Simon simply searched her face with an inscrutable look. "You seem... more at ease today," he observed quietly. "I am glad to see it."

Before she could respond, he bowed gracefully over her hand and turned away.

Victoria stared after him, skin tingling from his light kiss. That was all? She had steeled herself against teasing remarks or untoward suggestions. But the Duke continued surprising her at every turn. Shaking her head, she went to join Madeline upstairs.

Following a cold luncheon, most of the guests desired a rest in their chambers. Victoria decided to take advantage of the deserted halls to write a letter to her dear sister, hoping news from home might lift Aurora's spirits. Madeline settled on the settee with a book, content to rest indoors.

Seated at the writing desk in the corner, Victoria poured her heart out onto the parchment. She wrote of missing Aurora terribly, of longing for her soothing company and wise counsel during these trying days. She wished desperately she could unburden herself fully without fear of consequences. But she would never betray a confidence, even in a letter that was sure to be read by their father before

reaching Aurora's hands.

A timid knock interrupted her fervent scribbling. Expecting a maid, Victoria called, "Come in."

When the door creaked open, she looked up in surprise to see Madeline hovering anxiously.

"Do not be cross, Cousin, but I simply had to come speak with you." She closed the door behind her. "I have held my tongue as long as I can, but the tension in this house is stifling! Secrets that I feel I have the right to know are being kept."

Victoria sighed, laying down her pen. She patted the ottoman near her feet. When Madeline was seated, she asked gently, "What is troubling you, dear?"

Madeline clasped her hands tightly in her lap. "It is clear you and His Grace share some history, some entanglement beyond your engagement to his horrid brother Lord Oliver." She hesitated, then blurted out, "Victoria, are you in love with His Grace?"

Victoria reeled back, heartbeat thudding. "Goodness, whatever makes you say that?"

Madeline fixed her with an earnest look. "I see the way you look at one another, how he singled you out last night. Please, Cousin, if you have developed an attachment, you must tell me!"

Victoria stood up abruptly, moving to stare sightlessly out the window. How had intuitive Madeline read them so clearly? She wrung her hands, pulse racing. What could she say?

Madeline came up behind her and grasped her arm beseechingly. "I only wish to help. This web of secrecy cannot end well. If you have fallen in love with His Grace, we

shall find a way!”

Victoria turned, eyes pooling with tears. “You have a generous heart, dear Madeline. I wish the world was kinder, that love alone could conquer all.” She caressed her cousin’s cheek. “For now, have faith that I will find my way through this maze, wherever the path may lead.”

Madeline still looked troubled but nodded slowly. “I do have faith in you, Victoria, more than anyone. I only hope you also have faith in your own heart.”

She squeezed Victoria’s hands and then took her leave.

Alone again, Victoria crumpled onto the settee, equal parts warmed and weighed down by Madeline’s devotion. But her wise cousin was right—secrets had a way of coming to light, one way or another. And Victoria could not deny her growing attachment to Simon. Whatever would come next, she must have the courage to follow her heart, though it might lead to ruin. With that daunting resolution, she picked her pen back up and continued her letter.

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, Victoria, Simon, and the other guests ventured into the nearby village as part of the day’s house party activities. The quaint shops and cottages with their thatched roofs made for a pleasant change of scenery.

They strolled down the dusty village road, having wandered away from the rest of their party. Victoria watched a flock of geese waddle across the path ahead, their feathers fluttering in the gentle breeze.

“Admit it, Your Grace, we are quite lost,” she teased, shooting him an arch look. “I don’t believe you know where we are going at all.”

Simon scoffed, his boots kicking up dirt as they walked. “Nonsense. I know this village like the back of my hand.”

“Oh? Then where is the village square?”

He gestured vaguely. “Just up ahead.”

“And the smithy?” Victoria persisted, lips twitching.

“To the left, naturally.”

“Truly? Because I do believe it is to the right.”

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Simon pressed his mouth in a thin line, scanning the surroundings. “Very well, perhaps I am not as familiar with it as I thought. But we shall soon find our way.”

Victoria laughed lightly. “There is no shame in being lost, Your Grace. I daresay it makes things a touch more interesting.”

Their banter continued as they strolled beneath the shade of sturdy oaks and elms bordering the road. In the distance, Victoria spotted a familiar figure—none other than Oliver.

But as she moved to wave, Simon grasped her elbow and pulled her into a narrow alley between two stone cottages. Stumbling into the shadows, Victoria found herself chest-to-chest with Simon, his tall form crowding her against the wall.

“Your Grace, what...”

She inhaled sharply as Simon braced one hand beside her head, peering out around the side of the cottage. His hard body was pressed against hers, surrounding her with his warmth.

“My apologies,” he murmured, gaze scanning the lane. “I would prefer Oliver not to know I am here just now.”

Victoria wetted her dry lips nervously. “I see.”

She was exquisitely aware of every place their bodies connected, Simon’s muscular chest flush against her heaving bosom. His clean, masculine scent enveloped her,

making her pulse skitter.

Simon's attention returned to Victoria, dark eyes trailing over her features. "Forgive me," he repeated, voice low. But he made no move to step back, their forms still pressed together.

Victoria's breaths grew erratic as Simon slowly inclined his head. Her eyes fluttered shut in anticipation as his nose skimmed along the line of her jaw, lips ghosting feather-light on her skin.

When his mouth found the tender spot beneath her ear, Victoria let out a tremulous sigh. Sparks ignited within her core as Simon trailed searing kisses down the column of her throat, nipping lightly. His hands spanned her cinched waist, thumbs grazing just below the curve of her breasts.

He slid his hands under her bodice, caressing her firm, full breasts gently.

Clutching his broad shoulders, Victoria surrendered to the intoxicating sensations sweeping through her body. She knew this reckless passion invited scandal, but coherent thought escaped her as Simon's talented mouth left her gasping, pinned delightfully against the cottage wall.

It didn't take long before his hand found its way under her skirt while he kissed down her neck.

"Please, Your Grace," Victoria begged when she felt his fingers lightly brush her core.

Simon chuckled. "You're so wet, Lady Victoria."

She wondered why he had made her feel so much. Her core was throbbing for more.



“Please, Your Grace, please don’t stop,” she moaned when she felt his fingers slide inside her, gently and sensually.

“Oh my. You’re so tight,” Simon groaned.

“I’m going to... I’m.... aah, sooo good,” Victoria moaned as Simon kept fingering her under her skirt, bringing her close to the edge.

The sound of approaching voices had them springing apart, chests heaving.

Simon stepped back, running a hand through his rumpled hair. “Come, let us go.”

He moved out of the shadows of the alley. Victoria exhaled slowly, willing her nerves to settle. She shook out her skirts and followed him back onto the road, wondering at the strange effect his sudden closeness had on her.

They continued in silence for a stretch, Victoria stealing occasional glances at his stern profile. What thoughts lurked behind that inscrutable facade? She longed to know, even as she scolded herself for such fanciful notions.

“Do you know, I believe I spot the smithy just ahead, Your Grace,” she remarked lightly, hoping to break the tension. “It seems you were right about its direction, after all.”

Simon’s expression warmed a fraction. “It appears so.” He offered her a rare smile. “Well done, My Lady.”

Warmth bloomed in Victoria’s chest at those simple words of praise. Together, they walked on through the village, the awkward moment behind them. But she knew she would not soon forget the feeling of his strong arms around her, however fleeting.

The afternoon sun filtered through the trees lining the road back to Hayward Manor, casting dappled shadows on the touring party. Victoria rode beside her cousin Madeline, who kept stealing curious glances her way.

“You seem to be in fine spirits this afternoon,” Madeline remarked. “The fresh country air must agree with you.”

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A blush bloomed on Victoria's cheeks, and she dropped her gaze. "Indeed, the outdoors provide a welcome respite from the crowded city."

Madeline smiled knowingly. She had noticed Victoria and the Duke disappear together in the village earlier. But she merely said, "You must tell me all about your adventures in the village later. I want to hear what sights you took in."

Victoria quickly changed the subject, not wishing to divulge too much, with others within earshot. As the manor came into view, she found herself searching for Simon amongst the gentlemen riding ahead. Her heart rate quickened when she spotted his tall, broad-shouldered form atop a gleaming chestnut stallion.

As if sensing her attention, Simon turned and caught her eye, his piercing gaze making her breath hitch. The ghost of a smile touched his lips before he faced forward again. Victoria's mind drifted back to the heated encounter they had, hidden away in the shadowed alley...

"Victoria?" Madeline's voice broke through her reverie. "Shall we freshen up before tea?"

"Yes, of course." Victoria blinked, forcing her thoughts back to the present.

Soon the ladies had changed out of their riding habits and rejoined the gentlemen in the drawing room for tea. Victoria kept her gaze fixed firmly on the fine china cup she stirred honey into her tea, feeling Simon's presence across the room acutely. The murmur of polite conversation flowed around her, but all she could focus on was steadying her erratic breathing.

“Is everything okay, Victoria?” Madeline asked under her breath. “You seem out of sorts.”

“I’m fine,” Victoria whispered back hurriedly. “Just feeling a bit worn out from the day’s excursions.”

Mercifully, the cups were soon emptied, and Victoria escaped to her chamber to rest before dinner, avoiding Simon’s penetrating gaze. Later, dressed in an elegant emerald gown, with her dark brown hair arranged fashionably atop her head, she descended the stairs on leaden legs.

Madeline caught her arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Chin up. No one would guess what transpired from your lovely countenance.”

Victoria mustered a grateful smile, thankful for her cousin’s tranquility and discretion. She just prayed her own conflicted emotions were not written across her face for all to see.

At dinner, Victoria was seated far from Simon, for which she was grateful. Yet, her eyes continued drifting to him of their own volition, tracing the neat line of his cravat, the outline of his shoulders in his well-cut jacket. His inscrutable mask revealed nothing of the passion she had glimpsed mere hours ago.

Victoria picked at her quail, trying to focus on the conversation flowing around her.

“Did you hear, the latest French fashions are simply scandalous!” Lady Caroline exclaimed to the group. “Hems rising, necklines plunging...”

“Certainly not appropriate for polite company.” Lady Margaret tutted in disapproval.

Victoria nodded absently, but her mind kept drifting back to the alley, reliving

Simon's passionate embrace.

The clatter of cutlery made her jump. She hastily gulped wine to steady her nerves, barely suppressing a most unladylike cough.

Madeline leaned over with a knowing look. "Dear cousin, you seem distracted."

"Yes, of course," Victoria murmured back. "Just eager for the evening to progress."

After the endless courses, the ladies finally withdrew to the parlor. But Victoria found no refuge from her roiling thoughts.

"Your gown is exquisite, Lady Victoria," complimented Lady Caroline. "Is it one of the new Parisian styles?"

"Oh, no, merely an old favorite," Victoria responded automatically, her laugh sounding too shrill.

When the gentlemen joined them, Madeline announced brightly, "Let us play a round of whist!"

Victoria hesitated, but Madeline's subtle nod bolstered her. Taking a seat across from Simon, Victoria tried to ignore the butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

Madeline kept up a steady stream of chatter, for which Victoria was endlessly grateful. With her cousin's calming presence, the night passed smoothly, Victoria's inner turmoil remaining hidden away.

At long last, the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing room, and Simon's enthusiastic suggestion of a hand of whist was met with eager acceptance. Victoria hesitated, worrying she might reveal her inner turmoil through inept gameplay, but at

Madeline's reassuring nod, she took a seat at the card table across from Simon.

With his face betraying nothing, Simon deftly shuffled and dealt the cards as Madeline kept up a lively stream of banter that helped put Victoria somewhat at ease. She even managed a few genuine smiles as the evening wore on, bolstered by Madeline's calming presence and Simon's courteous distance.

"Come now, Victoria, you mustn't allow your doubts to get the better of you," Madeline said lightly as she noticed her cousin's hesitation. "It's only a friendly game between friends. Just follow my lead, and you'll pick it up in no time."

Reassured by Madeline's breezy confidence, Victoria gathered her courage and focused intently as the game began. Under Madeline's discreet tutelage, she soon found her footing. Simon added an occasional word of guidance when needed, ever the gentleman.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:28 am*

As the night progressed, Victoria realized she was enjoying herself. The humorous tales and amiable conversation around the card table made her feel at ease. With growing excitement, she won a few hands, much to her surprise and delight.

Simon and Madeline were wise enough not to go easy on her. The challenge kept Victoria on her toes and heightened her sense of triumph when she prevailed. Her eyes sparkled, and color bloomed becomingly in her cheeks.

When they finally laid down their cards in the wee hours, Victoria was aglow with accomplishment. "My dear Madeline, you were so right to urge me to play tonight," she exclaimed. "I haven't had such fun in ages!"

Madeline squeezed her friend's hand affectionately. "I'm glad to see you coming out of your shell, Victoria. We shall have to make card games a regular pastime!"

As the ladies retired for the evening, Simon bowed over Victoria's hand. "It was a pleasure playing with you this evening, Lady Victoria. I look forward to many more opportunities in the future."

Victoria blushed at the warmth in his tone.

She bid the remaining guests goodnight with gratitude. The day's emotional toll had thoroughly exhausted her. Arm in arm with Madeline, she climbed up the stairs, looking forward to the sanctuary of her bedchamber.

Once tucked beneath the covers, Madeleine turned to Victoria with a mischievous grin. "Now, you simply must tell me what happened today. I've been on

tenterhooks!”

Despite her fatigue, Victoria could not suppress an excited smile as she recounted in hushed tones her encounter with Simon in the village. Madeline listened, rapt, letting out delighted gasps in all the right places.

“... and before I knew it, he was kissing me so passionately that I thought my legs would give out!” Victoria finished.

“How utterly romantic!” Madeline declared. “His Grace is already quite enamored of you.”

Sobering, Victoria whispered, “Do not say such things. It cannot be so.” At Madeline’s confused look, she hesitated before continuing slowly, “It is only that... the situation is complicated. I do not wish to invite trouble or damaging rumors.”

Madeline nodded sagely, though her eyebrows remained knitted in concern. “I understand. Your secret is safe with me.”

She squeezed Victoria’s hand warmly before blowing out the lone candle, plunging the room in darkness.

In the darkness, Victoria’s worries crept back in to gnaw at the edges of her mind. Had she put Aurora’s safety at risk by allowing herself to get closer to Simon? If Oliver learned of it, would he follow through with his vile threats of exposure?

\* \* \*

The pale light of dawn filtered through the curtains, rousing Victoria from slumber. As she blinked awake, it took a moment for her to get her bearings. The lovely wallpaper and ornate furnishings marked this as one of the luxurious guest chambers



at Hayward Manor.

Today was their last day in residence, for the festivities would draw to a close this evening.

A soft knock sounded at the door connecting her chamber to Madeline's. "Victoria? Are you awake?" her cousin called out gently.

"Yes, come in," Victoria responded, sitting up against the pillows.

Madeline entered, already dressed in a charming day dress of pale blue muslin. "Good morning," she greeted brightly. "Did you sleep well?"

"Tolerably so," said Victoria.

In truth, her rest had been fitful. The secret surrounding her sister's condition gnawed at her. And the false engagement into which she had been forced by wicked Oliver preyed upon her thoughts.

"I confess I shall be sad to leave Hayward Manor today," remarked Madeline, gazing wistfully out the window at the lovely gardens below. "I have so enjoyed the house party thus far. The diversions have been simply delightful."

Victoria smiled indulgently at her cousin's provincial charm. Madeline had grown up quietly in the countryside. These last three days of dinners, dances, horse riding, picnics, card games, and royal treatment had been thrilling for her.

"I am glad you have had such a pleasant time," said Victoria warmly. "I know the whirlwind of the London social Season shall seem strange and overwhelming to you at first. But you shall grow accustomed to it in time. There are many more upcoming festivities for you to enjoy."

Looking back to Victoria, Madeline sighed. “You are right, of course. I should not be ungrateful. Still, I shall cherish the memories from my first ever grand house party always.”

“As will I,” Victoria assured her, though for far different reasons. Rising from the bed, she crossed over to give Madeline’s hand an affectionate squeeze.

A knock sounded at the chamber door, heralding the arrival of the lady’s maid. It was time for Victoria to dress for the day ahead.

The cousins breakfasted together in the smaller south parlor, as many of the guests were still abed after last night’s lively moments. Victoria welcomed the intimate setting. She had no desire to encounter Oliver just yet and have him force her into playing the doting fiancée.

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Over toasted bread with jam and steaming pots of tea and chocolate, Victoria and Madeline chatted lightly about inconsequential matters. They shared amused recollections about some of the more eccentric personalities amongst the party guests.

Too soon, their peaceful interlude was interrupted by the arrival of several other young ladies. The group decided to take advantage of the fine weather and walk about the ornamental gardens. Victoria and Madeline agreed to join them.

As the giggling cluster of ladies filed out onto the grounds, Victoria felt her tension begin to dissipate. Here, surrounded by verdant beauty, her troubles did not seem so pressing.

Madeline's eyes widened in delight at the varied shrubs and flowers they passed. "I have never seen such varieties! Roses, lilacs, peonies and more. However, does the gardener organize them all so they bloom at staggered intervals?"

"It is a carefully orchestrated dance," Victoria told her cousin with a smile. "Different bulbs and seeds are planted at calculated times, so there are always new blooms to behold."

Madeline shook her head in wonderment. "I shall have to take notes on which specimens thrive best in this climate. I would love to enhance our garden at home."

They wandered slowly through the grounds, impressed by the marble statues and cleverly designed fountains. Victoria let the calm trickle over her spirit. For a brief time, she could almost fool herself into believing she was just an ordinary young lady enjoying a garden stroll. Not a vulnerable pawn trapped in a web of secrets and lies.

All too soon, the ladies returned inside to dress for luncheon. Victoria selected an elegant gown of ivory silk. Its slim bodice featured intricate embroidery in a floral motif. She hoped its maidenly style would discourage Oliver from paying her undue attention this afternoon.

Madeline wore a pretty frock of striped green muslin, its short, puffed sleeves and simple silhouette suiting her youthful charm.

“You look lovely,” Victoria assured her cousin warmly before they descended the grand staircase.

In the dining room, Victoria was relieved to be seated at some distance from Oliver. She conversed pleasantly with a baronet on one side and a young scholar on the other. Neither seemed inclined to flirtation, for which she was grateful.

The meal concluded. Some of the guests retired to the music room, others to the library, and still more drifted onto the back terrace to sip liqueurs and admire the gardens. Victoria remained close by Madeline’s side, not wanting to be cornered.

“Would you care for a turn around the gallery?” Victoria suggested.

Perusing the painted Hayward ancestors would be an innocent diversion to while away the afternoon.

“I should like that very much,” Madeline acquiesced with an eager smile.

The cousins wandered slowly through the long gallery, studying the dignified visages gazing out from ornate gilt frames. Victoria could discern traces of Simon in several of his patrician forebears. The cool reserve in their eyes, the firmly set jawlines, the impeccable self-control.

“It is a rather imposing family legacy, is it not?” Victoria murmured. “I confess, I am glad the Reynolds’ blood does not run through my veins.”

Madeline nodded in somber agreement. Privately, Victoria gave thanks that her lineage was rather less august. Her family valued kindness far more than pedigree. If only her father had not fallen prey to insecurity and ambition, wanting so desperately to rise in station, then Aurora would not be in such a terrible predicament now. And Victoria would be free of Oliver’s loathsome hold over her.

Lost in melancholy reflections, Victoria was unprepared for the sound of approaching voices in the corridor outside. To her dismay, she immediately recognized Oliver’s cultured baritone. He was deep in conversation with another gentleman.

Victoria froze, panic rising within her. There was no other exit from the gallery. In mere moments, she would be trapped.

Madeline read her cousin’s sudden tension and glanced at her in surprise. But before Victoria could say a word, the gentlemen entered the gallery.

Oliver halted upon noticing them, an inscrutable look flashing across his handsome features. “Lady Victoria, Miss Russell, what a delightful surprise. I was just showing my esteemed friend Mr. Carter some of our finer paintings.”

Victoria dipped into a dutiful curtsy. “Good afternoon, Lord Oliver.”

As she straightened up, she caught the gleam in his pale eyes that always put her on edge.

Mr. Carter, Simon’s friend and solicitor, greeted them graciously. “We must not interrupt your time together, ladies. Come, Lord Oliver, let us continue and give them privacy.”

Before Victoria could voice a protest, Oliver waved his hand. “Nonsense, let us all enjoy the gallery in company.” He moved to her side, offering his arm. “My dear Lady Victoria, will you walk with me?”

Victoria swallowed hard, seeing no way to refuse without appearing rude. Forcing her lips into a facsimile of a smile, she laid her hand on his sleeve. “Of course.”

They walked slowly down the row of paintings, Victoria concentrating on keeping her face smooth and her voice light. Inside, her nerves were stretched taut at being so near to him. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the solicitor shooting them curious looks.

When they paused before a portrait of some 17th-century Reynolds ancestor, her unwanted companion leaned in closely. “You are very skilled at keeping up appearances, my dear,” he murmured, lips nearly brushing her ear. “No one would ever guess what a sham our supposed affection is.”

Victoria stiffened, resisting the urge to jerk away.

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“This is our final day beneath this roof,” Oliver continued softly. “I shall expect your full cooperation this evening in cementing our fraudulent attachment in everyone’s eyes. Be properly attentive and convincing in your devotion, and all shall go smoothly. Provided you wish your sister’s delicate condition to be kept secret.”

Victoria’s stomach twisted with impotent fury. How she detested this odious man! Yet, she was utterly at his mercy.

Forcing a smile, she turned her face up to his. “You have my word,” she replied, keeping her voice light despite the anger simmering within. “I shall play the besotted fiancée most convincingly tonight.”

Oliver’s eyes glinted, clearly savoring his power over her. “See that you do.”

Turning his attention back to Simon’s solicitor, Oliver launched into a detailed history of the portrait they stood before. Victoria tried to calm her pounding heart as they continued walking. She avoided looking at Madeline, not wanting her cousin to glimpse the distress in her eyes.

At long last, the gentlemen made their farewells and departed. Victoria waited until their footsteps faded before letting out a shaky breath.

“Victoria?” Madeline questioned in concern, moving to her side. “Whatever is the matter? You seem so uneasy.”

Summoning a wan smile, Victoria patted her cousin’s hand. “Oh, do not mind me. Lord Oliver simply has a habit of speaking intensely, and it can be... discomfiting.”

Madeline furrowed her brow. “He is your betrothed, yet he discomfits you?”

Victoria forced a light laugh. “I did not mean it like that. Come, let us find the other ladies. I believe I heard mention of a musical entertainment this afternoon.”

Though still appearing puzzled, Madeline allowed herself to be led out of the gallery. Victoria felt relief sweep through her as they joined a cluster of guests heading for the music room. She was safe for a little while longer.

The strains of the harp and violin soon filled the air, providing a soothing balm for Victoria’s unsettled nerves. She sat straight-backed beside Madeline, letting the beautiful melodies carry her temporarily away from her troubles.

Afterward, Madeline declared herself eager to spend some time sketching in the gardens before it was time to dress for dinner. Victoria readily agreed, welcoming the chance to catch her breath in the peaceful outdoors.

Selecting a stone bench nestled amidst fragrant roses, Madeline set out her sketchpad and pencils. Victoria pretended to admire the view, but inwardly, her thoughts were roiling. The evening loomed before her, and with it the necessity of feigning intimacy with the vile Oliver. How was she to do it? What further torment might he devise to control her?

Lost in her brooding, Victoria failed to notice the approach of Mr. Carter until he gave an awkward, little cough.

“Pardon me, Lady Victoria,” the solicitor began hesitantly. “Might I have a word?”

Victoria smoothed her features to hide her dismay. “Certainly, Mr. Carter.”

The solicitor shuffled his feet on the gravel walkway. “It is only... I could not help



but notice earlier when you and Oliver were strolling together. I must say, you did not seem entirely... comfortable.”

Victoria’s heart sank. This could not bode well. “I do not take your meaning, Mr. Carter,” she replied, striving to keep her tone light.

Mr. Carter flushed red. “Forgive me if I am overstepping. It is only that when two young people are anticipating marriage, one generally expects to see... warmth between them.”

Victoria froze. Did he suspect the truth about her false engagement? She must allay his doubts at once.

Summoning a smile, she waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, think nothing of it, Mr. Carter. Lord Oliver and I simply prefer to save displays of affection for after the wedding. We do not wish to embarrass the more reserved company, you see.”

Mr. Carter’s blush deepened. “Quite right, quite so. I apologize sincerely for making you uncomfortable, Lady Victoria. I can see I was mistaken in my assessment. Please, enjoy this fine day.”

With an awkward bow, he hurried off down the path. Victoria watched him go, fresh tension coiling in her muscles. Drat the man for being so perceptive! She would have to take even greater care this evening. The slightest crack in her facade with Oliver could bring the whole precarious charade crashing down.

Madeline set aside her sketchpad, eyeing Victoria in concern. “What was that about? He seemed distressed.”

“Oh, merely a misunderstanding,” Victoria replied lightly, hoping Madeline would not press for more details. She did not wish to burden her cousin unduly. This was her

cross to bear.

They did not speak further about it.

When Madeline returned to her sketching, Victoria fixed her gaze blindly on the gardens. She must not falter tonight. Too much depended on her playing the part of the blissful bride-to-be, no matter how it made her stomach churn. She only prayed her nerves would hold.

As her maid helped her dress that evening, Victoria had never felt less excited about attending a party. Her sumptuous gown of ruby silk glistened in the candlelight, but its beauty only mocked her inner turmoil. She stared at her pale reflection as her maid arranged her hair in artful curls. How she wished she could flee this place and never set eyes on Oliver again!

But such fantasies were foolish and childish. She had a duty to protect her sister. If portraying an in-love courting couple was what Oliver demanded in exchange for his silence, then so be it. She must be strong.

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Schooling her features into a pleasant mask, Victoria thanked her maid and departed to join Madeline.

Descending the grand staircase on Madeline's arm sometime later, Victoria glided into the dazzling ballroom as though she had not a care. Chandeliers blazed overhead, illuminating the elegant guests beneath twinkling crystals. An orchestra played a lively tune in the corner.

Madeline caught her breath at the splendor. "Oh my. I shall never grow accustomed to such magnificence."

Victoria smiled, thankful to have her artless cousin's company this evening. It would bolster her courage.

No sooner had they reached the ballroom floor than Oliver appeared before them. Impeccable in black evening attire, his cool gaze swept over Victoria in frank assessment.

"My dear Lady Victoria, what a vision you are tonight."

Taking her hand, he lifted it smoothly to his lips before tucking it into the crook of his arm. Victoria suppressed a shudder at his touch.

"You are too kind, Lord Oliver," she managed, hoping the warmth in her voice sounded genuine. She did not dare meet Madeline's eyes.

"Come, let us take a turn about the room together," Oliver suggested, already steering

her away. “The sooner they all see us looking so handsome together, the better.”

Victoria swallowed hard and summoned every ounce of poise she could muster. Tonight’s ordeal was only just beginning. She could not falter now. The eyes of the ton were upon her.

## CHAPTER 11

The musicale had drawn to a close, and the guests began filing into the drawing room for refreshments before dinner. Victoria moved through the elegantly dressed crowd, nodding politely but unable to focus on the chatter around her.

Madeline walked at her side, casting the occasional curious glance her way. “That was a lovely concert, was it not? I was quite carried away by the soprano’s solo.”

“Yes, quite lovely,” Victoria murmured.

In truth, she had barely heard the music. Her thoughts had been consumed by apprehension over what the rest of the evening held. Oliver had been most insistent that she convey utter devotion tonight.

As they entered the drawing room, footmen floated around with trays bearing champagne flutes. Madeline eagerly accepted one. Victoria hesitated before taking a glass. Though unwise before needing all her wits about her, the wine might help steady her nerves.

She took a small sip, dismayed to feel her hand trembling slightly.

Get hold of yourself. One evening of pretense, and then you are free of this place.

Drawing a calming breath, she glanced around the room.

Her heart clenched as she saw Oliver holding court near the fire, his brother at his side. As if sensing her attention, his pale gaze shifted to meet hers. Something like triumph sparked in his eyes before he gave her the barest nod of acknowledgment.

Victoria's stomach twisted. He intended to keep her on edge until the last possible moment. She watched warily as he turned back to his companions, smiling and conversing with ease. How she envied his composure!

"Victoria?" Madeline's gentle voice interrupted her thoughts. "Let us find a seat, shall we?"

Grateful for her cousin's soothing presence, Victoria allowed herself to be led to a silk-upholstered settee. She perched tensely on the edge while Madeline chatted about inconsequential matters, providing a distraction. Victoria offered an occasional murmur, keeping one eye on Oliver across the room. His continued nonchalance unsettled her.

When the gong sounded for dinner sometime later, she rose hastily, desperate to leave the drawing room. At least at the dining table she need not worry about maintaining a facade for her "betrothed."

Madeline had just accepted the arm of a kindly older gentleman when Oliver materialized at Victoria's side.

"Lady Victoria," he intoned courteously, already tucking her hand in the crook his arm.

Victoria attempted a gracious smile. "Good evening, Lord Oliver. Shall we go in?"

"Eager for dinner? I cannot say I blame you." He smirked. "You will need your strength for what comes after."

Victoria stiffened, hating his innuendo. Yet, she could not make a scene.

As they crossed into the dining room, Victoria tried to steady her nerves.

You can do this. Just a few more hours of pretense.

Conversation flowed around her throughout the meal's multiple courses, but Victoria had no appetite. She forced down a few bites, hyper-aware of Simon at the head of the table. A trace of wine helped her through.

When at last the dessert plates were cleared, the ladies rose to withdraw and allow the gentlemen to enjoy their port. Victoria was dismayed when Oliver waylaid her.

Offering his arm once more, he said loud enough for all to hear, "I will escort my beloved to the drawing room."

Victoria managed a simpering smile. "You spoil me, Lord Oliver." She kept her tone bright, despite feeling anything but.

Returning to the drawing room, Victoria braced herself. Surely Oliver would make his move soon. She must be ready.

The usual after-dinner diversions began. A young lady seated herself at the pianoforte while small groups chatted or flipped through books and magazines. Victoria chose a chair slightly apart, wanting to draw as little notice as possible. Madeline, bless her, stayed loyally by her side.

After the pianist finished, Oliver entered with the other gentleman. His sharp gaze zeroed in on Victoria, and he began making his way over to her. Victoria's pulse quickened, her mind racing. What would he demand of her now? She must not falter.

“My dear Lady Victoria, will you favor us with a song?” Oliver inquired as he reached her, his voice loud enough to carry.

Victoria froze. With all eyes turning her way, she could hardly refuse without appearing rude. Forcing a smile, she acquiesced, “Of course, Lord Oliver.”

Several young ladies flushed and giggled over being singled out by the esteemed bachelor. Victoria felt no such delight as she moved slowly to the pianoforte. Perching on the bench, she rifled through the music book with trembling fingers.

She selected a moderately paced romantic piece and began to play and sing, thankful the notes and words were well memorized. She kept her voice smooth and expression bright, though her corset felt tight as a vice.

When the song ended, she rose and bobbed a curtsy to the politely applauding guests. Oliver wore a small satisfied smile that made her want to flee the room. But she merely returned to her seat, the cymbals still crashing in her ears.

Madeline patted her hand. “Nicely done,” she whispered. “Are you quite all right?”

Before Victoria could respond, Oliver moved to stand before the room. “Good people, if I may have your attention!” His voice rang out as he lifted his glass. “I have an important announcement.”

Victoria froze.

No, surely he cannot mean to...

“I will not prolong the suspense.” Oliver smiled. “I have been honored and delighted these past months to have become better acquainted with one of the kindest, most thoughtful, intelligent young ladies I have ever known.”



He turned toward Victoria then, and her heart stuttered. “Lady Victoria Hatcher, you are the light of my days and occupy my every thought. I would be most humbled and gratified if you would consent to be my wife.”

Utter silence met this pronouncement. Victoria stared wordlessly, unable to make sense of what was happening. After a tense moment, she became aware of expectant gazes and hushed whispers all around her.

Oliver arched an eyebrow, the smile never leaving his lips. “My darling Lady Victoria, might I have an answer from you?”

Coming back to herself, Victoria gave her head a small shake. Her voice came out barely above a whisper. “I... I confess I am quite overcome, Lord Oliver. This is all so very sudden.”

Her mind raced wildly. What was she to say? Surely he did not mean for them to wed!

At that moment, a movement at the back of the room drew Victoria’s gaze. It was Simon, staring at her intently and slowly shaking his head.

Victoria froze. A silent threat if ever she saw one.

Heart sinking, she realized she had no choice. To refuse Oliver’s proposal publicly would ruin everything they had worked toward. The facade must hold, at least a little longer.

Turning back to Oliver with a wavering smile, Victoria lifted her chin. “Forgive my hesitation, Lord Oliver. I was quite overwhelmed. Any lady would be honored to accept such a flattering offer from one such as yourself.” She swallowed hard. “I most joyfully consent to be your wife.”

The room erupted into excited chatter and applause.

Beaming, Oliver crossed to take Victoria's hand and pull her to her feet. "You have made me the happiest of men," he declared. "I shall spend my life striving to be worthy of you."

Victoria forced herself to soften her rigid posture. She had done it. Maintained the ruse, despite her utter shock and dismay. In truth, she felt like she might retch at any moment.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:28 am*

Numbly, she accepted congratulations from the other ladies, their exclamations blurring together in her ears.

Madeline embraced her, face alight with delight. "I am so thrilled for you!"

Over her cousin's shoulder, Victoria glimpsed Oliver slip out of the room, his expression unreadable. A fresh wave of dread curled through her. What did he have in store for her, now that they were publicly engaged?

At last, Oliver came to claim her attention once more. Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, he led her away. "There now, that was not so difficult, was it?" he asked, sotto voce. "You performed beautifully."

Victoria lifted her chin. "I have lived up to my end of the bargain. When do you intend to live up to yours and break this sham engagement?"

Oliver tsked. "Now, now, patience, my dear. All in good time." His voice hardened. "Assuming you behave yourself and continue playing the part of blissful bride to perfection."

Jaw clenched, Victoria held back the furious words that sprang to her lips. She could not afford to lose her temper and spark his ire. He held all the power still.

Smoothing her features into a facsimile of a smile, she replied lightly, "Of course. I am happy to play along with this game a little longer, as you wish."

"See that you do," Oliver murmured as guests moved to congratulate them once

more.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Victoria clung to the fraying edges of her composure, smiling until her cheeks ached and making light conversation, though her nerves screamed.

\* \* \*

Simon sat brooding in his study, a half-empty glass of brandy in hand. The house had finally fallen silent after the chaos and revelry of the past four days. Most of his guests had departed late that evening in a parade of carriages piled high with luggage.

Now blessed quiet reigned, leaving him alone with his churning thoughts. Chiefly, thoughts about the unsettling culmination of the house party—his brother's sudden engagement to Lady Victoria Hatcher.

Try as he might, Simon could not make sense of it. Oliver had shown no prior attachment to the young lady, and she had seemed equally indifferent. Yet, now they presented the image of a couple deeply in love.

It did not sit right with Simon. In his heart, he knew they were not truly attached. This smacked of artifice and deception. But to what end?

The possibilities troubled him. Victoria was by all accounts a lady of modest means. She hailed from a minor noble family clinging to the fringes of polite society. What could she stand to gain from an alliance with a duke's brother?

Wealth, stature, consequence—any number of advantages. Try as he might, Simon could only conclude the engagement was designed to reap some benefit for them both. Perhaps they hoped to lay claim to the sizeable inheritance Oliver would receive upon making a love match.

If so, they would fail. Simon knew real love when he saw it, and those two did not have it. He would not release the money until irrefutable proof was provided. He must protect the family's assets and estate.

A thump and raised voices filtered through the study door. Simon grimaced.

Speak of the devil.

It seemed his brother had overindulged in the claret again.

Moments later, the door swung violently open, and Oliver stormed in. "Evening, dear brother," he snarled, swaying slightly. "Hard at work as always?"

Simon slowly set down his brandy. "Oliver, I see you've been making the rounds of my cellars."

Oliver threw himself into a leather chair. "Never you mind that. I've come to discuss more important matters." He jabbed an unsteady finger. "That money is mine now. I've fulfilled the blasted terms of Father's will."

Simon arched an eyebrow. "Is that so? I was not aware you had found a true love match."

"Don't play the fool, Simon," Oliver spat angrily. "You know very well Lady Victoria and I announced our engagement tonight."

"Yes, quite a surprise, that one." Simon studied his brother closely. "But I know you are faking it all."

Oliver's eyes narrowed. "What does it matter? I've made my intention to marry her clear." He smirked and added crudely, "Among other things."

Simon tensed at the implication but kept his tone neutral. “Forgive me if I require more proof than a mere announcement of engagement. You understand I must be certain the terms are fully satisfied before releasing Father’s bequest.”

With a snarl, Oliver surged to his feet. “Don’t play the high-handed Duke with me! You’ll not cheat me out of what’s mine.” Swaying, he slammed his hands down on Simon’s desk. “Give me the money, damn you!”

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Simon did not flinch at the outburst. “Control yourself, Oliver. I’ll remind you that you are speaking to the head of this family.”

His cold tone only further incensed his brother. Oliver’s face twisted in fury. “You always thought yourself so above me and everyone else. Hiding behind that stony mask of a face. I see through you.”

He jabbed his finger at Simon. “You’re afraid. Afraid of living, afraid of feeling anything. That’s why you deny me now. You don’t want anyone to be happy!” He sneered. “Well, I won’t let you control me any longer, or my sweet, little fiancée. We’ll take what’s owed to us.”

Simon frowned, an unfamiliar emotion burning through him. “Have a care how you speak of the lady.”

Oliver threw back his head and laughed derisively. “Oh, standing up for your little whore, are you?” His eyes gleamed cruelly. “Maybe I’ll bring her back here after the vows, and we can all get better acquainted.”

Rage erupted in Simon’s chest, a torrent of fire. In two long strides, he had crossed the room and slammed Oliver back against the paneled wall, forearm pressed harshly against his throat.

“You will speak of Lady Victoria with respect,” he gritted out, face inches away from his brother’s.

Choking for breath, Oliver clawed at Simon’s arm, eyes wide. But Simon held firm,

jaw clenched. He knew he should release his drunken lout of a brother, but fury still pumped through his veins.

At last, he stepped back, shaking off the red haze of anger. Oliver collapsed to the floor, coughing and wheezing. Rising unsteadily, he glared at Simon through watering eyes.

“I’ll speak as I like,” he rasped, massaging his throat. “She’s going to be my wife, after all.” He straightened up and met Simon’s stare. “But since you’re so keen to defend the lady’s honor, let’s settle this the proper way.” His lips curled into a sneer. “I challenge you to a duel, Brother. Dawn tomorrow, on the east lawn.”

Simon froze, momentarily taken aback. A distant part of him realized this was foolishness. But a larger part was already accepting.

“Very well.” He inclined his head. “I accept your challenge. Swords at sunrise.”

Oliver nodded once, a smug gleam in his eyes. “We’ll see who is the better man.”

He turned and stalked out of the study, slamming the door shut behind him.

Simon released a long breath. What bizarre fit of madness had come over him? He abhorred senseless violence. Yet, at his brother’s vile words about Lady Victoria, something fierce and unfamiliar had reared up inside, demanding satisfaction.

In truth, Simon did not fully understand this reaction. What did it matter to him if a woman of little consequence were insulted? Although he had started falling for her, he now felt it was for pity’s sake. She was merely a scheming social climber after his brother’s fortune.

Wasn’t she?



Simon frowned, pacing to the window. Some niggling doubt gave him pause. Despite his earlier conclusions, something in his gut told him Lady Victoria was not entirely what she appeared.

Beneath her polished smiles and charm, did there lurk a deeper truth?

Perhaps he had judged her unfairly. But why, then, was she carrying out this sham engagement? What hold could Oliver possibly have over her?

Frustrated by the unanswered questions, Simon raked a hand through his hair. He would likely never know what motivated Victoria. But honor demanded he defend her, even if she was naught but a schemer using his brother. He had given his word to Oliver, and the duel must proceed.

Let it be done, then. Perhaps the coming dawn would also shed light on other hidden truths.

With that disquieting thought, Simon left the study to prepare.

## CHAPTER 12

The rays of the morning sun streamed through the windows of Hayward Manor, signaling the start of a new day. In just a few short hours, the grand estate would once again be vacant, as the guests from the past week's festivities prepared to depart.

Victoria awoke feeling drained, the events of the last several days weighing heavily on her mind. So much had happened since she first arrived with her cousin Madeline—the whirlwind of parties, the unraveling secrets, and the questionable agreement she now found herself entangled in.

As she sat up in bed, a knock sounded at the door. "Come in," she called,

straightening her nightgown.

Madeline entered, already dressed for the day ahead. “Good morning, Victoria,” she greeted with a smile, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Victoria could sense her cousin’s apprehension. She too felt it gnawing at her insides. “Good morning,” she replied softly.

Madeline sat down on the edge of the bed. “Can you believe this is our last day here? It feels as though we have only just arrived.”

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“Indeed. So much has transpired, it’s difficult to believe it all occurred within a week.”

Madeline nodded, fiddling with the bed covers. She hesitated before speaking again. “Do you... do you think we’ll see him before we leave?”

Him. She could only be referring to one person—Oliver Reynolds. The horrid man who had ensnared Victoria in his deceitful ploy.

Victoria shook her head. “I cannot say. Though I dare hope we do not.”

Madeline looked worried. “What if he tries to stop us from leaving? Tries to insist you uphold your end of the... arrangement.” She said the last word delicately, clearly still upset over Victoria’s predicament.

“He cannot dare do that. His Grace would not let him.”

Victoria hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

A knock interrupted them then, and a maid entered upon Victoria’s bidding. The young lady helped Victoria wash and dress for their departure.

As the maid fixed her hair, Victoria’s thoughts wandered to the events of the previous day. The chaos that ensued when Oliver publicly announced their betrothal. Her fabricated tale of courtship and romance. And the way Simon had stared her down with unveiled contempt.

She suppressed a shiver at the memory of his cold, dark gaze. He did not believe a word of her well-concocted story, for reasons she did not fully comprehend. He seemed determined to despise her, though he hardly knew the truth.

Once she was fully dressed and ready to go, she and Madeline headed downstairs to break their fast. As they entered the dining room, hushed voices caught Victoria's attention. She recognized one as belonging to Simon's friend and solicitor, Mr. Carter. He sounded quite flustered.

"This is most irregular, Your Grace! Most irregular, indeed!"

Simon's calm reply followed. "I understand your concern, Carter. However, I assure you the matter is well in hand."

"But, Sir, we cannot simply pretend nothing is amiss! The money, the duel, your brother's disappearance... this does not bode well, I daresay."

Victoria watched Simon unfold a napkin over his lap, entirely unruffled. "All will be sorted in due time. Come, let us discuss it no more this morning."

Mr. Carter opened his mouth as if to argue, then thought better of it with a shake of his head. "Of course. My apologies, Your Grace."

Victoria exchanged a puzzled glance with Madeline. It seemed Oliver's absence had been discovered. Wherever could he have gone? Knowing what she did about his character, it was doubtful any explanation would reflect well on him.

Madeline appeared similarly concerned, but neither of them dared discuss it there in mixed company. They quietly took their seats and ate, ruminating over the worrisome news.

After Simon took his leave, Madeline leaned in with wide eyes. “Where do you suppose Lord Oliver has gone?” she whispered dramatically.

Victoria shook her head. “I’ve no idea. Though I cannot claim to be surprised.”

“Nor I. Lord Oliver has proven himself to be of questionable morals.” Madeline hesitated, looking troubled. “You don’t think he’s fled for good, do you?”

“If he has any sense at all, he will not return,” Victoria replied frankly.

Though in truth, she doubted Oliver had fully considered the consequences of his actions thus far.

Madeline bit her lip anxiously. Before she could respond, raised voices sounded from the hall outside the dining room. Victoria instantly recognized Mr. Carter’s strained tenor mingling with Simon’s deeper baritone.

“Your Grace, please, I must implore you to take this seriously!” Mr. Carter was saying in obvious agitation. “The solicitors in London have just sent an express. Your brother... he has somehow accessed the money. All of it!”

Victoria gasped softly. Madeline’s hand flew to her mouth. They stared at one another in dismay.

Simon’s voice was too low to make out his exact words, but his tone radiated calm control.

“I realize that,” Mr. Carter responded desperately, “But... but... this changes everything! Who knows where he has gone... he could be halfway across the Continent by now!”

“Carter,” Simon interjected, his voice sharpening. “As I already said, this changes nothing. Return to the study and see that all is ready for our departure.”

“Y-yes, Your Grace,” Mr. Carter acquiesced, though he still sounded ill at ease.

“Right away, Sir.”

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His footsteps faded down the corridor, and Victoria released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Her mind swirled with questions.

Madeline appeared similarly aghast. "Did you hear? Lord Oliver has somehow gotten hold of the money, after all!" Her eyes were wide with disbelief.

Victoria nodded grimly. She had suspected Oliver's ultimate goal all along, though his methods remained unclear. "His Grace does not seem surprised in the least," she mused. "I wonder if he anticipated this."

"Surely not!" Madeline exclaimed. "Why, it sounds as if Lord Oliver has committed some act of fraud or theft!"

Privately, Victoria thought Simon likely had the right to it. The signs of Oliver's greed and callousness were too apparent to ignore. Aloud, however, she merely said, "We cannot know for certain. But I feel it unwise to jump to conclusions."

Madeline looked uncertain but nodded in acquiescence. For a moment, neither of them spoke, absorbed in their turbulent thoughts.

At length, Victoria broke the heavy silence. "We should begin gathering our things. The carriages will be ready soon."

With a sigh, Madeline assented, and they made their way upstairs to finish packing for the journey home. As Victoria neatly folded gowns and tucked slippers into her trunk, her mind continued to churn. She desperately hoped Oliver would not dare show his face again before they left. The sooner she could put distance between them,

the better.

Before long, a footman arrived to carry their luggage down to the carriages. Victoria took one last sweeping look around her guest chamber, then followed Madeline out of the room.

They were near the top of the stairs when hurried footsteps approached from behind. Victoria turned to see Mr. Carter hastening toward them, face flushed.

“Pardon me, Lady Victoria, Miss Russell,” he began upon reaching them, a touch breathless. “I hope I might have a brief word before you depart.”

Victoria tensed. She had a feeling she would not like whatever he was about to say. “Of course,” she replied evenly. Madeline looked uneasy as well.

Mr. Carter dropped his voice to just above a whisper. “It is regarding the recent... developments... with Lord Oliver. I understand you are acquainted?”

Victoria stiffened. How much did this man know? She chose her next words carefully. “We got engaged recently, yes.”

Mr. Carter wrung his hands nervously. “Indeed, indeed. I do not wish to offend, but... well...” He hesitated, seeming to inwardly wrestle with how much to say. Finally, he continued in a fervent tone, “The situation is quite irregular, as I’m certain you know. While the depth of Lord Oliver’s depravity was unexpected, His Grace maintains that we ought not to act rashly.”

Here he paused, and Victoria thought she detected a note of frustration in his voice.

“However,” Mr. Carter went on, leaning closer, “If what I suspect is true, things could become very ugly, indeed. You would do well to distance yourself from him,



Lady Victoria. Before it is too late.”

Victoria’s breath caught in her chest. Mr. Carter knew. She was certain of it in that instant. Her eyes darted reflexively to Madeline, who appeared equally startled.

When Victoria found her voice, it came out low but firm. “I appreciate your concern, Mr. Carter, misplaced though it may be. I do not take such counsel lightly. However, I understand my circumstances better than you ever could.” She held his gaze meaningfully. “Some things are more complicated than they appear.”

Mr. Carter looked briefly taken aback by her forceful reply. Then his shoulders slumped in resignation. “Forgive my boldness. You are quite right, it is not my place.” He sighed heavily. “I wish you the very best, Lady Victoria. Truly.”

Unsure how to respond, Victoria simply nodded. After a beat, Mr. Carter bowed his farewell and continued on his way.

She watched his retreating figure, heart pounding. Once he was out of earshot, Madeline seized her arm. “He knows!” she whispered frantically. “He must know of the blackmail!”

Victoria exhaled unsteadily, shaken by the encounter. “So it would seem. Though thankfully, he did not raise the issue directly.”

Madeline’s forehead creased in distress. “Oh, Victoria, what if he knows and tells His Grace? This could spell utter ruin!”

“He will not tell him,” Victoria said, wishing she felt as confident as she sounded. Lowering her voice, she continued, “You heard him. He knows His Grace wants discretion in the matter.”

Madeline still appeared fretful but gave a jerky nod. Victoria squeezed her hand reassuringly, and they resumed their descent.

They reached the front hall, where servants bustled about, assisting the departing guests. Victoria scanned the entryway for any sign of Oliver, muscles tensed. Not seeing his face among the crowd, she allowed herself to breathe normally again.

Perhaps he truly had fled for good. The notion should have relieved her, yet dread coiled in the pit of her stomach. Where had he gone with such a vast sum of money? And what trouble might he cause in his greed-fueled recklessness?

\* \* \*

Moments later, Victoria couldn't help but feel a spark of admiration for Simon and the way he had handled his deceitful brother. Though Oliver had fled after his misdeeds came to light, Simon remained composed and unruffled through it all.

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Victoria watched Simon make his rounds amongst the departing guests, gracious and unfazed as ever. When his gaze met hers across the room, her breath caught at the intensity in his dark eyes. For a fleeting moment, the chaos and gossip swirling around them faded away, and there were only the two of them, connected by an invisible thread.

Then Simon gave her the faintest of nods before returning his attention to his guests. The spell broken, Victoria blinked and tried to calm her racing heart.

“Did you see that just now between the Duke and Lady Victoria?”

Victoria overheard the hushed gossip of two Society ladies nearby.

“Most irregular,” the first woman murmured behind her fan. “Especially considering her engagement to his brother.”

Victoria’s cheeks burned as she quickly excused herself from the room. She had no desire to hear further whispers regarding herself and Simon. Especially when even she could not make sense of what was between them.

Upon returning to her guest chamber, she busied herself with checking whether she had forgotten any of her belongings. A knock interrupted her, and Madeline entered.

“Nearly ready?” her cousin asked. “The carriages will be prepared soon.”

Victoria nodded. “Just a few last items to pack up.”

Madeline eyed her keenly. “You seem distracted. Is everything all right?”

“Of course. I’m just... ready to be home again, that is all.”

It wasn’t entirely a lie.

Madeline didn’t look convinced but let the matter drop. “I know just what you mean. This has been a most exhausting visit for you.”

Victoria had turned back to continue with her final checks when Madeline spoke again. “I noticed you and His Grace exchanging rather intense looks earlier.”

Victoria busied herself with folding a gown. “Did you? I hadn’t realized.”

“Hmm,” Madeline said knowingly.

Victoria ignored her pointed look.

Once confirmed nothing was left behind, they headed downstairs to the bustling entry hall. Guests bid their goodbyes while footmen loaded luggage into carriages outside. During a pause in the commotion, Victoria slipped away unnoticed, intending to have one last word alone with Simon before leaving.

Her nerves fluttered strangely as she approached the door to his study. Drawing a bracing breath, she knocked once. At the call to enter, she stepped inside.

Simon stood by the window, his back to the door. He turned at her entrance, surprise flickering across his face. “Lady Victoria. To what do I owe the honor?”

Victoria clasped her hands tightly before her to keep them from shaking. “Forgive my intrusion. I thought we should speak privately before I depart.”

Simon raised an eyebrow but motioned for her to continue.

She took a few steps nearer. “I wish to thank you again for how kindly you’ve handled... recent unfortunate events.”

The corner of Simon’s mouth lifted wryly. “It is I who should thank you, Lady Victoria. Your pretend attachment provided useful insight into my brother’s ill intent.”

Victoria paled at his blunt candor. She drew a shaky breath. “About that, Your Grace?—”

But Simon held up a hand, stopping her explanation. “There is no need for excuses. My brother is adept at manipulation. The fault is not yours.”

Victoria bit her lip. She longed to confess the full truth to Simon, to unburden herself of this weighty secret. But she couldn’t form the words, terrified of how he might react.

Simon eyed her closely. “There is more you are not telling me.”

It was not a question.

Victoria opened her mouth, willing herself to reveal all. But the long-instilled habit of protecting her family held her back.

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At her hesitation, Simon's expression hardened. When he spoke, his voice held a cutting edge. "It seems I was mistaken in thinking you an innocent pawn in my brother's schemes. You played your part well."

Victoria flinched at the accusation. "Your Grace, you mistake my motives?—"

But Simon spoke over her. "I imagine you and my brother cooked up this ploy together. Though I confess, I did not predict you would succeed so well in beguiling me."

Victoria gaped at him, stunned by his cruel words. "Beguile you? I've done no such thing!"

Simon went on remorselessly. "Come now, let us speak frankly. Did you two have a good laugh, conspiring to make a fool of me?"

"Of course not!" Victoria cried. "I would never mock or manipulate you thus."

"Wouldn't you?" Simon challenged. "What other reason could there be for a young, ambitious woman to become involved with a man like my brother?"

Victoria reeled, hurt and anger churning inside her. So this had all been a game to Simon. A means of testing her character, which she had failed spectacularly.

"I see you have gravely misjudged me, Your Grace," she said coldly. "I thought you an honorable gentleman. I see now I was mistaken."

A muscle ticked in Simon's jaw, but he remained silent.

Victoria stepped closer, meeting his glare steadily. "You wish to think ill of me? So be it. But I did nothing with dishonorable intent, whatever you believe."

Simon searched her face intently. For a moment, his severe expression wavered. But then the hard mask slipped back into place again. "I think it best we end this conversation here."

The finality in his tone left no room for argument. Victoria stood a moment longer, trembling with emotion. Then she spun on her heel and left the room without another word.

She rushed blindly through the corridors, Simon's accusations ringing in her ears. So, he had only been using her, hoping to expose some vile deficiencies in her character. And at the first test, he had found her lacking.

Well, she would not stand weeping over the ruined esteem of such a man. Let him think her false—wicked, even. She knew the truth in her heart. She had acted selflessly to protect those she loved. If he could not see that, then so be it.

By the time she reached the foyer again, Victoria had mastered her turbulent emotions.

Madeline hurried over, looking anxious. "There you are! I was ready to send out a search party." She looked closely at her. "Are you quite all right?"

Victoria conjured a weak smile. "Quite. Just eager to be home."

Madeline's expression remained concerned, but there was no time for further talk as the footmen came to usher them out to the carriage.

During the long ride back to London, Victoria stared blindly out the window, lost in unhappy thoughts. Madeline attempted some conversation but soon gave up in the face of Victoria's half-hearted responses.

## CHAPTER 13

Simon arrived at his London townhouse after a long day of business. He was exhausted from meeting with tenants and going over estate affairs but knew he should make an appearance at his club as usual. The familiar sounds of glasses clinking and men's voices filled the room as he entered.

"Good evening, Your Grace," the bartender greeted. "The usual?"

Simon nodded and took a seat in his customary leather chair by the fireplace. A brandy was delivered promptly. He sipped it slowly, letting the day's tensions drain from his shoulders. Still, his thoughts turned to the events of last week. Kissing Victoria Hatcher in that darkened alleyway had sparked something in him.

He could still feel her soft curves under his hands. She was like no woman he had ever met—proud yet vulnerable, with a fire in her eyes that stirred him. What was his rogue brother up to with her? Simon sensed she was innocent in all this, merely protecting someone dear to her from Oliver's schemes. He would get to the bottom of it, for the lady's sake if nothing else.

Simon was pulled out of his thoughts as the club doors burst open. In stomped Oliver, face red and contorted with rage. He scanned the room wildly before his gaze landed on Simon.

"You!" he shouted, marching over to stand before Simon's chair. "You damned snake!"



With no further warning, Oliver drew back his fist and punched Simon squarely in the jaw. Gasps echoed through the club as Simon's head snapped back. He slowly straightened, rubbing his jaw and chuckling darkly.

“Finally uncovered my little secret then, have you?” he asked calmly.

This only enraged Oliver further. “You knew! You knew all along and let me make a fool of myself!” Spittle flew from his mouth in fury.

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The other club members shifted uncomfortably, mesmerized by the unfolding scene.

“Knew what, dear brother?” Simon goaded, still irritatingly nonplussed.

“That you had bought up my debt yourself! To the bloody gaming hall that had me in a stranglehold! All these months, I’ve been scrambling to find a way out, and you knew I was free of it if only you had told me!”

Oliver was shouting loud enough to rattle the chandeliers. Simon waited until his brother had let it all out before responding.

“And what makes you think I would ever share that information with you freely?” he asked coldly. “You lost my trust long ago with your penchant for drink, cards, and debauchery.”

Oliver’s chest heaved, realization dawning on him. “Who told you, then? Someone must have talked.” His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Simon sighed. “If you must know, I was informed by the gaming hall owner himself. He assumed I took on your debts as a show of familial loyalty. Unfortunately for you, he assumed wrong.”

Oliver’s hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. “You are a snake, Simon. Letting me twist in the wind all this time when you could have ended my suffering with a word. Is this some kind of sick punishment for perceived slights against you?”

Simon stood up swiftly. Though they were of similar height, his powerful frame and

cold stare made him seem to tower over his cowering brother.

“Perceived slights?” he hissed. “Need I remind you of the many times I covered for you as a boy when you ditched your studies? How do I make excuses when you disgraced yourself and our family name with your scandalous behavior? Have you forgotten the fortune Father had to pay to cover up your reckless gambling before, leaving our estate coffers depleted? No, dear brother, my grievances against you are anything but perceived. Now you owe me all the money I paid up for your debts!”

Oliver seemed to shrink under this verbal lashing. His face lost its furious red hue, replaced by a pale, shaken countenance. “I... I see,” he stammered. “I thought... well, I see now I was mistaken.”

Slowly the fight went out of him. His shoulders slumped in defeat. Here was a man recognizing how deeply in debt he still was, literally and figuratively. He moved to leave, then paused.

“Mark my words, Simon,” he spat over his shoulder. “I will find a way to destroy all you hold dear for this. You have not seen the last of me.”

With those ominous words, Oliver hurried out of the club. Silence rang in his wake.

Simon stared pensively into the fire, swirling his brandy. Let his brother make all the empty threats he wished. Simon had nothing left to take, nothing left to lose. The estate and dukedom were in shambles without his fortune. His parents were dead, and his relationship with his brother was ruined. No, Oliver could not touch him anymore.

At the thought, Victoria’s face flashed in his mind again. For just a moment, he worried for the lady who had somehow become entangled in his brother’s web. But no, he had ended things with her. She despised him now, thinking him no better than his blackguard brother. Rightfully so.

No, there was nothing left that Simon cherished enough for Oliver to exploit. With that resolve, he drained his brandy and stalked out into the night.

\* \* \*

The next day, Simon arrived at his solicitor's office promptly at midday. His jaw still smarted from Oliver's sucker punch, but it was a small price to pay to see his brother finally crack.

"Your Grace, welcome," greeted Percival Carter, Simon's longtime solicitor and one of the few he considered a friend.

Percival's naturally anxious demeanor seemed even more anxious today. His fingers worried a button that threatened to come loose on his waistcoat.

"Let's get straight to business, shall we?" said Simon. He preferred not to make idle small talk if he could avoid it.

Percival looked as if he wished to speak on something else, but he nodded quickly. "Of course, of course, business it is." He shuffled a stack of documents on his desk. "There are still several tenants behind on their rents this quarter. I've drawn up potential courses of action should they not pay. The southern farmlands have seen a blight on their crops as well, so some leniency there may be in order..."

Simon nodded, only half listening. He trusted Percival's counsel on these matters. His thoughts wandered back to the previous night. Something had been bothering him since Oliver's outburst.

"Percival, how do you suppose my brother could have discovered I purchased his debts?" he interjected.

The solicitor glanced up nervously from his papers. “I, uh, well, that is?—”

“You were the only other person I informed of the arrangement,” Simon continued, pinning him with an intense stare. “And I know you are a discrete man. So how did this secret come to light?”

Percival tugged at his suddenly too-tight collar. “Now, see here, Your Grace. I did not—that is to say—you cannot possibly—” His panicked spluttering said it all.

Simon sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Come now, Percival. Let us speak plainly. I assume my brother cornered you somewhere dark and emptied a bottle or two down your throat first?”

“It was not my fault!” Percival burst out in desperation. “He caught me outside the tavern and insisted on celebrating something or other. I drank but one pint of ale with him, yet the next thing I knew he was dragging your name through the mud. I tried to hold my tongue, but the words slipped out somehow. I confess it all!” He dropped his face into his hands despairingly.

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Despite his solicitor's betrayal, Simon could not find it in himself to summon much ire. Percival had always been weak-willed, too anxious to deny anyone. He likely had not revealed the information willingly.

"Think nothing of it," Simon said, waving a hand. "The fault is my brother's alone. I should not have trusted you with the knowledge at all. We will speak no more on it."

Percival looked close to weeping in relief. "Bless you for your mercy, Your Grace! I vow it will not happen again. Now, about the tenant farms?—"

"Enough. I trust you to handle the estate affairs." Simon stood up abruptly. "Just see to it that my brother gets not one more pound from me. I will be at Hayward Manor should you need anything further."

Percival nodded emphatically. "Of course, of course! Thank you again for your understanding, Your Grace."

Simon departed without another word. As his carriage rolled through the London streets, he considered where to go next. He had no appointments and little desire to return home yet. Perhaps he would pay a visit back to his club and see what gossip he could catch about Oliver's latest schemes.

Yes, keeping an eye on his wayward brother was probably wise after last night's confrontation.

To the club it was.

Simon leaned back against the plush velvet seat, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on. The bumpy cobblestones made the carriage jostle. Hopefully, a brandy or two at the club would take the edge off this blasted headache.

As the carriage halted before the entrance, Simon stepped down. The footman opened the door for him, and he strode inside commandingly. The familiar scents of tobacco, leather, and brandy embraced him. He had just settled into his favorite chair when a weedy club attendant approached.

“Pardon me, Your Grace, but you’ve received an urgent message.”

The man held out a folded piece of paper sealed with wax. Simon took it with a furrowed brow. Who would be sending him messages here? He broke the seal and read the hastily scrawled note.

Simon,

We need to talk. Meet me at the Mercury Theater at once. Tell no one.

Oliver.

Simon’s headache spiked. What could his wretched brother want now? It was important if Oliver was risking being seen with him publicly. Simon considered ignoring the mysterious summons, but curiosity won over. Folding the note, he headed back through the maze of leather chairs and wood-paneled walls to the exit.

A light rain had begun falling as the theater came into view down the street. Simon glanced around warily before slipping inside. The entryway was empty, as most shows did not begin until evening. Muffled sounds from the stage floated through the curtains where actors were rehearsing.

“Took you long enough,” came Oliver’s voice from the shadows. He emerged looking disheveled, eyes bleary and clothes rumpled. He had been drinking heavily already today.

“What is so urgent that you couldn’t simply call on me at home?” Simon asked coolly.

Oliver paced, running a hand through his unkempt dark blonde hair. “It wasn’t safe. I had to get you away from prying eyes and ears.”

Now Simon was intrigued. “Go on.”

“That little stunt of yours yesterday did more than just reveal your deceit to me,” Oliver hissed. “It exposed all my debts, leaving me vulnerable! Now the moneylenders and gambling halls know to come demanding repayment from me once more. I had almost dug myself out, but now... now it is all crashing down!”

He punctuated this with an angry kick at a nearby chair. Simon observed dispassionately, unmoved by the tantrum.

“And how is this my concern? You got yourself into debt, you get yourself out of it.”

Oliver advanced on him furiously. “Don’t play coy, Brother. You knew this would happen! Admit you are trying to ruin me, take everything for yourself! But it won’t work. I will find a way back from this, with or without your help.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “Cease your delusions of persecution and plots against you. I assure you, I think very little of you at all. Your affairs are your own. Now if we’re finished here...”

He turned to go, but Oliver grabbed his arm. “We are far from finished. That little



stunt will cost you too, mark my words. I will find a way to make you hurt like you've hurt me, Brother." He practically spat the word "brother," face contorted and eyes wild.

Simon shook him off easily. "I think not. As I've told you, there is nothing left you can take from me. No loved ones, no fortune, no prospects. You've already done your worst. I am but an empty husk, entirely thanks to you."

For a moment, Oliver looked shaken by the cold finality in Simon's voice. But then his eyes hardened again.

"We shall see about that, Simon. Everyone has a weakness. Once I find yours, you'll regret the day you crossed me."

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With those ominous words, Oliver turned and exited the theater, leaving Simon alone on the stage. Simon mulled over the conversation as he departed into the drizzling afternoon. His brother was slipping into madness, consumed by desperation and drink. There would be no reasoning with him.

Still, that last threat niggled at Simon. Try as he might to deny it, there was one chink in his impenetrable armor. The brief flash of Victoria's face told him his heart was not entirely hardened. But no, he had ended that potential weakness already by pushing the lady away. She was lost to him now. For the best, really. He needed no distractions from his duties.

Simon banished all thoughts of the feisty, hazel-eyed maiden from his mind. His brother was welcome to search all he liked for weaknesses to exploit—he would find none.

With that resolution, Simon continued on his way, never imagining how wrong he was. How completely one Lady Victoria Hatcher might undo all his defenses. But for now, his fortress remained intact.

## CHAPTER14

Victoria and Madeline strolled arm in arm through Hyde Park, enjoying the sunny spring morning. As they walked down the path, Victoria couldn't help but notice several heads turning in their direction, followed by hushed whispers behind gloved hands and fans. She frowned slightly, wondering what was causing the unwanted attention.

Madeline seemed oblivious, chattering on about the upcoming Season and all the balls and soirées they would attend. Victoria tried to focus on her cousin's enthusiasm, pushing aside the uneasy feeling settling in her stomach.

As they neared the Serpentine, the whispers grew louder and more frequent. Victoria's cheeks burned as she caught a few scandalized gasps and pointed looks. What was going on? Had news of Oliver's horrid blackmail spread throughout the ton already? But no, that couldn't be. Only Madeline knew of that wretched situation.

Just then, an older woman bustled over to them, her face pinched in a deep scowl. "Lady Victoria! Miss Russell! Just what do you think you are doing, parading about in broad daylight for all to see?"

Victoria blinked in surprise. "I'm sorry, have we caused some offense?"

The matron huffed. "As if you don't know! The audacity, showing your faces here when your family is mired in utter disgrace!"

Madeline's eyes widened. "Pardon me, but I'm afraid we don't understand?—"

"Don't play ignorant, girl!" the woman snapped. "It's bad enough that your sister has shamed herself and your family beyond repair. Must you flaunt your lack of decency as well?"

Victoria paled, dread pooling in her stomach. Aurora. This was about her beloved sister. But how? They had been so careful to conceal her condition, sending her away to the country estate to have the baby in secret.

Swallowing down her panic, Victoria schooled her features into a mask of polite bewilderment. "I'm sorry, Madam, but we truly have no notion of what you're referring to. My sister has been recovering from a persistent illness in the country.

Perhaps you have mistaken?—”

The matron cut her off with a derisive laugh. “Recovering from an illness? Is that what your father is calling it? My dear, pregnancy out of wedlock is no illness, at least not of the physical kind.” She leaned in, dropping her voice. “Although I daresay it is a rather serious moral affliction.”

Victoria’s breath caught in her throat, her carefully composed expression faltering. How could she know?

“The news is all over town,” the matron continued in a harsh whisper. “Lady Aurora Hatcher, the Earl of Newton’s eldest daughter, is with child and is unmarried! Have you any idea the damage this will do to your family’s reputation? And here you are, walking about as if you’ve done nothing wrong!”

Madeline, who had gone white as a sheet, finally found her voice. “Surely there has been some mistake. Our Aurora is the model of propriety and virtue! She would never?—”

“Never?” The matron arched an eyebrow. “Then how do you explain her condition? Do you take me for a fool, child?”

Madeline fell silent, twisting her gloved hands together anxiously.

Victoria’s mind raced. How had Aurora’s secret come out? This woman spoke the truth, as much as she longed to deny it. They had been so careful, had told no one except...

A horrible thought occurred to her then. Oliver. He must have betrayed Aurora’s confidence and spread the scandalous tale throughout the ton. It was the only explanation. Her hands curled into fists within the folds of her skirt. That despicable,

vile man! She should have known he would stoop to such treachery.

Outwardly, however, Victoria's expression remained calm. "We appreciate your apprising us of this... situation," she said evenly. "Rest assured that my father will get to the bottom of these malicious falsehoods at once. Now, if you'll excuse us."

She took Madeline firmly by the arm and led her away down the path, her back straight and chin held high. Her cousin stumbled along in stunned silence until they were well out of earshot.

"Victoria, what are we going to do?" Madeline whispered frantically.

Victoria's calm facade nearly cracked at the wretched despair in her cousin's voice. But she had to remain strong, for both their sakes.

"First, we must speak to my father," she said, keeping her tone steady despite the maelstrom of dread and anger swirling within her. "We need to get the control of the situation and quick." Madeline gave a tremulous nod, interrupting Victoria's grim speculations. "You're right, of course. We should go to your father at once."

They hurried out of the park, Victoria barely noticing the continued stares and whispers that followed them. Her mind whirled with questions. How had this happened? What were they to do now? And that despicable Oliver... this had to be his doing. She seethed, recalling his smug face. He would pay for this, she vowed. She would find a way to expose his treachery and destroy him, as he had destroyed her family!

But first, she had to speak with her father.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:28 am*

They arrived back at Newton House in record time. Victoria swept inside, handing her pelisse and gloves to the butler. “Where is my father?” she demanded without preamble.

“In his study, Lady Victoria,” the butler replied, his eyes downcast.

Smoothing her expression, Victoria nodded. “Please inform him we must speak at once. A rather urgent matter has come to our attention.”

“Right away, Lady Victoria.” The butler hurried off.

Victoria paced the entrance hall with short, agitated steps as Madeline hovered anxiously nearby. The waiting was unbearable. She needed answers now.

At last, the butler returned. “Lord Newton will see you in his study,” he intoned.

Victoria swept past him without comment, Madeline on her heels. She threw open the study doors without knocking.

Her father sat behind his desk, face in hands. At their abrupt entrance, he looked up, revealing bloodshot eyes and pallid, unshaven cheeks.

“Victoria.” He rose unsteadily to his feet. “I wondered when you would return. No doubt you’ve heard...”

“Enough to surmise the general picture,” Victoria said coldly. Inside, her heart ached at her father’s wretched appearance. But she could not afford sympathy now. “Does

the whole ton know?"

Lord Newton's face crumpled. He turned away, one hand braced on the mantel. "I'm afraid so," he rasped at length. "The secret about your sister is out. The family is disgraced."

Victoria swayed where she stood. To hear it confirmed so bluntly was a blow. Beside her, Madeline made a choked, despairing sound.

"And now?" Victoria whispered.

"It doesn't matter!" her father snapped, rounding on her. "The damage is done. Your sister has ruined us all!"

Victoria drew herself up, outrage swelling within her. "Ruined? Our family's worth lies not in arbitrary societal conventions, but in our character and principles! The fact that you would disown Aurora so quickly proves you care more for your reputation than for your own daughter's well-being!"

Lord Newton reeled back as if struck. "You go too far, Victoria," he said unsteadily. "I will not have you speak to me in such a manner."

"I will speak the truth, whether you care to hear it or not," Victoria shot back.

Inside, a small part of her protested at addressing her father so disrespectfully. But her anger and disgust overwhelmed all else.

"This is a catastrophe, yes," she continued heatedly, "but not irreparable if only we stand together as a family. Casting Aurora out will only worsen the scandal."

Her father rubbed a trembling hand over his face. "It may be too late for that. Nearly

all the ton knows by now. I've already received several letters rescinding dinner invitations. We shall be social pariahs before the week is out."

Every flat surface was covered with opened letters. Letters whose broken seals and engraved vellum marked them bearers of the worst sort of news.

"The impertinence! Did the Marquess truly rescind his dinner invitation by post rather than in person?"

Lord Newton let out an inarticulate roar. "Curse them all for cowardly weasels! Are they so high and mighty as to forget the meaning of loyalty and discretion?"

Victoria strained forward, skin prickling with dread. What was going on?

Another pause, more deferential murmuring. Then her father exploded again. "The Evening Post dares besmirch my daughter's name so foully? I'll thrash that publisher within an inch of his life!"

Ice flooded Victoria's veins. There could only be one daughter whom the papers revealed. Aurora.

Victoria exchanged an uneasy glance with Madeline. The situation was quickly spiraling beyond their control. But giving in to despair would not help matters. There had to be a way out of this morass if only she could find it.

Squaring her shoulders, she faced her father resolutely. "Aurora did not get herself in this position alone. Someone else must be held accountable."

Lord Newton's face darkened. "That nobody physician. A Joseph Robinson. The man means nothing to me."



“He may mean something to Aurora,” Victoria pressed. “Does he intend to do right by her and the child?”

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“I hardly know or care,” her father bit out. “Even if they married, the damage is already done. Her reputation is ruined beyond salvaging.”

Victoria clenched her jaw stubbornly. “I refuse to believe that. If Mr. Robinson marries her before her condition becomes obvious...”

But Lord Newton was already shaking his head. “It’s far too late for that. Nearly all the ton knows of her shame. There will be no pity or understanding, you know Society well.” His voice turned bitter and bleak. “No, her only hope is to travel abroad, someplace remote, and have the child away from prying eyes. Then, in a few years, we may be able to reintroduce her to Society as a widow...”

“A widow?” Victoria cried. “You would have her give up her child, the man she loves, just to save face?”

“I must think of the family’s future!” her father thundered. “Your future, Victoria! Who will marry you now, with this scandal attached to your name?”

Victoria drew herself up, an icy glint in her eyes. “Any man worth having at all would not be deterred by circumstances outside my control. If this ruins my prospects, so be it.”

Lord Newton paced agitatedly, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. “You are young, you know not what you say. In time, you will see I aim to secure the best future for us all.”

Victoria crossed her arms. “I know that I will not stand silently by while you ship

Aurora off like a criminal, forcing her to give up her child, and pass the babe off to some stranger! How could you even consider something so heartless?"

"Because I must!" Lord Newton exploded. "Have you any idea of the pressure on me? The scandal your sister has brought down upon this family?" His chest heaved, face mottled. "You judge me for securing our future, but you have not an inkling of the precarious reality of our position!"

Victoria fell silent, stunned by her father's uncharacteristic outburst. For the first time, she noticed the sheen of desperation in his bloodshot eyes, the unhealthy pallor of his skin. This was not merely wounded pride over damaged social standing—he was terrified.

Her anger faded slightly, replaced by dawning understanding. She thought back on all the years of hearing him obsess over their family's mediocre rank and lack of funds compared to so many peers. How he drove his daughters relentlessly to make the best matches possible.

It had always seemed the action of a social climber.

## CHAPTER 15

The next morning after breakfast, Victoria hurried up the stairs, anxious to escape the chaos unfolding in the entrance hall. Footmen darted back and forth, delivering the steady stream of letters that had flooded in all morning. Each one, she knew, contained bad news—cancellations, lost invitations, friends turning their backs on them. Her father roared and raged with each new missive, cursing Aurora's name. Victoria could not bear to remain downstairs, helpless, listening to such bile spewed about her beloved sister.

Safely in her bedchamber, she collapsed on the edge of her bed, head in hand. This

was a nightmare from which she desperately longed to wake up. How had everything gone so wrong so quickly? Now their family teetered on the verge of ruin, thanks to Aurora's indiscretion being exposed so publicly.

A soft knock interrupted her brooding. "Victoria? May I come in?" Madeline's muffled voice called tentatively.

Victoria raised her head. "Yes, do come in, Maddie."

The door creaked open, and Madeline slipped inside. Her gentle face was creased with worry as she joined Victoria on the bed.

"Oh, Victoria, today has been simply wretched," she said with a sigh. "Have you seen the papers? The gossip columns are having a field day. They're calling Aurora every filthy name imaginable."

Victoria's stomach churned. She had been avoiding the papers, afraid of what poisonous untruths they contained.

"Let them print whatever they wish," she said with more conviction than she felt. "The people who matter know Aurora's true character. This scandal will pass in time."

"Will it?" Madeline twisted her hands in her lap. "Society can be so unforgiving about such things. Even if Aurora marries the babe's father, tongues will still wag for years. We may all be tainted by association."

Victoria winced, the unspoken truth striking deep. As much as she longed to deny it, she knew their family's reputation was indelibly damaged. Aurora's good name was shattered beyond repair. Which meant her prospects...

A sick sensation settled in her chest. She had enjoyed the admiration of many potential suitors last Season thanks to her wit, beauty, and status as an earl's daughter. Now those gentlemen would flee like rats from a sinking ship. She would be lucky if even the most odious fortune hunter would consider her now.

The bleak realization threatened to overwhelm her. She jumped to her feet, pacing in agitation. "This cannot be the end for us," she burst out. "There must be a way forward somehow. We are not without options."

Madeline watched her worriedly. "I wish I shared your optimism. But I cannot conceive how we can recover from such a blow. Unless..." she trailed off, looking hesitant.

Victoria paused her restless movements. "Unless what? Speak your mind, Maddie."

Madeline took a deep breath. "Forgive me for suggesting this. But if you were to make a very advantageous match, to someone of great status and means, it could begin to rehabilitate the family name."

Victoria resumed her pacing, considering her cousin's suggestion reluctantly. As much as the thought of being forced to accept such a distasteful arrangement galled her, she recognized the sense in Madeline's words. If she were to marry an aristocrat of high rank, one whose position was unimpeachable, it could silence some of the uglier gossip.

She shivered, loathing the notion of being trapped in a loveless union for status alone. But to save her family, she would make that sacrifice. She must start seriously considering potential matches and wealthy, titled gentlemen right away.

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The thought summoned that scoundrel Oliver's smug face to mind. Revulsion choked her. Never. She would rather die a spinster than shackle herself to the likes of him. There had to be another solution.

"Enough of this talk," she said firmly, forcing a smile. "Let us not dwell on the worst possibilities. I am convinced there is a way out of this morass. We simply have yet to discover it."

Madeline still looked doubtful, but she nodded, clearly unwilling to press the issue further. An awkward silence fell over them.

Desperate to lift the gloom settling over them both, Victoria cast about for a change of subject. "Come, let us go for a ride in the park. The fresh air will clear our heads from all this ugliness."

Madeline hesitated. "Is that wise? With everything going on, we're sure to be stared at and gossiped about like yesterday, or even worse."

Victoria lifted her chin. "Let them gawk. I refuse to hide away as if I have anything to be ashamed of. Either Society will accept us on our terms or not at all. But we shall not cower and bend to their fickle whims."

Setting her jaw resolutely, she stood and rang for her maid. Donning riding habits quickly, the pair slipped downstairs and outside without being waylaid by Victoria's still-raging father.

Mounting their horses, they set off at a brisk trot through the streets toward Hyde

Park. Victoria kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the blatant stares and whispers that followed them. Chin high, she feigned indifference even as her cheeks flushed.

Only when they passed through the park gates did she allow herself to relax slightly. Here, amidst the rambling green lawns dotted with elegant men and women on horseback, she could almost forget their troubles for a moment. Until she noticed those same park-goers nudging each other, obviously gossiping as she and Madeline rode by.

Doing her best to ignore it, Victoria guided her mare down a less-used path, away from prying eyes. Madeline followed silently. As they ambled along at an easy pace, Victoria forced herself to focus on their tranquil surroundings. But the beauty of the fluttering leaves and sunlight dappling the grass did little to quiet her churning thoughts.

“This is hopeless,” she burst out at last. “Even here, we are seen as pariahs.”

Madeline glanced at her sympathetically. “I did try to warn you. News spreads fast in Society.”

“But it is so unjust!” Victoria cried, yanking at the reins in frustration. “We have committed no crime, yet we are tried and convicted based on hearsay and scandal sheets. What has become of common decency?”

“When has Society ever been ruled by decency?” Madeline replied with unusual sharpness. At Victoria’s surprised look, she flushed. “Forgive me, I did not mean to snap. Only to say, we cannot control how others behave, only ourselves.”

Chastened, Victoria nodded. “You speak true. I know it is fruitless to rail against the injustice.” She nudged her mare back into a trot. “Come, enough of this ugly talk. Let

us enjoy the fine weather while we can.”

They continued in a more peaceful silence. Despite herself, Victoria soon relaxed into the ride, letting the calm, natural beauty soothe her. By unspoken agreement, they avoided the Serpentine and other popular areas, seeking the sanctuary of the park’s quieter paths.

Nearly an hour passed pleasantly before Madeline reluctantly announced she must return home soon. Victoria, not yet ready to face the turmoil awaiting her at Newton House, politely declined to join her.

“I shall ride a while longer. The fresh air has done me good.” She managed a convincing smile.

Madeline looked doubtful but agreed reluctantly. “Just take care. And try not to stay out too long.”

With a final wave, her cousin turned her mare around and trotted off. Victoria watched her go, envying the comforting normality of home that Madeline returned to. Things had been strained with her own family long before this scandal broke. Now it seemed irreparable.

Shaking off the gloomy thought, she set off again at an ambling trot. She told herself she would circle back soon, though in truth she dreaded facing her father’s temper and the ruined atmosphere. Just a few more minutes of solitude...

Lost in thought, she did not notice the figures approaching on the path ahead until it was too late. Rounding a bend, she came face to face with a trio of fashionably dressed young ladies. They halted their horses abruptly at the sight of her, pretty features twisting in mirrored looks of disdain.



Victoria tensed, instantly recognizing them as daughters of prominent Society families. Forcing calm, she inclined her head politely. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

Her courteous greeting went ignored. Instead, the ringleader, a stunning blonde named Lady Caroline, eyed her riding habit with a curled lip.

“My, how bold you are to still show your face in public, Lady Victoria. One would think a woman of your status would make herself scarce these days.”

Heat flooded Victoria’s cheeks, but she held Caroline’s challenging gaze. “I was not aware I had done anything requiring me to hide away.”

The other girls tittered as Caroline arched a contemptuous eyebrow. “Oh no? Is that not your sister’s sorry plight?” She leaned in and said in a mocking whisper, “We’ve all heard of her little... indiscretion. Tell me, did she even know the father’s name?”

Fury spiked through Victoria. How dare this petty, spoiled child speak so crudely of Aurora! Her hands tightened on the reins until her mare shifted nervously beneath her.

“I will thank you not to repeat vulgar gossip about my sister,” she replied in a clipped, icy tone. “Aurora’s affairs are hardly your concern.”

Caroline shrugged, undeterred. “Perhaps not. But we cannot have women of loose virtue sully Society, can we? It may give the rest of us ladies... ideas.”

Her friends tittered again.

Victoria trembled with rage, barely containing the urge to lunge at her and claw the smug look off her pretty face.

“The only ‘idea’ imparted here,” she said coldly, “is that some sadly still judge a woman’s worth with arrogant ignorance and petty cruelty rather than soundness of character. Now, stand aside.”

Nudging her mare forward, she meant to ride right through their blockading forms.

But Caroline moved swiftly, cutting her off again. “Do not feign outrage when it is your family that has transgressed so foully,” she snarled. “Thanks to your sister’s wanton behavior, your reputation is ruined, Lady Victoria. No respectable gentleman will go near you now.”

The harsh truth was a blow, knocking the breath from Victoria’s lungs. For all her brave defiance, she could not deny the damage Aurora’s fall from grace did to her prospects. Caroline and her ilk were only voicing the ugly whispers echoing across all levels of society.

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she forced icy calm. “You may spew whatever petty cruelty satisfies you. But in the end, no amount of idle gossip can impact one’s character or worth. I know my value.”

She made once again to ride past, but Caroline blocked her yet again. Victoria suppressed a growl of frustration.

“If you were any kind of lady, you would have fled to the country by now to hide your shame,” Caroline scoffed. “But instead, here you are, brazen and unrepentant as ever. It seems you possess your sister’s same wanton streak, after all.”

Victoria saw red, drawing herself up furiously. Enough was enough. This spiteful chit would not make her run off in humiliation. If it was a scene Caroline wanted, she would give her one to remember.

Locking her eyes onto Caroline’s spiteful blue eyes, she replied in a carrying tone designed to attract attention, “I believe the shame here lies with any who would speak so abhorrently to an innocent woman. Does it give you pleasure to attack those who cannot defend themselves?”

Around them, heads began to turn. Caroline flushed, eyes darting nervously at the mounting attention.

Victoria pressed her advantage. “Rather than condemn, you should practice empathy and wisdom enough to know rumors often distort the truth. I will pray one day you mature into a kinder, wiser woman. Until then, good day.”

Turning her mare’s head, she guided the horse forward steadily. This time, the frozen trio parted silently to allow her passage. Victoria kept her gaze fixed ahead, back poker-straight as she rode past with head held high.

Only when she was well out of view did she allow herself to slump, shaking all over. The encounter had rattled her more than she cared to admit. But at least she had held her own with poise. Let them see they could not so easily dampen her spirit.

Still, Caroline’s cruel remarks continued to echo in her mind. Ruined... no respectable gentleman... wanton streak...

Blinking back furious tears, she spurred her mare into a gallop, letting the pounding hooves and rushing wind drown out the hateful words. But nothing could erase the bleak truth they carried. Aurora's downfall had destroyed Victoria's reputation just as irrevocably.

By the time she arrived back at Newton House, she had no more control over the swirling rumors and gossip than the changing winds. Their family now lay at the fickle mercy of Society. And there was not a single thing she or anyone could do about it.

Shoulders slumping, she trudged inside. The entrance hall was finally empty, and the flood of damning letters ceased. But she knew it was only the eye of the storm. Soon enough, more gossip, financial troubles, and her father's temper would crash down upon them.

Wearily climbing up the stairs, she just wanted to throw herself on her bed and surrender to despair. But as she passed the corridor leading to her father's study, raised voices halted her steps.

Frowning, she crept closer. She recognized her father's incensed bellow, though his words were muffled by the heavy oak door. Who was he shouting at?

As she hovered uncertainly in the corridor, the study doors were suddenly yanked open. Victoria shrank back into the shadows as an unfamiliar man stormed out, face mottled with rage. Her father followed on his heels, jabbing an accusatory finger at his back.

"Do not dare threaten me, Sir! I shall not be strong-armed into compliance when it is your wretched son who ruined my daughter!"

The unknown man—tall, imposing, and expensively dressed—whirled with a growl.

“Ruined? They are equally culpable, and you know it! Your daughter is no innocent in this.”

Lord Newton advanced until they stood nearly nose to nose, both shaking with fury. “How dare you, Sir! My Aurora is the epitome of virtue! Your profligate son seduced and ruined her, destroying her reputation!”

Comprehension struck Victoria then. This imposing, well-dressed man must be Joseph Robinson’s father. Which meant...

She crept closer as the argument raged on. They seemed oblivious to her presence.

“If your precious daughter was so virtuous, she would not now be breeding a bastard child!” Mr. Robinson thundered. “Your family is as much to blame as mine! I’ll see you all exposed for the hypocrites that you are!”

Lord Newton paled but stood his ground. “Is that a threat, Sir? Because I promise you will not prosper from this vile scheme. No one of good standing will sympathize with your son once his depraved behavior is known!”

The two men glared daggers, quite beyond reason. Victoria hovered a mere few feet away now, holding her breath. She had never seen her father so enraged and unhinged.

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At last, Mr. Robinson stepped back. “I did not come here to trade insults and threats. I came seeking a reasonable path forward, for both our families’ sakes.” He drew a long breath, visibly composing himself. “Come, let us discuss this matter rationally, without all this heat.”

Lord Newton’s face remained flushed an ugly puce, but Victoria saw common sense pierce through his fury. His broad shoulders slumped slightly as he gave a terse nod.

“Very well. It does neither of us good to succumb to fury.” He waved the other man impatiently toward the study. “Come, we shall try to resolve this mess discreetly.”

The door closed firmly behind them, leaving Victoria staring at it in dismay. She had hoped eavesdropping might reveal some way out of their predicament. Instead, she now realized just how precariously they teetered on the brink of ruin. Slowly, she turned and made her way to her room.

## CHAPTER16

Victoria took a deep breath as she approached the imposing front door of Hayward Manor. She had managed to sneak past the few servants still awake at this late hour and make her way to the Duke’s private study undetected. Now came the truly risky part.

She raised her hand and quickly knocked three times on the heavy wooden door. For a moment, all was silent, and then she heard footsteps approach from within. The door swung open to reveal Simon, dressed down to just his white shirt and trousers, a glass of whiskey in hand. He looked at her with evident surprise.

“Lady Victoria?” he said, clearly not expecting to find her on his doorstep at this hour. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Though his words were polite, his tone held a note of wariness.

Victoria clasped her hands together nervously. “Your Grace, I apologize for the intrusion, but I was hoping I might have a word with you.”

Simon eyed her curiously for a moment before stepping aside. “By all means, do come in.”

Victoria murmured her thanks and brushed past him into the study. Her heart pounded as she heard the door click shut behind her. She was truly alone with him now.

“Can I offer you a drink?” Simon asked, moving to the crystal decanter of whiskey on his desk.

“No, thank you.”

He poured himself another glass before settling into the leather armchair by the fireplace. “Please, have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the matching chair opposite him.

Victoria perched on the edge of the chair, back ramrod straight with tension. Simon took a slow sip of his drink as he regarded her over his glass.

“Forgive me for being blunt, but might I ask what has brought you here at such an hour, unchaperoned?”

Though his expression remained impassive, there was an intensity to his gaze that made Victoria flush.

She twisted her fingers in her lap, unsure how to begin. “I... I’ve come to ask a favor of you, Your Grace.”

Simon’s eyes narrowed slightly. “A favor? What sort of favor?”

Victoria took a shaky breath. This was it. “One that is rather... intimate in nature.”

“Intimate,” Simon repeated slowly. He set down his glass and leaned forward, forearms braced on his knees. “I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific.”

Her cheeks flushed crimson, but she forced herself to maintain eye contact. “I want you to... ruin me. Completely.”

There was a loaded silence.

Simon’s expression was unreadable as he searched her face. “Ruin you,” he said finally. “Are you asking me to compromise your virtue, Lady Victoria?”

Victoria gave a small, jerky nod, unable to find her voice.

Something flashed in Simon’s eyes then, something hot and dangerous that made her pulse quicken. He unfolded from his chair and moved toward her with languid grace. Her breath caught in her chest as he extended a hand to tip her chin up, forcing her to meet his penetrating stare.

“Tell me plainly,” he commanded, his voice low. “Are you asking me to take your innocence? To make you mine?”

Victoria’s lips trembled. “Yes,” she whispered.

For a long moment, Simon simply looked at her, his eyes smoldering. Then his mouth



came crashing down on hers in a blistering kiss. Victoria gasped against his lips, hands coming up to grasp at his shirt. Simon's arm shot out to wrap around her back, pulling her flush against him.

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His kiss was domineering, demanding, heating her blood like nothing she had ever felt before. When they finally broke apart for air, Victoria's head was spinning.

Simon traced his fingers across her swollen lower lip. "Are you certain this is what you want?" he rasped. "There will be no going back from this."

In answer, Victoria twined her arms around his neck and pulled him in for another searing kiss. With a low groan, Simon lifted her effortlessly and carried her over to the wide leather sofa. They fell onto it in a tangle of limbs, hands roaming feverishly over each other.

Victoria moaned as Simon's lips trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down the column of her throat while his fingers worked at the fastenings of her dress. She hardly recognized herself in this wanton creature writhing beneath him.

Victoria's hips tilted against Simon's, her breasts against his chest. Her entire body sent a message that she was now ready to have him.

"You feel so good," Simon whispered.

In response, she unfastened his pants gently and stroked his warm manhood with her hand.

He slid his hands between her legs and worked his middle finger slowly inside her.

"Ooh!" She sighed as he slid his finger deep inside her.

Before she knew it, he was on top of her and pushed his hard manhood inside her. After several thrusts, he had to hold still. If he kept thrusting harder and faster, he would explode due to her tightness. He wanted to come with her.

After a few more thrusts, she couldn't hold it any longer, "Simon... I'm coming!"

Upon feeling her come, he could not hold it any longer and exploded deep inside her.

When at last they lay spent and panting, bodies still entwined, Simon pressed a surprisingly tender kiss to her temple. "Was that sufficient to accomplish your aim?" he murmured, a hint of humor in his tone.

Victoria huffed out a breathless laugh. "I believe so, yes."

Simon's expression turned serious then. He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow to look down at her. "Why did you come to me asking for this?" he asked quietly. "You must have been aware of the risk to your reputation."

Victoria bit her lip, averting her gaze. This was the opening she had been waiting for. "My reputation is already ruined," she admitted softly. "By your brother."

Simon went very still. "What did you say?"

Haltingly at first, and then with growing confidence, Victoria told him about Oliver's despicable blackmail scheme. She confessed the sordid details of how he had threatened to expose her sister Aurora's out-of-wedlock pregnancy unless she agreed to pose as his fiancée.

"He swore the engagement would be brief, just long enough to claim the inheritance," she explained miserably. "I only wanted to protect my sister's honor."

By the time she finished, Simon's expression was thunderous. He got up and began pacing, raking an agitated hand through his hair.

"That underhanded bastard," he bit out. "I'll wring his deceitful neck!"

"Please, don't blame him too harshly," Victoria implored. "I'm the one who agreed to go along with his ruse. I take full responsibility."

Simon whirled to face her. "You were coerced by threats against your family," he said fiercely. "Do not excuse his reprehensible behavior for one moment."

He knelt before her then, taking her hands in his. "You were incredibly brave to come here tonight and reveal the truth. Rest assured, I will put a stop to my brother's schemes immediately."

Victoria's eyes shimmered with tears. "Truly? You believe me?"

"Of course, I believe you," Simon said gruffly. "I know you now to be a woman of integrity."

He brought her hands to his lips in a gesture of respect that surprised her.

Victoria gave him a tremulous smile. "Thank you, Your Grace. You cannot know what a relief it is to unburden myself of this dreadful secret."

Simon's expression turned grim. "We must discuss what is to be done about it now. If word of your sister's condition gets out to more people..."

"It may be too late for that," Victoria admitted bleakly. "I fear Lord Oliver may have already betrayed her confidence. He knows the truth coming from him will destroy my reputation and invalidate our engagement."

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Simon swore under his breath. “Very well. Then we must devise a strategy to combat whatever malicious gossip he has spread.” He stroked a soothing hand over her dark brown hair. “You have my word, I will do everything in my power to shield you and your sister from further harm.”

Overcome with gratitude, Victoria wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close. They stayed locked in a warm embrace until the mantel clock chimed two.

Simon pressed a tender kiss to her forehead as they reluctantly drew apart. “It’s very late. We both need rest before facing what is to come. Sleep well, and know that you do not stand alone in this fight.”

Victoria lifted a hand to cover his. “Good night, Simon,” she whispered. “And thank you, for everything.”

Tonight had brought daring risks, but also unexpected rewards. Thanks to Simon’s stalwart support, she finally had hope of emerging from this nightmare unscathed.

Come what may, she would face it standing tall at his side.

\* \* \*

Victoria awoke with a start, her heart racing as she heard angry voices outside the door. It took a moment for her to get her bearings in the unfamiliar room, blinking against the pre-dawn light filtering through the curtains. She was in Simon’s study, she realized with a jolt of alarm. They must have fallen asleep together after...

A flush rose to her cheeks as memories of the previous night came flooding back. The way Simon had kissed her so passionately. The feeling of his hands on her skin as they gave in to their desires, consequences be damned. It had been reckless—dangerous, even. But at that moment, all she wanted was him.

The harsh voices outside the door grew louder, jolting Victoria back to the present. She could make out Oliver's slurred tones, demanding to speak to his brother. Her blood turned to ice. If he found them like this, there was no telling what he might do.

Victoria leaped from the sofa, hurriedly gathering her discarded gown and undergarments. "Your Grace," she whispered urgently. "Wake up, we have to get dressed!"

Simon stirred, sitting up in bed. Recognition sparked in his eyes as he, too, heard his brother's angry demands. He was on his feet in an instant, his eyes flashing with a protective anger.

Victoria struggled to lace up her gown, her fingers fumbling in her haste. Before she could finish, the study door flew open. Oliver stood in the doorway, his eyes blazing. For a moment, he stared wordlessly at the pair of them, taking in their state of dishevelment and the rumpled bedsheets.

"Well, well," Oliver snarled, his lip curling. "Isn't this cozy?"

"Oliver—" Simon began in a warning tone, moving to place himself between Victoria and his brother.

But Oliver was quicker, shoving past Simon to grab Victoria roughly by the arms. She cried out in pain and alarm as his fingers dug into her flesh.

"Let her go," Simon growled, his body rigid with barely suppressed rage.

Oliver laughed cruelly. “Oh, no, dear brother. You don’t get to make demands right now.” He yanked Victoria tighter against him, eliciting another pained yelp. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out about your sordid, little affair? That you could make a fool out of me so easily?”

Victoria shuddered at the madness glinting in Oliver’s eyes. This was the side of him she had hoped to never see again after he had blackmailed her into this engagement.

“I see how it is now,” Oliver continued bitterly. “You stole what should have been mine. My title, my inheritance... and now you want my betrothed, too.”

“I stole nothing. She was never yours,” Simon said through gritted teeth. “Now let her go, Oliver. Don’t make me tell you again.”

But Oliver was beyond reason. With another harsh laugh, he snarled, “If this harlot is what you want, dear brother, then she’s what I’ll take from you!”

And with that, he began dragging a struggling Victoria toward the door. She cried out and fought against him, but his grip on her was steely.

Something in Simon snapped. With an enraged roar, he charged at Oliver, tearing Victoria from his grasp. The brothers crashed to the floor, landing blows.

“Stop!” Victoria screamed. She had to break this up before they killed each other or someone came to investigate the commotion.

Thinking quickly, she grabbed a vase from a nearby table and dumped the contents over the brawling pair. They broke apart, sputtering in shock as water dripped into their eyes.

Taking advantage of their distraction, Victoria placed herself between them. “Get

ahold of yourselves!” she shouted. “Before this gets any further out of hand.”

Simon looked at her with dawning awareness, chest heaving from exertion and rage. The cold water seemed to have shocked him back to his senses.

He turned his glare on Oliver. “You will leave this instant,” he commanded, “before I forget you’re my brother and do something we’ll both regret.”

Oliver opened his mouth furiously to retort, but one look at Simon’s thunderous expression made him think better of it. With a growled curse, he turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.



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The silence that followed rang in Victoria's ears. Slowly, she turned to face Simon. He was staring down at his bloodied knuckles, a haunted look in his dark brown eyes. Victoria's heart ached for the pain she saw there. Hesitantly, she approached him, taking his hands in hers.

"Your Grace, look at me," she entreated softly.

He raised his head, the torment clear on his face. "I could have killed him," he rasped. "God help me, I wanted to. My brother..." His voice broke.

"But you didn't," Victoria soothed. "I stopped you in time. No real harm was done."

Except perhaps to the brothers' relationship, she thought sadly. She knew how much family meant to Simon, despite his efforts to pretend otherwise. This rift between him and Oliver had shaken him.

Simon searched her face, some of the anguish fading from his eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked gruffly, taking in her disheveled appearance. "Did he hurt you?"

Victoria gave a shaky laugh. "Just some bruises, nothing lasting. Although we may need to work on your brother's manners."

Her weak jest elicited a flicker of a smile from Simon. The sight filled her heart with warmth, even as the adrenaline of the morning's events began to fade, leaving her legs unsteady.

Sensing her fatigue, Simon gently led her to sit on the edge of the bed. He lifted one

of her hands, turning it over to press a fervent kiss to her palm.

“Forgive me,” he murmured, his breath warm on her skin. “You were caught in the middle of something ugly, something you should never have witnessed.” His jaw tightened, self-loathing plain on his face.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Victoria said gently. “I only wish I could have spared you such pain.”

She longed to soothe away the shadows behind his eyes, to show him he was not as cold and hardened as he believed.

Simon sighed heavily. “I should take you home. The sun will be up soon, and the servants will be about. It won’t do for you to be found here, for both our sakes.”

He was right, of course. They had been reckless enough for one night. Still, the thought of leaving the shelter of his arms filled Victoria with dread of what the coming days would bring. There would be consequences for their actions, she was certain.

But that was a worry for later. Right now, she cherished these last stolen moments with him. Victoria leaned up and brought her lips to Simon’s in a soft, lingering kiss. His arms encircled her waist, pulling her close as he returned the gentle caress, a world away from the frantic passion of the night before.

When at last they drew apart, Victoria found a tentative hope in place of the desolation in Simon’s eyes. They did not speak as they finished dressing, movements slow and almost reverent. Whatever happened next, they would face it together. She was sure of it now.

Simon escorted her silently through the quiet, dim halls and out to the waiting

carriage. The sky was just beginning to turn purple with the approaching dawn. As Victoria settled into her seat for the ride back to her family's townhouse, she met Simon's gaze one last time.

"Be safe," he told her gruffly. "I... I will come for you soon."

Victoria nodded, blinking back an unexpected tear. "And you. Don't lose faith."

With a final, lingering look, Victoria motioned for the driver to take off. She settled back against the plush velvet seat, emotions swirling through her like the morning fog. There was much to come. Her sister's shameful secret was out now, with no telling what their father would do. And who knew what new torment Oliver might devise after this night?

But through all the uncertainty, Victoria clung to the memory of Simon's touch, his kiss, the look in his eyes when he swore to come for her.

No matter what happened, she could face it, as long as he was by her side.

\* \* \*

Victoria slipped quietly back into Newton House, relieved to find the servants still asleep as dawn approached. She hadn't been missed, it seemed. Moving softly up the stairs to her bedchamber, she couldn't help smiling a little as she recalled the passionate night in Simon's arms. He knew the truth now about her engagement to Oliver. They had a real chance at happiness.

Her smile faded though as she remembered Oliver's drunken rage when he'd found them together in Simon's study. The violent fight between the brothers had shaken her badly. If she hadn't stopped Simon when she did...

Shivering, Victoria entered her room. She had just begun undressing when a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” Victoria called.

The door opened to reveal her cousin Madeline, candle in hand, her pretty face creased in concern.

“Victoria! There you are, thank heavens,” Madeline cried. “I’ve been searching everywhere for you.”

“Madeline, what on earth are you doing up at this hour?” Victoria asked in surprise.

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Madeline set the candle down and earnestly took Victoria's hands in hers. "I was so worried when you didn't come to bed last night. I had to know you were safe." She searched her face. "Where were you?"

Victoria sighed, too weary to dissemble. "I went to see His Grace," she confessed. "I had to tell him the truth about my engagement to Lord Oliver."

Madeline's eyes went wide. "You told His Grace? About the blackmail and everything?" At Victoria's nod, she asked, "How did he take it?"

Flushing, Victoria looked away. "He was... very understanding. We agreed."

Madeline studied her knowingly. "That's not all, though, is it? Victoria, did something happen between you and the Duke?"

Victoria's cheeks grew warmer. She glanced at her cousin shyly. "We may have gotten a bit... carried away," she admitted. "I couldn't help myself, Madeline. Being with His Grace just felt so right, so perfect."

"Oh, Victoria!" Madeline cried, embracing her impulsively. "I'm so pleased for you. I knew you and His Grace shared a powerful connection."

Victoria hugged her back, but her expression was troubled. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. This morning, Lord Oliver discovered us together in a compromising position. He was in a rage."

Madeline pulled back, stricken. "What happened? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Shaking her head, Victoria continued gravely, “His Grace protected me, but he and Lord Oliver fought violently. I had to stop them before it went too far.” She shivered at the memory.

“How awful,” Madeline breathed, taking Victoria’s hand in hers comfortingly. “What a dreadful mess this has all become.”

“Indeed,” Victoria agreed wearily. She sat on the edge of the bed, drawing Madeline down beside her. “I fear Lord Oliver will only make matters worse now. But I must trust that His Grace will find a way to free me from this engagement.”

Madeline nodded. “Of course, he will. His Grace won’t abandon you to Lord Oliver, not after you bared your heart to him.” She bit her lip. “But what about your sister, now that His Grace knows about her... situation?”

Pain lanced through Victoria at the thought of Aurora, banished to the country on their father’s orders. “I mean to bring her home,” she said fiercely. “Back where she belongs, scandal be damned. But Father will be furious if I dare do that.”

“We will think of something,” Madeline said stoutly. “Have faith. All will be well.”

Victoria managed a small smile, grateful for her dear cousin’s stalwart support. But inwardly, she harbored a fear that she had endangered them all by placing her trust in Simon.

Just then, the mantel clock chimed six. Victoria started, realizing the servants would be rising any moment. “You should get back to your room,” she told Madeline urgently.

“Of course.” Madeline stood up, pausing to give Victoria’s hand one last comforting squeeze. “Stay strong, Cousin. This storm will pass.”

With a final swift embrace, Madeline slipped quietly out of the room.

Alone again, Victoria moved slowly to the window overlooking the shadowed street below. Somewhere out there, she knew Simon was awake, too, thinking of her. She only prayed he truly understood the danger she and her loved ones now faced, and that he would find a way to shelter them from the coming storm.

## CHAPTER 17

It had been over a week since that night of passion they had shared when she had given in to her desire and let Simon take her virtue. She flushed now, remembering the intimacy they had experienced, the passion that had ignited between them.

Afterward, he held her close until she drifted off to sleep in his arms. And then had come the terrible fight the following morning. The hurtful words Oliver said in anger.

With a heavy sigh, Victoria set her sewing aside. She had hoped to hear from Simon after that night together, hoped he would contact her to speak about what had happened between them. Yet, there had been only silence from him this last week and more.

Rising, she moved restlessly to the window. Why was she allowing that vexing, complicated man to occupy her thoughts so? He had made sure to make her life difficult at every turn. And yet... she could not deny the spark of real feeling that had been ignited.

But perhaps she was alone in that. Simon still saw her as merely a means to an end. It was foolish of her to pine after a man who likely regretted their passionate interlude. She needed to harden her heart and remove him from her mind entirely.

At that moment, the front door opened, and her father's cheerful voice echoed up

from the entry hall as he conversed with the butler. Curious about what had him in such good spirits, Victoria started down the stairs.

“Victoria! Come quickly, I have excellent news!” her father called enthusiastically.

With growing unease, Victoria joined him in the study. “You seem very cheerful, Father. What has happened?”

“Marvelous news, my dear, truly marvelous!” He rubbed his hands together with glee. “I’ve just had word that Lord Carmicheal has agreed to invest in my latest business endeavor, despite his earlier reluctance. A glowing character reference from an anonymous nobleman tipped the scales in my favor.”



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“How fortuitous,” Victoria replied, attempting to match his cheerful tone while her disquiet grew.

“Yes, everything is falling into place now,” her father continued exuberantly. “This will give me the credibility I need to finally make real progress. Our fortunes will soon rise, mark my words!”

“I hope so,” Victoria offered weakly, her thoughts racing.

This sudden reversal seemed too opportune, coming so soon after Simon’s sudden silence. She needed to discover whether he was somehow behind this.

Making an excuse, Victoria went in search of her cousin Madeline. Finding her reading in the morning room, she quickly relayed the news.

“This all seems quite a coincidence,” Madeline agreed with a frown. “Could His Grace be involved?”

Victoria paced in agitation. “I suspect as much, though his motives elude me. He must mean to place my family in his debt, or strengthen his hand in some way.”

“You may be right.” Madeline set her book aside. “I can subtly make some inquiries if you like. There are always rumors circulating.”

“Please do.” Victoria twisted her hands. “I must learn if His Grace is behind this.”

In the following days, Victoria waited tensely for Madeline to gather information, all

while maintaining a facade of contentment when her father boasted of his sudden reversal of fortune. Her thoughts churned with uneasy speculation.

At last, Madeline approached Victoria with a grave expression, drawing her aside. In hushed tones, she reported what she had learned. “It is just as you feared. Rumors link His Grace to your father’s new investor. He provided a glowing character reference that convinced Lord Dalton to hand over a significant sum.”

Victoria’s pulse quickened, though she kept her face impassive. “I see. Did you learn anything of his motives?”

Madeline shook her head. “No, only that he intervened on your father’s behalf. But whatever his reasons, they are unlikely to be altruistic.”

Pacing away, Victoria pressed a hand to her furrowed brow. Why would Simon interfere in her family’s affairs so? Was it merely a ploy to get closer to her father for their false betrothal? Or something more sinister? His actions made no sense to her.

Over the following days, Victoria wrestled with the question of Simon’s motives. When next she saw him, she was determined to subtly extract the truth from him. She would need to proceed carefully, neither leaping to accusations nor letting her conflicted emotions cloud her judgment. Much depended on maintaining clarity of purpose.

But Simon did not call, nor make any attempt to contact her. As the days passed with no word, Victoria grew increasingly frustrated with herself for waiting, for expecting anything at all from that vexing man. She needed to put him out of her mind and focus on uncovering the truth through other means. There must be some clue as to his motives in assisting her father. She only had to find it.

Nearly a week had gone by when late one afternoon, an exuberant knock sounded at

the front door. Victoria heard her father rush to answer it himself, his jubilant voice carrying to where she sat attempting to read in the parlor.

“Lord Huntington, welcome! To what do I owe the honor?”

Victoria set her book aside, smoothing her expression as she listened to the men’s conversation.

“I’ve come to discuss expanding our investment, now that things are progressing so well,” Lord Carmicheal replied. “Thanks in large part to your mysterious benefactor’s endorsement. Tell me, did you ever learn who it was?”

“Why no, the referral came anonymously through my solicitor,” her father answered. “Quite mysteriously. But no matter, it has certainly borne fruit!”

“Remarkable,” Lord Huntington mused. “Well, whoever it was has my gratitude as well. Our venture promises to be most lucrative now...”

Their voices faded down the hall toward the study. Victoria remained frozen in thought, her heartbeat quickening. Here was a possible clue, if she could just learn who had provided the character reference that started it all. Determined, she rose and hurried off in search of Madeline. Her resourceful cousin had a lot of contacts. Surely between them, they could unravel this mystery.

She found Madeline arranging flowers in the conservatory and quickly shared what she had overheard. “If we can discover who gave that recommendation, it may lead us to His Grace,” Victoria reasoned. “Can you help?”

Madeline set aside her shears, brow furrowed. “Hmm. That will take some doing, but I may know where to start asking subtle questions. Leave it to me.”

In the following week, they worked together to cautiously make inquiries amongst Madeline's friends and acquaintances. Victoria held her breath each time Madeline approached her, hoping she had finally uncovered the truth.

But day after day, it was the same—either ignorance or vague rumors that led nowhere. Still, they persisted, determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. Too much was at stake for Victoria to simply let it be.

Late one evening, Madeline hurried to Victoria's room in a state of excitement. "I have it!" she exclaimed. "The character reference came from a Mr. Harold Kenfield. And when I made discreet mention of him to Lady Haversham, she hinted he has ties to His Grace!"

"Mr. Kenfield..." Victoria turned the name over, pondering its significance. "So you believe he acted on behalf of His Grace?"

"It seems likely. I know Lady Haversham is something of a gossip, but she did appear in earnest." Madeline gave a satisfied smile. "What will you do with this information?"

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Victoria paced slowly. “I am not yet certain. But you have given me a thread I can follow to hopefully unravel the truth of the Duke’s motives. Thank you, dear cousin.” She embraced Madeline warmly.

After her cousin had gone, Victoria readied herself for bed, but her mind still churned actively. Though she now had a clue linking Simon to her father’s new investors, his reasons eluded her. She would need to tread carefully going forward, neither leaping to accusations nor letting her conflicted emotions for him sway her judgment.

Too much depended on maintaining clarity of purpose. But she was determined to uncover the real motive behind his interference, no matter what it took. With time and care, she would find a way to uncover the truth.

\* \* \*

The morning sun streamed in through the dining room windows as Victoria picked at her breakfast. Her father was immersed in reading the newspaper while Madeline nibbled delicately on toast across the table.

Though the food before her was delicious, Victoria found she had little appetite. Her thoughts kept returning to the Duke and his puzzling interference in her family’s affairs.

A footman entered, carrying the morning post on a silver tray. Victoria paid it little mind until her father made a small exclamation.

“A letter from your sister,” he said, frowning at the envelope before passing it to

Victoria.

Taking it with surprise, Victoria examined the handwriting. It was indeed from Aurora. Breaking the seal, she unfolded the letter and quickly read its contents. As she did, her hazel eyes widened, and her grip on the paper tightened unconsciously.

“Is something the matter, dear?” her father asked.

Victoria raised her gaze to his, mind racing. How much to reveal? “It... it seems Aurora has received an unexpected endowment from a benefactor. A long lost relative, she says.”

“Indeed?” The Earl sat forward, intrigued. “How extraordinary. Is it someone we know?”

“She does not provide a name,” Victoria hedged. “Only that it has given her sufficient means to establish her household.”

“Remarkable,” her father mused. “But why should that trouble you so?”

Victoria bit her lip. No more avoiding it now. “Because she writes that she intends to marry Joseph Robinson with this newfound independence. She believes you can no longer refuse her now.”

“What!?” The Earl shot to his feet, face mottling with rage. “Marry that... that commoner? I’ll not allow it!”

“The letter seems to imply they intend to wed with or without your approval,” Victoria said quietly. Inside, her emotions roiled.

Her father paced, incensed. “This is unacceptable! Ungrateful girl, after all the

sacrifices I made for her well-being. I'll not stand to have my family tainted by such an unsuitable match!"

Victoria sat very still, clutching the letter tightly. Across from her, Madeline watched with worried eyes.

"No," the Earl continued heatedly, "I shall leave for the country estate at once and put a stop to this folly!"

He stormed out of the room, shouting for his valet and carriage to be readied immediately.

The silence he left behind rang in Victoria's ears. Her blood pounded with emotion. This mysterious benefactor, enabling Aurora to flout their father's will in such a way... could it be the Duke again? What possible reason could he have to interfere so directly in their family affairs now?

"Victoria?" Madeline's tentative voice broke through her racing thoughts. "Are you quite all right?"

Looking up, Victoria met her cousin's concerned gaze. She realized her hands were shaking. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed the letter carefully on her lap.

"I do not know," she admitted unsteadily. "I must go speak with Father before he departs."

Folding the letter with precise motions, Victoria rose on still-trembling legs. Madeline reached out and grasped her hand comfortingly before releasing her. Drawing strength from that supportive touch, Victoria left the dining room in search of her father.

She found him in his study, furiously scribbling a letter. He looked up impatiently as she entered. “Come to plead your sister’s case? I’ll not hear it. She has defied me for the last time.”

Victoria took a slow breath. “Father, I ask you to reconsider. Forbidding the marriage will only drive Aurora further away.”

He slammed a hand on his desk. “You dare suggest I simply accept this stain on our family? That chit has made a mockery of all my careful plans!”

“But if you truly want what is best for her, for all of us, you must let her choose her path.” Victoria implored him earnestly.



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Her father's face only hardened further. "Best for her? Marrying some insignificant physician will ruin her prospects completely! I am thinking only of her future."

Victoria hesitated. Time to change tack. "Father... does it not seem strange, this sudden benefactor enabling Aurora to flout your will so?" She watched him closely. "I cannot believe she did not divulge the details to you unless she felt you would not approve."

The Earl waved a hand dismissively. "Likely some distant relative looking to make amends. It changes nothing."

Pressing further, Victoria said carefully, "Could it be someone with... ulterior motives? The timing seems quite convenient."

That gave him pause, doubt flickering in his eyes. Victoria held her breath.

But then he shook his head. "Preposterous. You have become too suspicious, daughter." Straightening, he said firmly, "No, I will put a stop to this at once. It is for the good of this family."

Despair swept over Victoria as she recognized the implacability of his stance. As a last resort, she tried once more. "Please, Father, do not make any rash decisions. At least consult with me upon your return."

He sighed impatiently. "Very well, if it will put your mind at ease. But my resolve will not change." Taking up the letter he had been writing, her father melted wax to seal it with his signet ring. "There. I have written to the estate manager that Aurora is

expressly forbidden from marrying until I arrive.”

Victoria’s heart sank. She opened her mouth to continue pleading with him, but just then the butler entered to inform them the carriage was prepared for his immediate departure.

Her father waved her off. “I must be on my way. Upon my return, we shall discuss this matter further.”

With that, he strode out of the study, letter in hand.

Victoria remained frozen for a long moment after he left. His highhanded actions, defying Aurora’s clear wishes, galled her. And she still suspected some outside interference from the Duke, though she had no proof.

What should she do?

Mind made up, Victoria hurried to intercept her father before he departed. She caught him just as he was climbing into the carriage.

“Father, wait!” she called breathlessly.

He turned back impatiently. “What is it now?”

Victoria lifted her chin. “I ask you again to reconsider this course. Forbidding Aurora will only lead to greater unhappiness.”

Her father’s look turned stern. “We have already been over this. My decision is final.”

Anger and frustration boiled up in Victoria. “But you cannot control Aurora’s fate!

She has the right to make her own choice.”

“That is enough!” he snapped. “You forget yourself. Get in the house at once.”

But Victoria would not be silenced this time. “No, I will speak! Can you not see this will only drive Aurora away? You must accept that she can decide her future.”

For a moment, she thought she saw his stern facade waver. But then his mouth flattened into a hard line. “My word is final,” he bit out. “Do not test me further.”

Her father sat back in the carriage and rapped sharply for the driver to depart.

Victoria stood motionless, watching until the carriage disappeared down the drive. The bitter tang of defeat filled her mouth.

## CHAPTER 18

Victoria had failed to sway her father from this disastrous course. And if her suspicions about Simon’s interference were correct, matters were even worse than she had realized.

Slowly turning back to the house, Victoria considered what should be done next. If only she could learn more about this mysterious benefactor! Inside, she found Madeline hovering anxiously in the hall. Victoria quickly relayed what had transpired with her father.

“He will not listen to reason,” she finished despairingly. “But I am now certain someone means to manipulate events, and I fear what it portends.”

Madeline wrung her hands. “Oh, dear. What will you do?”

Victoria paced, thoughts churning. If this was Simon's work, his aims eluded her. But she knew with sudden conviction that she could not stand idly by.

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Coming to a decision, she turned to Madeline resolutely. “I must go after my father and speak with Aurora myself. It may already be too late to prevent any schemes, but I need to learn the truth.”

Madeline’s eyes widened. “To Shropshire? But the journey alone...”

“I know. But I cannot sit here, waiting helplessly any longer.” Victoria grasped her cousin’s hands. “Tell no one except the servants preparing my bags. I do not wish to be delayed.”

Madeline still looked uneasy, but she nodded loyally. “I understand. Be careful, my dear. I shall cover for you here.”

Impulsively, Victoria hugged her cousin tightly. Drawing back, she dashed upstairs to hastily pack a small valise. Her mind whirled with plans and contingencies as she changed into a sturdy traveling dress. She scribbled a quick letter to Madeline with instructions should her absence be questioned. Then, slipping her folded letter to Aurora into her pocket, Victoria stole quietly back downstairs.

She was relieved to find Madeline had followed her directives—a nondescript hired carriage waited at the back of the house. The coachman, one of their most trusted servants, was instructed to drive her swiftly and discreetly to the country estate. He had also procured a pistol and stout cudgel for her protection on the road.

After tearful farewells with her cousin, Victoria allowed the footman to hand her into the unmarked carriage. As they set off, she took deep breaths, trying to calm her anxiously pounding heart. Alone, unchaperoned, undertaking such a reckless

course—it went against everything ingrained in her by Society. But she would not falter. She had to reach Aurora and uncover the truth before it was too late.

The bumpy roads and rattling carriage allowed little rest as they traveled swiftly day and night. During the long hours, Victoria’s mind turned over all she knew and suspected about recent events. Her father, obsessed with status, refused Aurora any choice. Simon’s unexplained assistance in securing investment for her father. And now this—Aurora was able to marry her beloved thanks to anonymous funds. It made no sense, unless Simon was deliberately intervening for his murky purpose.

What could he mean to gain by creating such turmoil in their family? Victoria had no answers, only an ominous feeling that she was witnessing the early stages of some byzantine scheme. Well, she would do everything in her power to thwart it.

They reached the estate late on the second night. A servant announced Victoria’s presence to her sister, and soon Aurora herself flew down the stairs to embrace her.

“Victoria! What on earth are you doing here?” Aurora drew back, searching her sister’s face anxiously.

Taking Aurora’s hands in hers, Victoria squeezed them and tried to smile. “I had to see you. I hope you do not mind my sudden visit?”

“Of course not. But I don’t understand...” Aurora trailed off as quick footsteps approached down the hall.

A tall young man appeared, his gentle face lighting up at the sight of the sisters together.

Aurora turned with a radiant smile. “Joseph, come meet my sister Victoria.”

As he bowed politely over her hand, Victoria studied him with interest. His refined dress and speech revealed him as a gentleman, though untitled. She thought she detected wariness in his eyes, but his smile was warm.

“Welcome, Lady Victoria. Your sister speaks of you often.” Glancing between them, he added, “I will give you time to talk.” He and Aurora exchanged loving looks before he withdrew.

Drawing Victoria into the parlor, Aurora turned to her eagerly. “Now, please, tell me why you have come all this way. Has something happened?”

Victoria hesitated, unsure how much to reveal of her suspicions. But she needed Aurora’s full trust now. “Father intends to come here as soon as he can to stop your marriage,” she confessed directly. “I hoped to arrive first and speak with you.”

Aurora’s smile faded. “I feared he would react harshly to the news. But it changes nothing—Joseph and I will be wed.”

“Because of this unknown benefactor?” Victoria watched her sister closely.

Looking down, Aurora smoothed her dress. “Yes. I did not wish to go behind Father’s back, but we saw no other way.”

Victoria gently took her sister’s hands in her own. “Aurora, I must know... who provided these mysterious funds? What do you know about them?”

Aurora chewed her lip. “Truly, almost nothing. I never even met them. The solicitor said only that the money came from a long lost great-uncle wishing to make amends.”

“But how could you not know of such an uncle?” Victoria asked in confusion.

With a sigh, Aurora said, “Joseph made some quiet inquiries, but little could be verified. We decided not to question our good fortune further.”

Pacing away, Victoria pressed a fist to her mouth. Her suspicions were confirmed—some outside force was pulling strings just out of sight.

Aurora came to her side, brow creased. “Why does this trouble you so? It changes nothing about my choice.”

Victoria turned back to her sister sharply. “It changes everything if your fate is being dictated by an unknown party! What is their aim in this, I wonder?”

Aurora blinked. “Surely no one would object to two people marrying for love?”



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“You underestimate the manipulations some are capable of.” Victoria took a deep breath. “Sister, I have reason to believe the Duke of Hayward is behind this.”

Aurora’s eyes widened. “The Duke? But why?”

Haltingly, Victoria explained her suspicions about Simon’s dealings with their father and the carefully timed assistance he had rendered to each of them.

Aurora listened in dismay. “You believe he means to control us? But what could he possibly gain?” she asked in bewilderment when Victoria had finished.

“I do not yet know. But we must be cautious.” Victoria squeezed her sister’s hands. “Tell no one of my suspicions, not even Joseph. I do not know how deep this deception runs. For now, you must act normally, but be on your guard.”

Still looking troubled, Aurora nodded. “I will. Thank you for the warning. But...” She hesitated. “What if you are wrong about the Duke’s motives? What if he genuinely means to help?”

Victoria briefly considered it. Could she be mistaken? But no, there were too many odd links and coincidences. “I cannot take that risk,” she said firmly.

Aurora stared, then embraced Victoria tightly. “I will be careful, I promise. And I am so grateful you are here.”

Despite everything, Victoria returned her sister’s embrace warmly. She meant to protect this newfound happiness, not curtail it. Drawing back, she asked, “Have you

set a date for the wedding?”

“We thought this Saturday before Father can interfere.” Anxiety flickered in Aurora’s eyes.

Victoria gripped her shoulders reassuringly. “Then I will remain until you are wed. We shall face whatever comes together.”

Aurora’s smile broke through like the sun. Impulsively, she hugged Victoria again, half laughing, half crying. “Thank you. I am so glad you came.”

Over the next few days, an air of tense excitement filled the house as Aurora and the staff prepared for the upcoming nuptials. Victoria did her best to share her sister’s obvious joy, but inwardly, she remained on edge, watchful for any sign of interference from the Duke.

Where was he in all this? Lurking just out of sight, pulling their strings? It made her blood boil.

Joseph seemed equally wary, though he tried to hide it when with Aurora. Victoria wondered how much her sister had told him. She hoped he would prove worthy of trust. If not, they were all lost.

\* \* \*

Two days before the wedding, Victoria retreated to the garden to clear her head. Aurora was preoccupied with fittings, but Victoria had been unable to settle indoors. She strolled restlessly down the garden paths, frustration mounting inside her. The waiting, the not knowing... it tore at her composure. She longed to confront the Duke, to unleash her fury and demand answers. Only the need for discretion held her in check.

A snapping twig broke the stillness. Heart leaping, Victoria whirled, half expecting to find her nemesis standing there. But it was only Joseph, evidently also seeking solitude among the hedges.

He looked abashed at disturbing her. “Forgive me, Lady Victoria. I did not mean to startle you.”

Victoria released a shaky breath, pressing a hand over her pounding heart. “It is nothing. I am a bit on edge of late.”

His expression reflected understanding. “We all are. It is difficult not knowing what may come.”

Victoria studied him, considering. Here was one who might comprehend the dangers. Impulsively, she asked, “What do you know of my suspicions... about His Grace? Has Aurora said anything?”

Joseph’s eyes flickered warily at her directness. “Only that you believe he is somehow entangled in this. But I confess I do not understand his motives.”

“Just so. Nor do I.” Victoria’s hands clenched in frustration. “I cannot fathom why he meddles in our affairs so. But I mean to find out.”

Pacing away, she wrestled with indecision. Could she bring Joseph into her confidence? Having an ally might be wise. But would he credit her wild suspicions about a peer of the realm?

Turning back, she met his gaze resolutely. “I need the truth of what you think. Do you believe me mad for doubting Simon’s motives when he has shown you such favor?”

Joseph considered carefully before answering. “I think little is ever as simple as it appears. But I do know this...” He met her eyes earnestly. “I mean only to make your sister happy. If you believe something threatens that, I will help if I can.”

Victoria released a slow breath, resolve hardening within her. She would accept his promise, for now. Together, they may yet untangle this web of deception.

“My thanks,” she said simply. “Then let us speak no more of suspicions today, and join Aurora in preparing for Saturday.”

He nodded, offering his arm to escort her back inside. As they walked, he remarked carefully, “Your presence has brought Aurora much joy. I am glad you’re here for our wedding.”

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Victoria managed a genuine smile. “As am I. I only wish Father would accept Aurora’s choices in life.” She shook her head ruefully. “But for now, let us enjoy this happy occasion.”

The next two days passed swiftly in a whirl of wedding preparations—flowers, decorations, menus. Watching Aurora shine with quiet joy, Victoria determinedly put aside her worries and suspicions for the moment. This was her sister’s time.

The day of the ceremony dawned bright and fair as if the weather itself approved of the match. Victoria helped Aurora dress, brimming with sisterly pride to see her so radiant on her wedding day.

If Aurora had any lingering worries, she did not show it as she pledged her troth. Watching the couple exchange vows, Victoria unexpectedly felt tears prick her eyes. However vexing the circumstances, theirs was a love match. She could find no fault in that, whatever devilry had enabled it.

At the wedding breakfast, Victoria raised her glass in a heartfelt toast. “I wish you both the greatest joy, always. Know I am here whenever you need me.”

Aurora embraced her happily, and for just a moment, all seemed right with the world.

Later, as the bride and groom slipped away to begin their new life together, Victoria finally allowed her worries to resurface. She had received no word from her father—he had failed to stop the wedding in time. Where that left matters, she did not know. But she would face it soon enough.

For today, she waved merrily as the carriage bore Aurora and Joseph toward their future. Whatever storms lay ahead, let them have this moment. They were together now, beyond anyone's power to separate them. Not even a duke could sunder such devotion.

Watching the carriage disappear down the lane, Victoria felt a bittersweet mix of emotions. She was incredibly happy for her sister, yet uneasy about returning home to deal with the fallout. At least Aurora was safely married. That had been worth any risk.

Squaring her shoulders, Victoria turned back to the house. Time enough later to worry over consequences. For now, she would rest and gather her strength. Her father's reaction, when he learned of the marriage, would likely be volatile. But she would handle it with grace. Aurora's happiness was all that mattered.

In a few days, Victoria would return home to face the storm. But she did not travel alone. Come what may, she and Aurora would stand together, united in spirit if not presence. Tonight, she whispered a prayer for her sister's lifelong joy. The rest would unfold as it must.

## CHAPTER 19

Victoria hurried down the cobblestone streets of London, her slippered feet carrying her as quickly as propriety would allow toward the Duke's townhouse. Her heart pounded in her chest, though whether from exertion or anxious anticipation, she could not say. A day ago, she had borne witness to the secret wedding of her beloved sister Aurora to the man she loved. It was a bittersweet affair, full of joy at their union, yet tempered by the secrecy required to protect Aurora's reputation.

Upon returning home, Victoria's mind turned to the Duke. Though she still struggled to comprehend his motives, Simon had provided the funds needed for Aurora's

wedding and establishment, granting her the independence their father would not. Victoria itched to understand why he would show such unexpected generosity toward her family, given the inauspicious start to their association.

Halting before the imposing double doors, Victoria gathered her nerve and used the ornate door knocker. Moments later, the butler greeted her and ushered her inside.

“Lady Victoria,” he intoned, before departing to announce her presence.

Victoria paced the marble-floored entrance hall, wringing her hands in agitation. Soon the click of boots presaged the Duke’s arrival.

“Lady Victoria.” Simon inclined his head politely. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Victoria drew a steadying breath. “Your Grace, I have come to speak with you about a delicate matter. Might we speak privately?”

Simon raised an eyebrow, then gestured for her to follow him down the hall. He led them to a handsomely appointed study and closed the door behind them.

“Please, have a seat,” he said, taking a chair by the fireplace.

Victoria perched on the settee opposite him. “Thank you for seeing me. I realize this visit is quite improper. However, the matter simply could not wait.”

Simon nodded for her to continue.

Victoria twisted her hands in her lap. “I understand that it was you who provided the funds for my sister’s wedding and establishment.”

“That is correct,” Simon affirmed.

“Forgive me for being blunt, but might I ask why? After the way we met, I would not have expected such kindness from you.”

A ghost of a smile crossed Simon’s face. “Let us simply say that upon further reflection, I thought better of my initial judgments of your character.”

Victoria flushed. “Be that as it may, your actions have granted Aurora the independence my father would have denied her. You cannot comprehend what peace of mind that brings me. So, in that respect, you have my eternal gratitude.”

Simon inclined his head. “Think nothing of it. I am pleased to have been of service.”

Victoria took a deep breath. “However, it is for that very reason that I have come. If you truly did this out of regard for me, then I must ask you to refrain from further such actions.”



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Simon's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid you have lost me, Lady Victoria. Have I not aided your sister in achieving the life she desires? Is that not what you wished as well? I thought this was the best way to restore your family's reputation."

Victoria wrung her hands. "Of course, and I cannot express how deeply grateful I am. But... if this was intended as a gesture of care for me, as I suspect... then you must stop. Please."

Simon stared at her intently. "Why?"

Victoria met his gaze helplessly. "Because I am trying to move past... this... whatever lies between us. Your kindness only makes that more difficult. It gives me hope that perhaps you feel... more... and I cannot afford to indulge in such fanciful notions when my future is so uncertain. Surely you understand?"

Comprehension dawned in Simon's eyes, followed swiftly by a glint of humor. He rose and moved to stand before her.

"I confess, I am rather confused by your objections. If my actions give you hope, is that not a good thing? What future could be so dire as to negate that?"

Victoria kept her eyes locked on her lap. "You know very well the mess my life has become. I am pondering what to do about it. False hope serves no purpose."

She heard the rustle of Simon's coat as he crouched down before her. A gentle hand cupped her chin and tilted her face up to meet his knowing gaze.

“Who said anything about false hope?” he murmured, before pressing his lips to hers.

Victoria’s mind went blissfully blank, every coherent thought fleeing beneath the onslaught of sensation. His lips moved against hers, firm and questing, and she could not help but kiss him back ardently. For endless moments they remained thus entwined, the world reduced to just the two of them.

Finally, sanity reasserted itself, and Victoria pulled back, breaking the kiss. She searched Simon’s face bewilderedly. “Why did you do that?”

Simon gazed back at her, desire and affection mingling in his expression. “Is it not obvious? Because I have wanted to, for quite some time now.”

Victoria shook her head in confusion. “But... I don’t understand. This is impossible.”

Simon lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “On the contrary. I would say it is very much possible.”

A sinking feeling overcame Victoria. She stood up abruptly and backed away from him. “Please... do not toy with me this way. Not if you don’t truly mean it.”

Hurt flashed across Simon’s face. He moved toward her, but she held up a hand. “No! I cannot bear false platitudes or pretty lies. If you feel nothing beyond idle attraction, then end this charade now, I beg of you.”

Simon halted, holding her gaze intently. “You think my regard so trifling?” At her conflicted expression, he sighed. “Very well. Let me speak plainly.”

He moved close and took both her hands in his. “I love you, Victoria. I cannot pinpoint when or how it happened, only that it did. You captivated me from that first lively exchange on the terrace. Your wit, your intellect, your devotion to your

family—I find you utterly enchanting.”

Victoria stared searchingly into his eyes but found only earnest conviction in their dark depths.

Simon pressed on. “I know we did not start under the best of circumstances, but the more I learn of you, the more certain I become that you are the woman I wish to spend the rest of my life with.”

He stroked his fingers over her knuckles tenderly. “You once accused me of being cold and unfeeling. Perhaps I was, but you have awakened something in me I thought long buried. My actions for Aurora were as much for myself as for you, because I cannot bear to see you suffer, not when I have the power to remedy it.”

Victoria gazed up at him, scarcely daring to believe his words. “Do you truly mean what you say?” she whispered.

Simon clasped her hand over his heart. “With every fiber of my being. I love you, Lady Victoria Hatcher, and it would be my greatest honor if you would consent to be my wife.”

Overwhelming joy suffused Victoria, leaving her nearly giddy. To think that this man who once disdained her company now professed his love and desire for her hand! It was like something from a fairytale.

She flung her arms about his neck. “Oh, Simon! I can scarcely believe it, but I love you too, with all my heart!”

His arms came around her as his lips claimed hers once more. Victoria melted into his embrace, running her fingers through his hair as the kiss deepened. At length they parted just far enough to catch their breath, foreheads touching.

Simon caressed her cheek reverently. “I vow to spend every day proving myself worthy of you. Will you consent to be mine?”

“Yes!” Victoria breathed. “There is nothing I desire more.”

Pure elation lit up Simon’s face. He lifted her off her feet and spun her in an enthusiastic circle as she laughed joyously.

“I ought to inform your father...” he mused.

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Victoria shook her head. "Let us not dwell on that now. This moment belongs to us."

Simon smiled tenderly. "You are quite right." He drew her close once more. "To new beginnings," he toasted, before kissing her thoroughly.

And at that moment, with the man she loved in her arms, the troubles of the past seemed to fade away, overshadowed by the bright promise of the future.

### EPILOGUE

St James's Church glowed with the light of a hundred candles, casting a warm glow over the gathered assembly. Garlands of flowers decked the soaring stone columns, and the air was rich with their perfume. At the front of the nave stood the imposing figure of the Duke of Hayward, an uncharacteristic smile softening his usually stern mien as he awaited his bride.

Murmurs arose among the crowd as Victoria appeared in the doorway on Aurora's arm. She was resplendent in an ivory satin gown, face alight with joy beneath the gossamer veil. As she drew nearer, Simon's breath caught at how utterly captivating she looked.

Aurora placed Victoria's hand in Simon's with an approving nod. Lord Newton was not invited to the wedding after what he did to Aurora and his greedy plans to marry them off for wealth.

"It is for the best," Victoria had said bravely, though Simon knew it pained her.

Still, she would not allow her father's greed to ruin her big day. She had her true family by her side, Simon thought, as his gaze lingered on where Aurora sat with her husband Joseph and their infant son. He gave silent thanks that Victoria had their support on this momentous occasion.

The ceremony passed in a blur of heartfelt vows and smiling faces. When it came time to kiss the bride, Simon did so with profound tenderness, seeking to convey all that he felt for this remarkable woman who had so utterly transformed his life. Victoria clung to him tightly, joy and love infusing her countenance.

Too soon, they were stepping out into the crisp autumn air amidst a shower of flower petals tossed by well-wishers. Liveried footmen handed Victoria and Simon into a gleaming black carriage emblazoned with the Hayward crest. They waved farewell as the coach pulled away, bound for the wedding breakfast at the ducal townhouse.

Alone at last, Victoria turned to Simon with bright eyes. "We did it! I can scarcely believe we are wed!"

Simon clasped her hands in his own. "You are the most radiant bride that ever lived," he declared fervently.

Victoria's dimples flashed. "Do you know, I believe that is the most effusive compliment you have ever paid me," she teased.

"I shall have to endeavor to outdo it, then," Simon returned with mock solemnity. He lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her wrist just above the lacy hem of her glove. "For you deserve all the praise in Christendom for agreeing to shackle yourself to a wretch like me."

Victoria swatted his shoulder playfully. "Oh, do be serious! I am the luckiest woman alive, and you know it." Her expression softened. "To think but a few short months ago, I could barely stand the sight of you. Now I cannot imagine a life without you in

it.”

Simon enfolded her in his embrace. “Nor I you, my darling. You have made me a better man in every way. My life truly began the day you came into it.”

He kissed her then, reveling in the sweetness of her lips beneath his own. When they finally parted, Victoria nestled contentedly against his shoulder.

“Just think, soon we shall be at Hayward Manor as husband and wife,” she mused. “Oh, I cannot wait to see it! I shall explore every nook and cranny. And the gardens! I shall spend every sunny day out of doors.”

Amusement tugged at Simon’s mouth. “Careful, or else I shall become frightfully jealous of the grounds. Though I suppose I must learn to share you now.”

Victoria’s hazel eyes danced impishly. “Indeed you must! I warn you, I fully intend to be quite shamelessly enamored of our home.”

Simon kissed the tip of her nose. “I would expect nothing less. And I look forward to making a lifetime of memories there with you.”

Too soon, the carriage was pulling up before the townhouse. As they entered the gaily decorated ballroom, cheers rose among the guests.

Madeline rushed forward to embrace Victoria enthusiastically. “Oh, Victoria, I am so happy for you!” she exclaimed. She turned to Simon and bobbed a playful curtsy. “Your Grace, or should I say, Cousin?”

Simon chuckled. “I shall have to become accustomed to that. But you must call me Simon.”

Madeline smiled brightly. “Very well... Simon.”

The newlyweds greeted the other guests, including Aurora and Joseph. Young baby Matthew cooed happily from his father's arms, blissfully unaware of the occasion.

Over an elegant repast, ribald toasts were made to the bride and groom, prompting much blushing and laughter. Then Simon led Victoria for their first dance as husband and wife. They glided effortlessly across the gleaming parquet floor, lost in their shared joy.

Too soon, it was time for Victoria to toss her bouquet. The ladies gathered eagerly, Madeline foremost among them. With an impish grin over her shoulder, Victoria threw the bouquet back. Amidst excited squeals, it landed directly in Madeline's hands. Madeline turned scarlet as the guests applauded.

All too quickly, the coach was called around to take them to the ducal estate. There were hugs and kisses and fervent good wishes before Victoria and Simon finally climbed inside. With a snap of the reins, they were off, the sounds of laughter fading behind them.

Alone at last, Victoria gave a happy sigh and curled into Simon's side. "I can hardly believe this wonderful day is real."

Simon wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Believe it, my darling. For you have made me the happiest man in England." He nuzzled her ear. "And I intend to spend every moment proving how much I cherish you."

Victoria lifted her face to him eagerly, and soon all conversation was suspended in favor of more pleasurable pursuits.

It was fully dark when the carriage finally turned down the long drive leading to Hayward Manor.

The End?