



The Duke and the Scarred Bride

Author: *Maybel Bardot*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "You should not have claimed my name, love. Now, you belong to me."

Despite her scars, Miss Louisa has many prospects—but only because they see her as a charity case. Desperate to avoid the attention, she makes up a betrothal to a reclusive duke. After years at war, Duke Percival must re-enter society. So when a lady he's never met claims him as hers, he makes her a proposal she cannot resist: a marriage of convenience. Yet his sweet bride is too tempting...and he's about to lose control. Now, she can't escape his dark desire any longer...

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

Total Pages (Source): 92

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Chapter One

“I heard that this Season is starting off on an interesting note,” Isabella, Louisa’s twin sister, said, smiling as if she knew a secret they would be desperate to hear.

Everyone present sat up, including Benedict, the Duke of Northwick and Selina’s husband, and Duncan, the Duke of Fangsdale and Isabella’s husband, as they waited for the news.

Louisa, despite her usual disinterest, also sat up, wondering if perhaps there was news that would finally remove her name from the top of the rumour mills.

Even though two years had passed since she had been injured while trying to save her sister’s life, the story was still the most talked about, made even worse by the scar sitting proudly on her face. Even the peculiar entertainments at Isabella and Duncan’s lavish wedding party had not been enough to quell the rumours.

“I hear that the Duke of Colborne has returned,” Isabella intoned.

“Isn’t he the one who died a month ago?” Diana, their youngest sister, asked.

They had even attended the funeral, as the deceased Duke had no family except his friend, the Baron Gillingham, who had extended the invitation to Benedict and Duncan as fellow members of the peerage.

“That was Michael, the former Duke,” Benedict clarified. “You must be referring to Percival, then. I didn’t know he had returned.”

“Well, he has, and he apparently has to assume the title as the only heir,” Isabella said with a bright smile.

“Where did you hear this news, Isabella?” Diana asked excited.

“Lady Peregrine told me during tea yesterday,” Isabella answered. “I heard a lot of things about the Duke, and they are not very pleasant.”

“If they aren’t pleasant, then we shouldn’t talk about them,” Louisa said, even though her words lacked heat.

“Oh Louisa, you’re always so dull.” Isabella tsked. “It might interest you to know that he returned from missions overseas. He is a soldier, you see, and I hear he has many battle scars.”

Louisa couldn’t help the way her eyebrows shot up at the word ‘scars.’ It had been two years since she had acquired hers, and even though they weren’t horrid, they still stood proudly against her features and had earned her more than a few uncomfortable looks whenever any member of the ton deigned to talk to her. She had not been entirely wrong in her estimation of their vanity.

“They call him ‘the Beast’ because apparently, his scars are so grotesque that he has hidden himself away in his chambers,” Isabella continued. “A few of his maids had to quit because they couldn’t bear to look at him and because he had, apparently, nearly destroyed the manor when he had returned.”

“That is not a very nice moniker,” Selina muttered, hiding her frown behind her fan. “Even if he’s scarred and a little angry, there is no need to call him that.”

“I didn’t give him the moniker,” Isabella sniffed, showing her displeasure at being scolded. “Besides, if he doesn’t want the moniker, he shouldn’t hide away from

Society. He hasn't accepted any invitations to tea or even accepted any callers. He behaves like the fairytale creature after which he was named."

"Do you not think that perhaps he keeps to himself because of the judgment he might receive from the ton?" Louisa argued.

"What judgment, Louisa?" Isabella asked.

"The judgment I receive every time I walk into a ballroom."

"You're being positively grim," Isabella sniffed. "Do not ruin the mood this morning."

But the damage was already done. Her mother and sisters—except Isabella, of course—looked positively apologetic, but she looked away. Louisa was used to the pitying looks she received from the members of the ton, but that didn't mean they didn't annoy her. She disliked their vanity and the way they were so quick to point fingers and make someone an outcast just because they had physical impairments.

If she had her way, she too would have chosen to hide away in their country estate rather than return to face the revulsion and pity of the ton.

She would have apologized for her mood, but their butler's arrival put an end to their discussion and reminded them of the purpose of their gathering. They had been waiting for callers for either Louisa or Diana—the sisters yet to wed.

"A caller for Miss Louisa," the butler announced, breaking the tension in the room.

They all sat up, and Lady Langham motioned for Louisa to fix her face, which she did even though she was in a surly mood.

“Who is it?” Lady Langham asked.

“Owen Dowding, the Viscount Pemberton,” the butler answered.

The sisters tittered and gave Louisa conspiratorial smiles.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa suppressed the urge to sigh. The Viscount had been introduced to her a few weeks ago by her mother and had shown interest in her despite his inability to hide his revulsion at her scar. He was a young widower who had quickly taken to finding a replacement for his late wife as he needed an heir and he had been rather vocal about his desires not caring how they sounded.

It was not as though Lord Pemberton was thoroughly unpleasant—he was a gentleman by all standards, but with a penchant for bragging. She just wanted someone who wasn't daunted by something as vain as a scar.

“Show him in at once, Albert,” her mother ordered.

He bowed, and a few minutes later, Lord Pemberton strolled in, an air of self-importance about him as he surveyed the room with an upturned nose.

“Lord Pemberton,” her mother greeted. “It's a pleasure to see you this morning.”

“Lady Langham.” Lord Pemberton smiled down at her, kissing the back of her hand. “I assure you, the pleasure is all mine. You look positively radiant this morning.”

Lady Langham smiled brightly and blushed like a debutante.

Louisa shook her head at the scene but smiled nonetheless. She had already been prepared for this visit and was ready to charm as was expected of her.

Before Isabella had brought up news of the Duke of Colborne, she had been rebuffing claims that Lord Pemberton would propose that morning.

“Why else would he send so many flowers?” Diana had asked, referring to the large bouquet that had arrived the day before.

Louisa sincerely hoped that wasn’t true, but she had kept her opinion to herself. Her matchmaker of a mother would no doubt have gone on a tirade about how ungrateful she was being or how she was throwing her life away.

Lord Pemberton turned to her then, and she saw him wince before plastering a smile on her face. She wondered how her family hadn’t noticed the look on his face. She could already see Duncan and Benedict placing bets on whether or not the Viscount would propose. All her plans of charming him flew out the window.

“Miss Gouldsmith.” He smiled, kissing her hand. “You are as beautiful as a spring morning.”

She smiled and curtsied. “You flatter me, Lord Pemberton.” She remembered to smile bashfully, hiding her face behind her fan. “How do you fare this morning?”

“I am ecstatic.” Lord Pemberton beamed. “And the weather seems to reflect my mood. Would you care for a turn about your gardens? I spotted some begonias that I am interested in studying.”

Louisa was in no mood to take a turn about the gardens when he could barely stomach looking at her face and wanted very much to return to her chambers, but before she could voice her refusal, she caught her mother’s glare over his shoulder and accepted his arm.

“It would be my pleasure, My Lord.”

Lord Pemberton smiled and led the way, even though it was his first time in her family’s townhouse. He paused ever so often to admire the flowers.

He was a simple man, Lord Pemberton, with simple hobbies, and if he wanted, he could have his pick of any single lady of the ton. Louisa wondered why he would consider her. She was sorely tempted to ask him, but she knew her mother—who was only a few steps behind them—would berate her for being stupid.

“You are awfully quiet today, Miss Gouldsmith,” Lord Pemberton noted. “Does my presence offend you?”

She heard her mother’s sharp intake of breath and was quick to answer. “Not at all, My Lord. It is such a beautiful day, and I don’t want to ruin it with idle chit-chat. I would much rather enjoy the view with you.”

Lord Pemberton smiled brightly at her words and took her hands in his. “Your words have comforted me,” he admitted. “I would have been sorely disappointed had you said otherwise, for I hoped to ask for your mother’s permission to court you.”

Louisa’s eyes went wide as panic flooded her. She had thought she would have a week or more to scheme her way out of the engagement, but the damned man had to ruin it. Now, she would have to think of a solution on the spot. But what?

“M-My Lord, I am honoured,” she started, fumbling for the right words. “But don’t you think it’s too soon?”

She heard her mother hiss from behind them, but for propriety’s sake, Lady Langham couldn’t interrupt even if she dearly wanted to.

“I do not,” Lord Pemberton answered with a frown, no doubt wondering why he hadn’t been met with profuse gratitude. “I am as sure of your character as I can be, and I see no need to dally. Do you not think so?”

Louisa’s eyes darted around as she tried to come up with a response that would both

save his pride and give her the chance to escape the dreadful match. A risky idea came to her mind, but it seemed the most sensible course of action at the moment.

“I do, but, My Lord, I am sorry to have led you on—I cannot grant that request.”

Lord Pemberton folded his arms, glaring at her. “Whyever not?” he asked hotly. “You do not have other suitors, and surely you cannot have set your sights on anyone more eligible than I. No one else would have you.”

Her anger flared at his snobbery, and she was glad that he had spoken thus. Now, she wouldn’t care the least bit about sparing his feelings.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“On the contrary, My Lord, I do have another suitor, and we are already courting,” she declared, returning his glare. “I hoped to keep it a secret for as long as I could, but I see no need to now.”

He laughed and then shot her a disbelieving look. “Oblige me, dear.” He smiled. “Who is this gentleman you speak of?”

She tried not to worry her lip even as the ridiculousness of what she was about to say hit her.

“The Duke of Colborne.”

She would have appreciated a gasp or at least a look of surprise, but his mocking laugh annoyed her to no end.

“Surely you jest,” he said, laughing. “I understand you are afraid to marry, but you do not have to make such ridiculous claims. If you need more time, you only have to ask.”

“I do not jest, My Lord,” she insisted, folding her arms.

“You’re courting the Beast?” His tone was incredulous, and she hated him for it.

“Do not call him that!” she hissed.

She hadn’t meant to be so rude, but she was tired of their erroneous judgment of the Duke.

“He is not a beast. Not in any way,” she added, managing to take the heat out of her words. “He has only been busy putting his estate in order and familiarizing himself with his new responsibilities.”

Lord Pemberton gave her a scolding look, but there was still a glint of mockery in his eyes.

“I do not believe you, my dear,” he said. “How could you possibly be courting him when he has only just returned?”

“I have known him since I was a child,” she answered, lifting her chin. “Perhaps I might ask him to be present at the next ball in my letter to him this eve.”

His eyes glinted with delight, and she wondered if perhaps she had taken her ruse too far.

“Is that so?” he drawled, grinning maliciously. “You do not have to wait that long to write to him. His estate is not a great distance from mine. I could help you deliver your letter as I return home.”

Louisa tried not to let her panic show and schooled her features to indifference. “You do not have to do that, My Lord. I could?—”

“Nonsense.” Lord Pemberton smiled. “I will consider it doing a friend a favour.”

Louisa knew that if she continued to refuse, her lie would unravel, so she nodded instead, surprising him.

“I will only be a moment then,” she told him.

She saw her mother glare at her, but she ignored her, and once inside, she went up to

her room—but not before snatching one of the scented papers Isabella had abandoned since she got married and moved into her husband’s estate.

Penning a letter that would show how comfortable she was with the Duke was not hard at all, but she wondered if perhaps she was overdoing it. Reminding herself that Lord Pemberton would no doubt read it gave her the confidence to lightly seal it.

When she descended to hand him the letter, she saw her mother’s barely concealed glare as well as the near-laughing faces of her sisters, and knew she would be answering for her ruse as soon as he left.

“I must thank you again, My Lord,” she said, handing him the letter. “You truly are too kind.”

“Think nothing of it.” He smiled. “I shall see you at the Franworths’ ball, then.”

Lord Pemberton bid her family a good day and left, no doubt hurrying to the privacy of his carriage so he could read the letter.

“Louisa Amelia Gouldsmith,” Lady Langham screeched as soon as he had left. “Why would you let such a good opportunity slip through your fingers? You know how hard it has been for me to secure a match for you.”

“I know how hard you worked, Mother, but I do not want to marry him,” Louisa explained. “He doesn’t like me. He can barely stomach the sight of my scars. I cannot have a husband who hates my face.”

Her mother sighed, but her sisters and their husbands couldn’t stop laughing.

“I’m trying to imagine the Duke’s face when he reads that letter,” Isabella said playfully.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“Do tell us what you wrote, Louisa,” Benedict urged.

“You do realize that Lord Pemberton will read the letter.” Duncan chortled, beside himself.

“I know you didn’t want the match, but you didn’t need to pull the Duke into it.” Selina shook her head. “I hope he takes your jest in good faith.”

“Imagine if he responds,” Diana said, and everyone burst into more laughter.

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Isabella giggled. “Do tell us if he replies, Louisa. I want to hear everything.”

“Who knows? This could be the start of a love story,” Selina teased.

“I truly hope you know what you’re doing, Louisa,” Lady Langham sniffed, stepping out of the room.

Louisa didn’t know what she was doing, but she hoped that no one, other than Lord Pemberton, would ever read that letter.

Chapter Two

“We do not have to do this, you know,” Diana complained as they stared at the Duke of Colborne’s imposing townhouse.

It was an impressive stone structure with quaint gardens and a well-kept stone-lined

path leading to the house. It was like any other townhouse of any member of the ton, but the wrought iron gates and the storm clouds shadowing it gave it a haunted look as well as the silence, save the warning thunder.

Louisa shivered and drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders. She was grateful that Diana had agreed to come with her, or else she might not have had the courage to try and reclaim her letter. No one sound of mind would dare venture into this imposing house. She surely didn't think Lord Pemberton was brave enough, but she couldn't be too sure. A bruised ego would give him enough courage to brave this foreboding building.

"I have to, Diana," she told her sister, alighting from their carriage. "I do not want anyone seeing it. Much less the Duke."

"For all we know, Lord Pemberton didn't deliver it," Diana said, casting a wary look at the house again. "I do not think him capable of such courage."

"You might be surprised by the lengths people would go to when they are scorned."

Diana sighed but still shook her head, remaining stubbornly in the carriage. "Perhaps he might have taken it as a jest and thought nothing of it?"

"Diana, are you coming with me or not?"

"How are you not frightened, Sister?" Diana asked, still not moving.

"I am, but I have much greater worries than this," Louisa answered.

"I cannot come with you!" Diana cried. "I will wait for you here."

All Louisa could do was shake her head and set off on her mission. She had chosen to

come at an hour when few people would be out and about, and if she wasted this window of opportunity, she couldn't imagine the consequences.

Squaring her shoulders, she stepped away from the carriage and through the wrought iron gates into the estate. Lightning flashed overhead, almost foreboding as thunder followed. She drew her shawl tighter around her to ward off the chill. She would have to hurry if she was going to escape the coming rain.

Her steps were short and quick, her eyes darting around for staff, but she spotted no one. The house was awfully silent. She tried to find the mailbox, but it was empty. Sighing in defeat, she moved to return to the gate, only to spot a lit window as well as a dark figure peering down at her. She jumped and turned to run.

"Stop," a commanding voice said.

She stilled, debating whether to run or not.

"Do not consider running," he warned. "Why don't you come inside and tell me why you are in my home."

Her heart pounded in her chest as she saw the heavy oak doors swing open. She could still run, and no one would be any wiser. He hadn't seen her face, so there was no way he could identify her even if he chose to rejoin Society.

She tiptoed past the door, but when she saw no one there, curiosity took root where common sense should have been, and she found herself walking into the house.

Seeing no one inside, she vaguely wondered if perhaps she had imagined the man in the window and his voice, after all.

"Excuse me?" she called out. "Is anyone here?"

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Diana would have hissed at her and dragged her out the door had she been there.

My curiosity would definitely be the death of me one day.

“Who...” A kind-looking old man hurried down the steps, looking at her with wary eyes. “Who are you?”

She recognized him at once as the butler. His uniform and the air of importance around him gave that much away.

“I...” She paused, realizing that she had almost given away her identity. “Your master asked for me.”

She wasn’t exactly lying, but that wasn’t the truth of the matter.

The importance of the difference between the two didn’t seem to matter to the butler, who beamed with excitement.

“You are welcome, then.” He bowed his head. “His Grace is in his study. I shall inform him of your arrival. Would you like some tea while you wait?”

“There is no need, thank you.” She smiled. “I am sure he is already aware of my arrival.”

“In that case, I will show you to the study,” he offered. “I am sorry no one was present to welcome you. I hope you haven’t waited long?”

Her eyes had been busy taking in the décor in Colborne House, and she couldn't help but admire the paintings—which, in their prime, would have been resplendent.

When she noticed the butler raising his eyebrows at her in question, she reddened.

“Forgive me,” she offered. “I am just intrigued by the Duke's home.”

“You should see it once it is fully restored,” he said. “Watch your step here. The stairs still require some work.”

When they stopped outside the study, the smell of paper and ink wafted to her from the doors even before they were opened, and when they finally were, her eyes went wide at the imposing figure of the black-clad man standing by the window, facing away from them.

“Your Grace, you have a visitor,” the butler announced.

“I see that,” the Duke replied, not bothering to turn around and acknowledge their presence.

The butler bowed and stepped out of the room, leaving Louisa with the Duke, who radiated so much power that all her senses were warning her to flee.

She ran her eyes over the desk piled high with unopened correspondence, trying to spot her letter among the pile, but she was disappointed when she didn't glimpse the coloured paper.

Could he have read it already?

She sincerely hoped not. She had already been embarrassed at the thought of Lord Pemberton reading it, and he hadn't done it in front of her, where she could gauge his

reaction. Considering how his ego had been bruised, she was sure he wouldn't even bring it up again. If the Duke had read it, she didn't dare to imagine just how embarrassed she would feel.

He had yet to acknowledge her presence, and she was irked. Curiosity gnawed at her. She itched to put a face to the mystery surrounding him, but he seemed perfectly content to wait.

Diana would no doubt be worried that some horrible fate had befallen her, and Louisa could already see a light drizzle starting through the window. She would have to leave soon if she were to arrive home before the storm gained strength.

She cleared her throat, as he still made no move to acknowledge her presence.

"I wonder what could have brought a gently bred lady to this dark part of London," he mused. "I do not recall trespassing on private property being part of the lessons in etiquette."

"I didn't know anyone would be here," she explained, knowing how weak her argument sounded.

"Surely the open gates were indication enough."

"I shall be on my way, then," she said stubbornly.

If the Duke had read her letter, he wouldn't be inquiring about her presence in his home. Perhaps he thought her a brave gossipmonger looking to feed the flames. She would play ignorant if it was what it took for him to toss the letter into the fire, where she was sure the other correspondence would go if the ashes by the fireplace were any indication of his hobbies.

“Without this?” he said, holding her letter proudly in his hand.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Her opened letter.

She decided to play the ignorant card. “I have no idea what that is.”

She heard his scoff and the light rustle of paper as he read it one more time.

“I find myself doubting the truth of your words,” he said.

“I speak the truth.”

“If it wasn’t a letter you sought, why then would you rifle through my mailbox?” he asked.

Just how long had he watched me?

Her eyes darted around as she tried to think her way out of the pit her lies had dug for her. He had caught her red-handed, and there was no way she could continue her farce, unless she chose to be utterly shameless.

She sighed, knowing there was no use in denying it any further.

“Were you courting my brother?” he asked.

It would have been foolish of her not to have realized that she was standing before the Duke himself, but she still marvelled that he was actually real, and she would probably be the first and only member of the ton who saw him if he chose to continue his confinement.

“I... The letter was a prank,” she explained. “I did not know your brother personally, but my brothers-in-law did. I only attended his funeral.”

She realized too late that she was rambling and should have probably left out that last part, for the temperature in the room dropped.

“I am sorry. I spoke out of turn,” she murmured.

The Duke said nothing, but then he placed the letter on the table behind him without looking at her.

“You may leave, then,” he said. “I will speak nothing of this encounter. I do not think your reputation would survive it.”

She snorted but eyed the letter, making no move to leave. If she timed her movements correctly, she would be able to snatch the offending letter and toss it into the fire before he could stop her, and she would finally sleep without its weight on her conscience.

She made her move but was a second too late. With impossible speed she hadn't expected, he turned and grabbed her hand just as it touched the paper. Her heart thudded loudly not just from the shock of the entire ordeal, but from the sheer beauty of the man before her.

Sparks raced up her arm where he held her, but even as her eyes traced the large hand curling almost painfully around her arm, her whole body suddenly felt as though she'd been doused in flames.

How had they thought to call this man a beast?

If only they knew.

Standing before her was a man who looked anything but a beast. He looked more like an angel if she was being honest, with darkbrown hair that curled messily over his head and a chiseled jaw that had her staring more than she usually did at a man. As if that wasn't enough, he had beautiful eyes—stormy grey with an icy glint that made her understand that this man before her was not to be trifled with.

Her breath hitched in her chest.

She eyed the scar running from the top of his brow, down his cheek, to his jawline and found beauty in the rough edges of it. It was deeper than hers and had healed poorly, but rather than take away from his beauty, it added a dangerous air that made her itch to touch it.

A beast was an unworthy title for someone as handsome as he was.

He smelled like sandalwood and something so male that she felt light-headed. He was standing too close to her. She knew it was beyond improper, but she couldn't help but lean closer.

He pulled the letter out of her grasp, yanking her out of her reverie. No words could come to her mind, and her mouth felt too dry. She had never seen a man more beautiful than him. Even the way he moved showed precision and confidence.

“People call you the Beast.”

She heard the words leave her mouth and cringed, feeling stupid. How could she have said that out loud?

He smiled briefly, and she felt proud that she had made this mountain of a man break character.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“And what do you say I am?” he asked, his eyes glinting with humor.

The sound of his voice, low and commanding, sent a slight shiver down her spine and stirred warmth low in her belly.

She found herself answering without thinking. “I do not know you well enough to have an opinion.”

A smile tugged at his lips before he could suppress it, and her eyes widened at the way it transformed his face. He cleared his throat, fixing a blank mask on his face.

“May I have my letter?” she asked, feeling bold.

“It was addressed to me, no?” he pointed out, raising a perfect eyebrow.

“It was a means to escape an engagement I did not want. It is not important,” she insisted, reaching for the letter.

He lifted it out of her reach and eyed it warily. “It seems very important, since you were brave enough to venture into the Beast’s lair to get it back.”

“I do not call you a beast,” she told him. “I would never.”

He watched her, and she wondered what he could be thinking.

“I will hold on to the letter,” he declared as he folded the letter with a snap of his fingers, drawing her eyes to his big, capable hands. Even the movement of his hands

was mesmerizing.

“But...” she trailed off, before clearing her throat to regain her composure.

“It was addressed to me, was it not?” he interjected.

“Only as a jest.”

“I understand that.” He nodded once. “But it is my property now.”

Her lips formed an angry pout. “That is not very fair.”

“I am sorry.”

She sighed, knowing she would get nowhere with him. He was as stubborn as all men tended to be, and it was getting too late for her to continue to trade words with him.

“Do not let anyone see that letter,” she warned, even though she could hear the plea in her voice.

“I do not intend to.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” she asked.

She found herself trying to prolong the meeting because she had yet to come to terms with the man standing before her. There was something in his eyes that resonated deeply with what she had struggled to hide from her family, yet it almost seemed too good to be true. That one could understand her burden amazed her.

“You do not,” he answered, turning away from her. “Tobias will show you out.”

She took his dismissal in stride and let herself be led out of the house, wondering if perhaps she had imagined the whole encounter. He had communicated with her more than he had any other person, according to the rumours, and that was enough to temporarily sate her curiosity.

“Will we be seeing you again, Miss?” the butler asked.

“If your master permits it,” she answered, stepping into the cold.

She itched to know the Duke’s story and what had given him those scars. She had many questions, but she would bide her time.

She would definitely be seeing him again—she promised herself that. Just to make sure he wasn’t some figment her imagination had conjured to tease her... even though she knew there was nothing in her imagination that could have prepared for his beauty.

“Are you all right?” Diana asked as soon as she stepped into the carriage. “You were gone for a long time.”

“I... I think so,” Louisa answered. “Let us leave before the storm is upon us.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“Did you get your letter?” Diana probed.

“No,” Louisa answered. “He didn’t give it to me.”

“Who? The Beast?”

“Don’t call him that!” she hissed. “Sorry, Diana.”

“Don’t apologize. I am sorry,” Diana said with a smile. “What was he like?”

If Louisa had the right words, she would be able to answer the question, but she only said, “Nothing like I could have imagined.”

Chapter Three

Your Grace,

It’s been only a short week since I saw you, yet it feels like an age. I wonder if you miss me as I miss you. Will you invite me to tea again, or will you perhaps dance with me at the Franworths’ ball next week?

I look forward to seeing you again. My family seeks to marry me off quickly. Do you think you might propose soon?

Do think of me fondly while you read this.

Yours faithfully,

Louisa.

Percival couldn't suppress the snort that escaped his lips as he read her letter again, trying to reconcile the sweet words with the bold woman who had ventured into his estate. When he first read the letter, he wondered if perhaps his late brother, Michael, had been courting someone. But after meeting the lady, it was clear that wasn't the case.

His brother, as vain as one could be, would never court someone with a scar like hers. That was the first thing that caught Percival's eye. He wondered what could have led to her having such a gruesome mark on her pretty face.

His hand subconsciously touched his scar. She hadn't even shrunk back in fear the way his maids had when he had come back.

"It was a means to escape an engagement I did not want. It is not important."

He usually would not take interest in someone who would fake courting someone else to escape an engagement, but her going as far as writing him a letter to ensure no one uncovered her charade intrigued him.

He hadn't laughed truly since he had returned to England a month ago, and he doubted he would again, but she had made him break character with her words.

"I do not know you well enough to have an opinion," she had said, but he had garnered enough from one meeting.

She was unlike any woman he had ever met, and her bravery to step into his haunted home could not go unnoticed. He knew about the rumours surrounding him and his family's estate from the information Eli, the Baron Gillingham, relayed to him in a bid to bring him out of his seclusion.

“Your Grace,” the butler called as he entered the room. “I have escorted your guest to her carriage.”

“Was anyone else with her?” Percival asked.

“Yes. Her sister.”

“All right.”

He didn’t need a scandal in the event anyone else saw her leaving his family home.

“Might I ask who she is?” the butler asked.

“I do not know, Tobias,” Percival admitted, handing him the letter. “She came looking for this. I spotted her through the window, roaming around. Have we gotten any more applications? I need more servants.”

“They all seem scared for some reason, Your Grace,” Tobias answered, not looking at him. “This is a rather interesting letter. Who was it intended for? The late Duke?”

“You saw her, Tobias,” Percival pointed out. “Michael would never.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“Surely, it can’t be you.” His butler laughed.

If Tobias hadn’t been with his family for as long as he had, and if Percival didn’t trust him with his life, he would have sacked him right then.

“Apparently, it was a ruse,” he said. “She wanted to end her engagement.”

Tobias placed the letter on the desk and nodded. “It is not a bad idea, Your Grace,” he remarked. “It is high time you took a wife.”

Percival shot him a glare and turned to throw the pile of unopened invitations into the fire. They had come in droves since news of his return had spread, and he knew everyone wanted to be the first to host him in their homes. They were all looking for a story for the gossipmongers, and he wasn’t in any mood to be their topic of discussion even though they gossiped despite him not indulging them.

“I might ask you to retire early if you keep making such senile decisions, Tobias.”

“I assure you, I am of sound mind,” Tobias sniffed. “It is high time you did. One, to secure your family’s fortune, and two, to make your re-entry into Society as smooth as can be, considering how rude you have been.”

He pointed to the pile of letters that were now ash on the ground.

“Even if I were to agree with you, what makes you think she would be the best candidate?” Percival asked, folding his arms across his chest. “A lady who enters a bachelor’s home uninvited and unchaperoned doesn’t seem like she has very good

breeding.”

“It shows bravery, considering the reputation you’ve managed to earn yourself and us, by extension,” Tobias retorted. “Plus, she didn’t run off screaming or swoon after seeing your face. She is the only woman in England’s nobility who wouldn’t.”

Percival resisted the urge to roll his eyes, but he was sure that if the butler kept waxing lyrical about the young lady’s qualities, then he surely would.

“You do not know that.”

“Oh, but I do,” Tobias asserted. “Serving a noble family for as long as I have has enlightened me on the characteristics of the ton.”

“A match with her would draw too much attention to us,” Percival tried. “She and I are scarred. What do you think they would say about that?”

“She has their sympathy. No one would fault her for her choice,” Tobias reasoned. “If she wrote that letter to escape a match, it must be for good reason. Her options are limited to old widowers or desperate gamblers who need her dowry to pay off their debts—none of which would give her a chance at happiness.”

Percival snorted. “How many matches end up happy, Tobias? Now, you’re just being ridiculous. Do you think she’ll have much of that with me?”

“If you’ll let yourself.”

“I need to think, Tobias.”

“While you do, consider the estate. She might just have a large enough dowry to help restore it.”

Percival sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You do not intend to make this decision easy for me, do you?”

“Not at all,” Tobias answered with a broad smile. “You have always done the right thing, Your Grace. Do not stop now.”

Tobias was right about Percival needing a wife with a large dowry to at least start the repairs to the estate... among other things. Percival had been appalled that his brother had let the estate fall into such disrepair. But then again, Michael had not been particularly adept at managing finances. Thankfully, he wasn't a gambler, so they hadn't accumulated debts beyond what was reasonable.

Percival frowned again, remembering the letter that had labelled his brother's death an unfortunate riding accident. He found the notion inconceivable as Michael had been a skilled rider and would never drink if he was going to be on his horse.

Yet even though he suspected foul play, he wondered who could harbour such malicious intentions for his brother who had been society's darling for as long as he could remember.

Since childhood, Michael had been the more sociable of the two of them, garnering a following that he had maintained even in Oxford. He had a quick wit and was handsome by all standards, which added to his appeal.

Pain lanced through Percival's heart as he remembered his brother and the childhood they had shared. Thick as thieves they had been. He still had to carry out a private investigation, and what better way to do that than to be in the thick of Society, where his brother would no doubt have been. He wouldn't be able to get information outside of it. Even Eli, despite his rank, would be unable to help get the information he needed.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he muttered, realizing that marriage was the only option available to him.

“Language, Your Grace,” Tobias scolded. “That kind of language is fit for the barracks, but it won’t be welcomed among polite society.”

“I’m not there yet, Tobias.”

“But you will be soon. You need to start early.”

“Leave me, Tobias.”

“I will, but I need you to consider this seriously,” Tobias pressed. “If it wasn’t important, you know I wouldn’t insist on it. Lunch will be served in an hour.”

“I do not need it.”

“See to it that I do not need to come up here, Your Grace.”

With that, the butler was gone, leaving Percival with many thoughts racing through his head. He hadn’t told anyone of his suspicions yet and had tried to keep his interrogations of the staff light so as not to arouse suspicion.

He would have asked Tobias to continue investigating the servants discreetly, as they would be more likely to let down their guard around the kind old man, but he thought better. It was not as though he didn’t trust Tobias—he just didn’t want the man’s life to be in danger if his hunch proved correct.

They were not in such dire straits financially, and neither was he involved in any scandal that could have pushed his brother to make the decision they claimed he had, so he couldn’t understand it.

But what would anyone stand to gain from killing his brother?

He thought back to the only marriage candidate he had now and sighed. He couldn’t deny that what Tobias pointed out about the lady had made perfect sense.

She was well dressed and spoke like a gently bred lady, which proved that she might indeed have a large enough dowry. He also considered her aversion to marriage and knew she would give him the privacy he needed to work without demanding his attention.

His openly courting her would cause a stir that would no doubt rock the halls of England's nobility and earn them more attention and invitations than he needed. There were many benefits to a match with her, but there were inconveniences as well.

He wasn't blind to her charms. His body, long starved of a woman's touch, had responded to her in a way that he hadn't liked. The familiar spark of desire had ignited in his blood as he had touched her and been close enough to smell her rose perfume. Her simple day gown had been cut in a manner that enhanced her curves and teased his eyes with a glimpse of her cleavage.

The scar on her face did nothing to take away from her beauty. In fact, it gave her an air of mystery that he found interesting. She held herself with more confidence than he would expect from someone who had no doubt been the object of many a pitying glance.

It was obvious that she had found him attractive too. He wasn't blind to the signs of an interested woman, but he had been caught off guard. If she weren't a noblewoman, he might have engaged in a bit of flirtation and gotten the itch out of his system, but she was a noblewoman, and he would not have dared lest she bind herself to him.

He didn't need such an attachment, and if he desired the touch of a woman, he could purchase it in one of the brothels in the city.

"I do not call you a beast. I would never," she had said, looking so angry that anyone would call him that.

He groaned, trying to rid his mind of thoughts of her, but her voice kept ringing in his ears. She carried herself so delicately that he felt a strong urge to protect her, but her spine and words showed a woman with a steely resolve who would not appreciate such a notion.

He wondered what she could have done to deserve such a scar... He could have asked Eli but he wouldn't even dare or the man would question him endlessly.

He wondered if her lovely brown eyes and sweet, full lips would part in surprise if she saw him again. Worse still, whether she would be happy or reject him if he proposed to her.

He found himself wondering what her reactions would be, as so far, he had failed to predict her. He had thought she would run home when he had called to her from the window, but she had surprised him when she had come inside, annoying him even further when she looked amazed by him rather than frightened by his scar. There were many layers to this woman he wanted to unravel, and it annoyed him that he was tempted beyond casual inquiry.

She thought he was hers?

Well, she was just about to find out how true that statement was.

Picking up the invitation to the Franworths' ball, he placed it on his desk and decided to accept it. He wanted to see more of this intriguing woman and perhaps ruffle her feathers the way she had his, and the ball seemed the perfect place to do it.

First, he would intrude on her privacy as she had his and show her that he intended to take her letter very seriously. She had ventured into the Beast's lair, and he would show her that she had gotten more than what she had bargained for.

She might have claimed him as hers in her letter, but she was about to become his in more ways than she could imagine.

Chapter Four

“You don’t think he will come looking for us, do you?” Diana asked, the panic in her voice causing Louisa to look up from the piano and miss a note.

Seeing the look on her sister’s face, Louisa stood up and walked around the pianoforte to sit on one of the sofas that made up the sitting area of the drawing room.

Diana immediately came to sit beside her. “You do not think he might report you to the authorities? I don’t know the law, but I am positive that breaking into a residential building is a punishable offense,” she continued, her voice ringing with anxiety. “I wonder what would be said in the rags about us if he does so. It would ruin us.”

Assuming that the ton believes such a rumour.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa smiled inwardly. She didn't know about her own reputation because her scar garnered her sympathy from the majority of the ton.

"Trust me, all would be well," she said, smiling at her sister reassuringly.

"What if—" Diana started.

"He will not report us. Do not worry."

"Who won't report you?" Isabella asked, entering the drawing room.

Oh God. Why now?

"The Duke of Colborne," Diana answered.

"Why would he have reason to report you?" Isabella asked, pouring herself a cup of tea. "Is it because of the letter?"

"No," Louisa uttered. She had truly hoped that no one but herself, Diana, and the carriage driver would know about their visit to the Duke's townhouse, but alas it was not to be.

"Well?" Isabella prompted impatiently. "Will any of you tell me what happened?"

"We went to the Duke's townhouse," Louisa admitted.

"You did what?"

“I wanted to get the letter back before he could read it, but he caught me.”

“I literally have nothing to say,” Isabella scoffed, shaking her head. “I sincerely hope for your sake that he doesn’t report you.”

He would have to leave his house first.

Not for the first time since their visit to Colborne House, Louisa wondered what exactly happened to the handsome man who lived behind those dilapidated walls.

What happened to make him choose a life of solitude, content to haunt the walls of the old building?

What was it about the man that made him so mysterious and piqued her curiosity?

What was it about the man that made her long to get to know him, to understand what emotions swirled in his dark eyes?

She had cared little about much else apart from her family since her accident.

“So, is he a beast like the rumours say?” Isabella asked, forcing her to focus on the reality in front of her and the room she sat in.

“Who?”

“The Duke of Colborne,” Isabella huffed in a chastising tone.

“No, he wasn’t,” Louisa replied with a sigh, standing to return to her seat at the pianoforte.

“What did he look like? Does he have horrific scars? Is he deformed?” Isabella

probed, curiosity getting the better of her.

“No, he doesn’t. On the contrary, he is quite... good-looking,” Louisa replied, keeping her voice carefully bland and arranging the sheet music to continue practicing on the pianoforte. A fast piece that challenged but intrigued her.

Just as her fingers hovered over the keys, ready to play, the door to the drawing room swung open and her mother strolled in.

“Louisa,” Lady Langham said shakily. “It appears that you have a visitor.”

Louisa’s eyes widened at the news as she watched her mother leave.

When she got to the door, Lady Langham turned around abruptly. “Remind me to never doubt your stories again,” she added awkwardly, before turning on her heels and stepping into the hallway.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa frowned, wondering who called on her and why their visit had discomfited her mother. She had no friends, hence she hardly had any callers—at least since the accident. The few friends she had, they had left since then.

This was in no way their fault. It had been a deliberate decision on her part. She had grown tired of the pitiful looks they threw her way whenever they met. It felt like she was attending her own funeral while she was still alive whenever she was with them, and that was ridiculous because she could not, for the life of her, understand why they made such a fuss over a little scar.

Some people might argue that the scar marred her face and made her unattractive and unable to attract suitors, but she preferred to have someone who liked her beyond her physical attributes. A person who loved her for her personality and intellect. A person who would not be discouraged simply because of a tiny scar on her face.

She knew it was a fanciful thought. It even sounded unlikely to her, but there was a part of her that held out hope that she might meet that special person.

That was the reason she would rather remain unmarried than marry Lord Pemberton. He could not hold her gaze any more than her former friends could. Since there was no possibility that her friends were visiting, the only other person who would call was the Duke of Colborne. But that was not likely, right?

The man was a recluse who rarely came out of his home. What were the odds that he would make the sacrifice of leaving the safety of those old walls simply to come and punish a daft girl who had trespassed on his property?

But then he was within his rights to punish her. It was highly unlikely that he was calling on her, but not impossible.

“Do you think it might be the Duke?” Isabella asked, a hint of fear in her voice.

“There is only one way to find out,” Louisa said, standing and wiping her suddenly damp hands on the skirt of her dress before marching out of the room.

Just as she got to the door, she had to stop abruptly to avoid colliding with the newcomer, who seemed to be trying to gain entrance into the drawing room.

“Good morning, ladies,” the stranger greeted in a familiar, deep voice.

Looking up into his face, Louisa found herself awestruck yet again.

The man was beautiful in an essentially masculine way. He had a typical aristocratic face with high cheekbones, a chiseled jaw, and eyes the colour of the sky during a storm. She recognized those eyes but found it hard to believe. His eyes flickered with several powerful emotions, but seeming to realize her scrutiny, they shuttered, locking her out.

Here in the light of day, she came to the startling realization that the Duke of Colborne was in fact an irresistibly attractive man, and he became even more so when he cracked a smile, transforming his somber expression into something she could only describe as dangerous.

“Do not tell me that you have already forgotten me, Miss Louisa,” he drawled, a mischievous smile playing on his lips. “I am Percival Fletcher, the Duke of Colborne.”

His words were followed by a perfect bow over her hand and a chaste kiss on it,

making the butterflies in the pit of her stomach flutter.

Louisa had to make an immense effort to maintain her composure.

Clearing her throat, she said, “Welcome to our humble abode, Your Grace. We are honoured to host you. Forgive my surprise, we were not expecting your visit.”

“Why, am I not allowed to visit my fiancée without prior notice?” he asked, the sly grin on his face growing as a collective gasp rippled through the room.

Well, there was one more thing she hadn’t deduced from their first meeting. It appeared that the reclusive Duke had a flair for dramatic announcements.

Louisa could feel the weight of three pairs of eyes on her, and even though she could not see their faces, she knew they looked astonished. She would explain the situation to them later, but at the moment, her focus was on the Duke, who she was doing her best to smite with the heat of her glare.

Instead of looking intimidated, the dratted man seemed to enjoy her discomfort because his smirk just widened.

She pulled back the hand he was still holding, and he instantly released her, surprise flashing in his eyes and disappearing just as quickly. As if he had not realized that he had been holding onto her hand for the better part of five minutes.

Running her suddenly damp hands over her dress, Louisa forced herself to hold her head up high as she stepped forward. One step, then another, until she stood so close to him that she could feel the heat of his body.

A part of her enjoyed watching his smirk dim a little in surprise.

“If you are here to blackmail me, Your Grace, I must say that you should be ashamed of yourself. This is a most cowardly thing to do,” she said in a low whisper.

“Miss Louisa, I would never do anything of the sort,” he replied.

“Welcome.” Isabella greeted, reminding Louisa of her presence in the room. “Please make yourself comfortable. I must leave you two to discuss. I seemed to have forgotten an appointment with my modiste. I shall see you tomorrow, Louisa.”

The Duke bowed in response.

As soon as the door closed behind Isabella, they stepped away from each other.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

The Duke went to take a seat on one of the sofas in the drawing room, leaving Louisa standing, watching him as he folded his tall frame and made himself comfortable.

“If you have not come to blackmail me, what did you hope to gain by claiming to be betrothed to me in front of my family?”

“You reached out to me first, or have you already forgotten, beautiful Louisa?” he retorted, stressing the syllables in a way that felt like a caress.

Warmth bloomed in her belly in response.

She had always thought her name was too simple—stuffy even. But when he said it, he made the simple syllables sound like something sinful. Something to be whispered in dark corners at night.

She had to make a conscious effort to pull herself back to reality. What exactly was it about the man that drove her to distraction?

“Yes, I did. Was that the reason you decided to break your self-imposed seclusion and visit us?”

“Well, it would be rude of me not to answer your letter, especially after you had gone through the trouble of using a dashing gentleman to deliver the letter,” he said with an aggravating smile. “Besides, I am a gentleman, and I would never allow a young lady to fall into disgrace on my account. You should have expected my proposal, especially considering the scandalous nature of your letter and the fact that we had spent time alone in my manor unchaperoned.”

“But nobody saw us,” she pointed out in outrage.

“Are you sure about that?” he asked, his eyes glittering with barely concealed mirth.

He was enjoying this, damn him.

“You live alone. Who could have seen us?”

“Do I? Live alone, that is?” he asked with a raised eyebrow, staring at her steadily until she came to a horrible conclusion.

“Your butler? He wouldn’t,” she gasped.

“I do not control what Tobias says or does beyond his duties. He is usually discrete, but I could never expect him to enjoy solitude the way I do. He must talk to someone. Besides, I am sure that you are familiar with the saying that the walls have ears. Believe me, the ton would have learned about this somehow.”

Louisa dropped her folded arms in defeat. “I will not be the only one ruined if they find out. Little Diana might be affected as well. There is enough noise about me amongst the bon ton. I certainly do not wish to add scandal to the list,” she said in a hopeless tone.

“I just did not want to be coerced to marry a man who pitied me and held no affection for me. My last suitor just wanted to marry me as a broodmare of sorts. I could never settle for that no matter how hideous the world thinks I look.

“I would not be able to bear the pity and pain for a lifetime. I am sure it sounds unrealistic, but I had thought to escape it by inventing an imaginary suitor. Forgive me, but I thought you did not exist, that the stories about you were just fantastical tales conjured by members of the ton to entertain themselves.”

“I do not blame you. I do live like I do not exist,” he acknowledged, a somber expression on his face. He patted the space beside him on the sofa. “Come, Miss Louisa. I believe we have much to discuss.”

Louisa came to sit on the other end of the sofa, keeping some distance between them.

“I do have an offer that could put your current problems to rest.”

“That does sound intriguing, Your Grace. Do tell,” she said, leaning forward and staring at him with rapt attention.

For a moment, he was distracted by the warmth of her wide brown eyes. But then he cleared his throat and spoke up. “I propose that we marry.”

Seeing her frown, he raised a hand to stop her asking questions until he could frame his words.

“It would not be a marriage in the true sense of the word—a marriage of convenience if you will. You will no longer have to deal with the pressure of your family forcing you to marry a man you strongly dislike, and you will certainly not receive pitiful looks from me. I know people who deserve such an emotion, and you, my dear, are not on the list.

“You will have your freedom to come and go as you wish. You will have the protection of my name and the freedom that neither married nor unmarried ladies of the ton can boast about.”

Louisa was stunned into silence, worsened by his unwavering stare. He was a man confident in himself and much used to getting his way, and while that should have annoyed her, she found she was somewhat... excited by it.

“Your offer is attractive, Your Grace. Maybe a bit unrealistic. You promise things that seem too good to be true. In exchange, what do you want from me? I do not particularly like to be indebted to anyone,” she replied, a skeptical look on her face.

“Do not worry, dear,” he said, leaning forward to stare intently into her face.

His gaze felt like a hot caress on her skin. Louisa swallowed hard, doing her best to appear composed.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“You would pay me back by simply attending all social events with me, turning on your best ballroom smile, and helping me return to the good graces of the ton. Of course, I will also need your dowry to repair my manor. You might have noticed that it was in great disarray during your last visit.” He gave her a rueful smile.

Louisa had indeed noted that Colborne House needed repairs and silently wondered about the Duke’s financial situation. She knew it was in no way his fault, but it still worried her. Repairing it would be best for both her and her soon-to-be husband. While she did not require a lot to be comfortable, she fancied living in a home that was at least sufficiently organized.

“Just that?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Just that,” the Duke confirmed with a nod.

“B-But you are a duke. Surely you would require an heir?” she asked tentatively, shifting self-consciously as his eyes flashed with more heat and slowly roamed down her body.

“You are not required to do anything other than what I had stated earlier, Miss Louisa,” he reassured her, looking away just in time, as she was contemplating reaching for her fan to cool the heat that seemed to consume her whole body.

“What of your title? It would end with you,” she pointed out, a frown creasing her brow.

“Do not worry about that, dear,” he said with a half smile. “I have a relative who

would inherit the title when I die. You do not have to break a sweat over it.”

“So, do you agree? Do you have any other questions?” he asked.

“I just feel like I have more to gain from this marriage than you do. We might also be throwing away any chance of making love matches,” she said, biting her lower lip anxiously.

“I have never intended to make a love match, and I never will. I might not promise you love, but you would have my protection and my loyalty. I would be faithful to you for as long as I walk this earth.”

“Even if we do not have marital relations?” she pressed, her cheeks flushing. “I know that men do have needs—needs that are supposed to be satisfied in the bedroom. How will you remain faithful when I do not offer you that satisfaction?”

“Do not worry yourself about that, my dear. I would worry about that myself. Just know that I keep my vows,” he replied, looking away dismissively.

“If I am to agree to this, I have expectations.”

“Whatever things you require will be taken care of.”

“You didn’t even wait to hear what I have to say,” she said, smiling.

“Consider it done. We will be wedded in a week by special license. I will obtain one from the Bishop,” he declared with finality, a satisfied smile tugging at his lips.

When Percival set out to make this offer, he had been doubtful of its success. The first problem he had encountered was choosing what to wear. Seeing as he had not been in polite company for the better part of two years, he had not needed formal

dress.

At that moment, staring at the contents of his wardrobe, he cursed himself for neglecting to acquire some of the finery that came with his title, never mind that he did not feel he deserved it.

It was at that moment that good old Tobias stepped in to save the day. Apparently, he had some of Michael's clothes altered. His brother was about the same height, but his time in the army must have given him broader shoulders because the coat felt snug around the shoulders.

Percival had to hire a hackney to go to the heart of Mayfair, where Langham Manor was located. It was a well-kept building, a far cry from the state of his home. When he had introduced himself as a duke, the butler was only too happy to allow him in. When he had finally seen his quarry, he was once again struck by the uniqueness of her features. She was petite but had curves that teased him endlessly. Her hair was twisted in a loose bun, with some tendrils escaping to frame her face, giving her a youthful look.

Her sister stood beside her, with nearly identical features. They might look the same, apart from the scar, but something in his quarry's soulful brown eyes ensured that he recognized her at an elemental level.

It seemed the restlessness in his soul called to hers.

When he proposed, he had expected her to reject him passionately. He was even ready to use blackmail if need be. Imagine his surprise when she accepted his terms without much resistance. Just when he was about to seal the deal in a manner of speaking, her mother stepped back into the room, with a maid bearing refreshments hot on her heels.

“My apologies for the delay, Your Grace,” she said with a nervous smile. “We had to make a fresh batch of biscuits.”

She set down a tray laden with different types of cakes and cookies, complete with a tea set.

“Thank you, My Lady,” he returned with a smile.

He didn’t much care for sweets, but looking back at his betrothed, he could see the longing glances she cast at the overflowing tray from time to time, as if she wanted to reach for it but was not allowed to.

Using a napkin, he picked up one perfect cream muffin.

“Here, my dear,” he said, offering it to her. “Think of it as an early betrothal gift.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

She chuckled happily and took it. A sense of relief washed over him when he saw how relaxed and happy she was.

“Mother,” she announced, looking up with a smile, “His Grace has asked for my hand in marriage, and I have accepted.”

Percival watched in amusement as relief flashed across Lady Langham’s face and her shoulders relaxed.

“That is excellent news, Louisa,” she said, rocking slightly as if she dearly wanted to break into dance but was making the effort to stand still. She turned to him with a radiant smile. “Welcome to the family, Your Grace. I promise you will not regret this decision.”

“Marrying Louisa can never be regrettable,” Percival declared stiffly, slightly offended by the implication that his betrothed was not desirable. “I am a lucky man to have her. Since we have agreed, I will do my best to obtain a special license. We will be married in a week.”

With a deep bow, he walked out of the drawing room, leaving the two ladies standing there, their jaws slack with astonishment.

“Well,” Isabella began, breaking the silence that fell over the room following the Duke’s departure. “It seems that we have a wedding to plan on very short notice.”

“Indeed, I do not know how on earth we are expected to put forth a good celebration on such short notice. We do not even have a wedding dress ready. I truly wonder if

the modiste will be able to make something beautiful so quickly. We have to go there before nightfall,” Lady Langham sputtered, frantic with worry.

“Mother, there is no need to fret,” Louisa said.

“There is every need, dear Louisa. You are not allowed to look anything but absolutely glorious on your special day. I am not going to let the vicious mamas of the ton have a field day again,” Lady Langham asserted, pacing the length of the drawing room.

Louisa felt that familiar cold weight in her belly that reminded her of the blow her self-esteem had taken for the past couple of years since the accident. Her mother attempted to play it off as nothing, pretending that she was not affected by their snide comments, but her last comment belied her pretense.

“Louisa...” Lady Langham began in an apologetic tone.

“There is no need, Mama. The modiste will make a good dress. No amount of finery will make the ton forget that I am a scarred lady. I bear my scars with pride and would never allow them to make me feel less.”

“That is the spirit, dearest sister,” Isabella chimed in, a wide smile on her face.

“Come, my dear,” Lady Langham urged, taking Isabella’s hand. “We have a wedding to plan. There is so much to do. Make haste.”

Considering that Isabella’s wedding had taken three months to plan, Louisa did not envy them the task of trying to replicate a wedding of such opulence in so little time. But then, if there was anyone who took hospitality and balls very seriously, it was her mother.

It was how Lady Langham had managed to marry off two of her daughters to dukes, and a third was on the way.

While she did not particularly care for appearances, Louisa understood her mother's need to control some things, and because she understood the cause of that impulse, she humored her.

More than the wedding, she was concerned about the marriage per se, and naturally, she thought about her fiancé. She could only describe him as mysterious in a dark way, and while that quality was attractive in a way, it was also the root cause of her nervousness.

While the marriage offer seemed the answer to her prayers, she wondered what it would be like to be married to the Duke of Colborne. On the surface, she must admit that he was easy on the eyes and that he was attractive in a dark, untamed way, with a smoldering gaze and rumbling voice that called to a primal part of her that she had not realized existed.

They were attracted to each other, there was no doubt about that. But she had no inkling of his character and what exactly he was capable of. She had a feeling that she would never know, especially if he meant to keep to his plan of living separate lives.

She was supposed to be euphoric about the idea of enjoying the freedom that came with living alone, hence she did not understand the tightness that bloomed in her chest at the thought.

Chapter Five

Percival felt the difference in the air the moment he stepped into the tavern. The air inside was thick with smoke, permeated with the smell of unwashed bodies and another distinct smell that seemed to emanate from rotting food.

This was the place the lowest of the low frequented in England. Thieves, cutthroats, assassins, and patrons of such services met here. The Bow Street Runners would not dare raid the tavern. The gangs that met there would return with even deadlier force.

It was no place for a duke, but then he was no ordinary duke. He felt more at home here than in the finest gentlemen's clubs that London had to offer.

Looking around, he finally located his half-brother sat at one end of the room. Percival made his way through the crowd towards him. He had told Eli to dress simply, but his half-brother still looked out of place among the pile of unwashed bodies.

"Eli," he greeted when he stopped in front of the table.

"Colborne," Eli returned, taking a swig from the tankard he held in his hands.

Percival had thought that the man would complain about not going to a better establishment, but Eli looked at ease. Perhaps he had misjudged him, after all.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“Do you care for some ale? They brew a fine batch here,” Eli said, raising his tankard.

“Not yet,” Percival replied, taking a seat across from him. “You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“I am. I received your missive. I hope there is nothing amiss?” Eli asked, studying his face carefully.

Percival opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by the owner coming to their table, bearing a tray laden with bread and a plate of stew.

“Gud eve’, guv. Ye’re a sight for sore eyes, eh?” Mr. Lewis greeted with a smile that revealed two missing front teeth and several yellowing ones.

“Great to see you too, Mr. Lewis. I’d like to have a more private room for me and my companion.”

“Anything ye want, guv. We got a fine room at the back—very fine,” Mr. Lewis said with a bright smile, leading them past the counter.

He went down the hall, passed two doors, and stopped at the fourth one. He balanced the tray on one arm and fished in his apron for the key. After opening the door, he led them into a smaller room that boasted one trestle table and two rickety wooden chairs that had seen better days.

It was rough, but it met Percival’s requirements—it was private.

“Thank you, Mr. Lewis,” he said, dropping two coins into the owner’s free hand.

“Anything for ye, guv.” Mr. Lewis set down the tray on the table. “Call to me if ye need anything else,” he added with a bright smile, before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

This was why Percival liked coming to this tavern. No one knew he was a duke here... Not that anyone would imagine that. There was no one to judge how he ate his food. No one to wonder why he was meeting the Baron Gillingham. No one to wonder at the similarities between his features and those of the man sitting opposite him.

“What secret do you have to tell me that requires such privacy?” Eli asked with a raised eyebrow, taking another sip from his tankard. His eyes flickered with faint amusement.

Percival suspected that his half-brother was fast on his way to getting drunk. As long as he had known him, Eli had always had a fondness for drink, but that vice had worsened in the past year until it seemed like a cup of alcohol was an extension of his arm.

“I am getting married,” Percival announced with a sigh.

He poured himself some ale and downed it in one gulp. When he put his cup down on the table, he noted the surprise on Eli’s face.

“Do close your mouth—flies might get in,” he said dryly.

“You are the one who had sworn vehemently never to marry over the past couple of years, so forgive me if I am a bit surprised,” Eli scoffed, his eyes flashing with an emotion that Percival could not place.

Percival had known Eli for the better part of five years since the day Michael had found the Baroness Gillingham's letters to their father, mentioning an illegitimate son that she had managed to foist on the old Baron to avoid public disgrace. They could not believe they had another brother, but when they took a good look at Eli, they could see the similarities in their features.

Eli had their distinctive height, colouring, and their trademark gray eyes. Eventually, Michael and Percival approached him with evidence of his mother's perfidy in this very tavern, being careful about tarnishing his reputation.

Michael had been quick to accept Eli as their brother, but Percival had always felt there was something off about the man that he couldn't put a finger on. He wouldn't have bothered informing him about his impending nuptials, but as it stood, since Michael's death, Eli had become his only surviving blood relative, and he wanted to keep that connection alive. That was what Michael would have wanted.

"It is merely a marriage of convenience," he explained, waving a hand dismissively.

"What exactly do you mean by the term? Would she bear your heirs?"

"My contract with my wife does not require us to see each other more than a few times a year. It is a marriage in name only."

"In that case, I must say congratulations. I must meet the lady who is about to make an honest man out of you," Eli said with a teasing smile.

Percival gave a noncommittal grunt.

One tankard of ale and a few moments later, Percival was ready to go home. Saying his goodbyes to Eli, he headed out of the tavern and flagged down a hackney cab.

As the hackney pulled away from the seedy tavern and towards home, he thought about his impending marriage and the feisty lady that was to be his bride. When he had first met her in his gloomy study at Colborne House, he had thought she was a beauty who had a scar that she made no effort to conceal. That fact had caught his attention.

Ladies of the ton were more likely to attempt to conceal such an imperfection with layers of powder, but she did not mind walking around barefaced, as if she was challenging everyone to think that she was less.

She had not seemed afraid of him, holding his gaze throughout their meeting. He was aware that he was intense in an intimidating way, but instead of cowering before him, she stood her ground. But her scar suggested that she had experienced things that no young lady should have to endure.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

He was loath to admit it, but her boldness and confidence did interesting things to the area below his waist. It hardly mattered because he planned to have a chaste marriage with her. It wouldn't make sense to burden such a young lady with the weight of the demons that tormented him.

As he stared out the window of the carriage, he admitted to himself that he was not sure what the marriage would look like, and he was too exhausted to ponder on it. That was his last coherent thought before he drifted off to sleep.

Percival woke up to the sound of someone screaming and tapping him on the shoulder. When he opened his eyes, he noticed that the hackney was parked on the side of the road and the driver was standing at the door with a concerned look on his face.

That was when he came to the sickening realization that he had been the one screaming loud and long enough to alarm the driver.

“You seemed to have had a nightmare, guv. Do not worry, it happens to everybody. We are close to the address you gave me,” the driver said, before closing the door and regaining his seat, giving him no chance to reply.

But what was Percival going to say?

He had been suffering from horrible nightmares since he returned from the war. Some were particularly violent. They had been partly the reason why he avoided human interaction and neglected the notion of marriage.

In the last couple of months, he had not had them, so he had assumed that he was cured. It seemed that he wasn't if he was having night terrors in broad daylight, for goodness sake. At that moment, he was glad that he made the arrangement he had with Louisa.

Hopefully, she would never know about the scars he hid under his clothes or the night terrors that turned him into a vulnerable infant. She would never know because they would never live together. He would make sure of it.

He might not be innocent—he could not be, not after the bloodshed that he had a hand in—but he was going to protect her from the demons that haunted his sleeping and waking hours.

When the hackney stopped in front of his manor, he climbed down, paid the driver, and walked slowly to the front door. Tobias appeared to take his coat, and he continued down the passageway till he opened the door to the basement, where he sparred.

Soon after his return from the war, Percival realized that physical exertion helped push his body to exhaustion, thereby helping him sleep better. His weapon of choice was a leather bag filled with sand that he suspended from the ceiling.

After rolling up the sleeve of his simple tunic, he started punching the bag, taking out his embarrassment, frustration, and pain on the resilient leather. Eventually, he started feeling the strain on the muscles in his shoulders, the soreness of his bare knuckles, the sweat pouring down his face.

He welcomed it, pounding at the bag until his breath came in pants.

Collapsing on the floor, he stared up at the ceiling. An uneasy feeling bloomed in his chest, telling him that things were changing drastically and he had little control of it.

And somehow, he knew that a certain blonde-haired lady stood in the middle of that change.

He woke up the next morning with an aching body courtesy of the punishing activities of the previous night. He might have had better sleep, but his inner turmoil returned in full force the moment he opened his eyes.

He rang the bell to summon Tobias and requested hot water. In about half an hour, Tobias, along with two footmen, had filled the tub with steaming hot water. The heat of it caused perspiration to drip down Percival's brow.

He then shooed them out of his room so he could bathe in solitude. He never wanted anyone to see the extent of his scars.

He quickly undressed, eager to step into the welcoming heat of the water. It felt like heaven to his aching muscles when he lowered himself into the water and dropped his head back, relaxing fully. He was fast on his way to falling asleep when he was startled awake by the sound of the bedroom door opening.

"Forgive me, Your Grace. It seems you have a letter?" one of the young footmen from earlier said.

"Who is it from?" Percival asked, lowering himself further into the water.

"It seems to be from your fiancée, Your Grace. Miss Louisa Gouldsmith."

Percival motioned for the footman to drop it on a stool far from him and waved him away.

It seemed that his fiancée had a fondness for writing letters. He wondered if the note she had sent him was as sweet as the first one she had written and smiled to himself.

But then he caught himself and frowned.

In just two days, she had made him break character more often than anyone who had ever tried. Any longer and she might turn him into someone he didn't recognize. It seemed there were some ground rules he had forgotten to set when he made his proposal. It was time to remedy that.

He rose from the bath to read her note, and frowned. She was inviting him on an outing with her family, and he wondered if she was truly expecting him to come.

Did she think that with just one visit to her family home, he was suddenly ready to re-enter Society?

He would go if only to warn her never to repeat that mistake.

Chapter Six

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa loved her twin sister, she truly did, and the fact that they were born mere moments apart meant that they shared a bond stronger than that seen between normal siblings. However, in moments like this, she wished for a respite from the suffocating protectiveness of her sister and her husband.

The moment she had tried to leave the house, Isabella overheard her speaking to her mother about her plans to meet with Percival. Isabella had insisted on accompanying her to chaperone them, since their mother wanted time with her grandson.

Coincidentally, just as they stepped out, Duncan arrived, and after some moments of kissing and hugging his wife, she managed to convince him to take them to the location of Louisa's rendezvous with Percival.

That was how Louisa ended up standing with them in a menagerie, taking tiny sips of the punch they had procured from one of the booths nearby.

Since the accident that had permanently disfigured Louisa's face, permanently differentiating her from her twin, Isabella had stopped short of wrapping her in cotton to protect her.

While Louisa understood that her sister acted out of the need to assuage her guilt, it did nothing to make her feel better about the invasion of her privacy.

"You do realize that this is supposed to be a private meeting, not a family picnic. What would Percival think when he arrives?"

"It seems you are on a first-name basis with the Duke already," Isabella noted with a

mischievous smile.

But the serious look on Louisa's face seemed to remind her that her sister was indeed serious.

"I do realize you are old enough to make your own decisions, but I wish to ask if you are truly sure about this. You do realize you do not have to marry anyone you do not like. Besides, not much is known about your reclusive Duke, and something about that fact sets me on edge."

"Isa, you do realize I have very few suitors, primarily because of my scar. Not many men are willing to overlook that to marry me, and no matter if I turn as ugly as sin, I would never marry a man who is courting me because of some misguided pity or charity," Louisa stated vehemently.

"Louisa you are still a beauty, scar or no scar. You are not required to endure an uncomfortable marriage simply because you think you would not attract a better suitor."

"You are my sister, Isabella," Louisa said with a dry laugh. "So it is expected that you view me through rose-coloured lenses."

"I do not."

"Isabella, he is a duke—a prime catch, according to Mama at least. I do not understand why you are making a fuss about it," Louisa scoffed.

"We are just concerned, dear Louisa," Duncan chimed in. "The Duke of Colborne is a mystery to the fashionable ton. Even the gentlemen barely have any information about him, apart from the fact that he was in the army for years, fighting the French. Years of such violence and a life of seclusion right after might not be the best for the

sanity of a man. We just want you to be safe,” he added quietly, a frown of concern marring his brow.

Duncan had assumed the role of an older brother since he married Isabella, providing a blanket of brotherly protection that could be suffocating sometimes. But Louisa knew that part of his devotion stemmed from his guilt, especially considering that her injury was caused by his vindictive ex-fiancée, who had mistaken her for her twin sister. She had never had any reason to doubt his love for Isabella, so she believed his concern was genuine.

“I guess we will learn more about him when he arrives,” she said, forcing a cheerful smile on her face.

Isabella turned to stare at her husband over her cup and exchanged smiles with him. The sort they exchanged when they shared a private joke.

“What? Would you kindly let me in on the joke?”

“Well,” Isabella began tentatively. “It seems to me that you are curious about this Duke of yours.”

The way she wiggled her eyebrows suggestively gave Louisa an idea of the sort of curiosity her sister was talking about.

She shifted in her seat, feeling her cheeks burning with embarrassment. “He is going to be my husband. It is only natural that I am curious about him.”

Her sister and her husband exchanged those knowing glances that never ceased to irk her. She watched them make a show of sipping their punch, a frown of frustration creasing her brow.

It was quite unfortunate that she was the only one who knew how far the Duke and Duchess of Fangsdale strayed from the prim and proper image they showed to the ton.

Duncan was a former rake, and his mischievous tendencies complemented that of his wife. Together, they had made it their life's mission to tease her mercilessly about topics that were ordinarily considered taboo among polite company.

But then she did not qualify as polite company to them. She was just their sister, and most times, she considered that a blessing, since they treated her normally without the kid gloves that the rest of the family seemed to don around her.

Sticking a hand in the hidden pocket of her walking dress, she retrieved a pocket watch. Already several minutes had passed since their arrival and Percival was nowhere to be seen.

“It seems that the Duke has other engagements,” she murmured, looking around. “I have to take my leave. Mother needs me to go with her to the modiste—something about embellishments for the gown.” She patted her hair and rose from her seat.

“I wish you good luck with Mama,” Isabella said with a laugh, but then her eyes narrowed on something behind Louisa. “It seems your Duke is committed to your engagement, after all.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa turned to see that Percival was indeed approaching them in long-legged strides. She let out a relieved sigh.

“Good day, Miss Louisa,” he greeted with a deep bow when he stopped in front of them. “I apologize for my tardiness,” he said with an unreadable expression, raising her hand to his lips.

Louisa only nodded in acknowledgment, unsure what to say. Breaking eye contact with her, he turned to greet Isabella and Duncan before asking her to take a turn with him around the menagerie.

“I did not expect your invitation, Miss,” he began when they were out of earshot.

“Louisa,” she uttered.

“What?” he asked, watching her with an unreadable gaze.

“Just call me Louisa,” she clarified. “Since we are going to be married, it seems right for you to use it.”

“In that case, you should call me Percival,” he said after a pause.

She stumbled back, clearly not expecting him to give in so easily, but then she righted herself and they resumed their stroll. If he found her actions odd, he said nothing.

“All right.” She nodded. “Now that the matter is settled, I would love to know why you thought my invitation was odd. We are to be married, are we not? Isn’t it right

that you at least court me before you propose?”

“I had assumed that since we will have a marriage of convenience, I was not required to court you.”

“I do not require you to court me truly, Percival,” she explained, glaring at him. “But even if we were to be husband and wife only on paper, I highly doubt you would want anyone else to know that. It would attract too much attention if we suddenly announce an engagement.”

“But your Lord Pemberton will be a witness to our courtship.”

Was he going to be this stubborn about everything?

“I do not think his word would be sufficient to convince all of England that we had a rushed marriage not because I was compromised.”

“And I suppose you would rather they think us a love match?”

“Precisely.”

“This was not what we discussed earlier.”

“For our plans to work, there have to be adjustments,” she emphasized. “It will be difficult to convince them that we are a happily married couple if we’ve barely been seen together or if we barely know anything about each other.”

“You strike a hard bargain, but you have a valid point. Ask away, I am all ears.”

She fished in her pockets, produced a folded piece of parchment, and unfolded it.

“Do not tell me that you curated a list,” he said, his voice ringing with disbelief.

“Well, I did. What other way is there to ensure that I remember all the important questions?” She raised an eyebrow.

“As you wish, Louisa,” he relented, raising his hands in surrender. “Do go ahead.”

She smoothed the piece of parchment and scanned it, her eyes skipping between the lines. His fingers itched to smoothen out the furrow between her eyebrows.

“Tell me, Percy,” she began, tearing her gaze away from her list. “Why did you become a soldier?” she asked, examining his face closely.

Percival schooled his features into an impassive mask and gave her the diplomatic answer. “It is a noble occupation.”

She stared at him for a few moments, and when it became obvious that he was not going to provide further information on the subject, she moved on to her next question.

“What is your favourite colour?”

Percival was a bit taken aback by the new direction their conversation had taken, from a potentially emotionally charged question to one that seemed innocuous.

“Blue,” he replied.

“Why don’t you attend balls?”

“I love my privacy,” he replied stiffly.

He was startled when she let out a groan of frustration.

“Percival, I am not conducting an interview,” she said, her voice laced with barely leashed frustration. “Please desist from answering my questions like I am conducting one. I ask these questions to get to know you better, so I do not particularly care for your superficial answers.”

“Does a groom who replies with more words make part of your list of requirements for marriage?” he asked, an amused smile curving his lips.

She burst into laughter. The melodic sound was a balm to the turmoil in his soul that he had carried for the past few years.

“I might have to add it,” she quipped when her laughter died down. “You never told me what else you require of me as your wife.”

“I will do that, but I’d rather have the conversation back at my manor. My requirements might include rules about where you can or cannot go,” he said.

“Why? Am I to become a prisoner in my own matrimonial home?” she asked hotly, her eyes narrowing.

“Absolutely not. I only seek to ensure your safety, which will become my responsibility once we are wed,” he explained quickly. “However, I can be particular sometimes and require things to be done in a particular way. Routine settles my mind, so I do not like to flout that order. We will speak on this later.”

“Do you have other expectations? In the bedroom?” Louisa asked, her cheeks flushing a deep red.

The question seemed to make him uncomfortable, as he adjusted his stance.

“I require nothing else, my dear. I would never force you to uphold vows you don’t mean or make you do anything that would make you uncomfortable. I would honour any other additional requirements you make.”

“There is nothing particularly dramatic. I just require that we at least spend some time together. If we do not, I am positive it will get very lonely. I do value my sanity and yours profoundly,” she said in a wistful tone.

“And?” he prompted.

“I would like to have something sweet every day as well. I have developed quite a sweet tooth, you see,” she continued, flashing him a bright smile that he could not resist returning.

“I will do my best, Louisa.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said, laughing and bobbing a mock curtsy. “I might add more requirements as time goes on.”

“I am yours to command, Louisa. I accepted all your requirements earlier, remember?” he reminded her.

“You did. Forgive me if I dismissed it as the usual promises gentlemen make to get what they want.”

He leaned closer to her, and she tried to maintain her position and not blush further under his heated gaze.

“In the future, dear Louisa,” he murmured, his eyes roaming over her face then settling on her lips, “you would come to realize that my word is my bond.”

Louisa could feel the most delicious tingle starting in her lips. She wondered vaguely what it would feel like to kiss him.

“It is all I have left,” he whispered, raising his hand as if to touch her face then dropping it at the last moment.

The movement snapped Louisa out of her trance, and she swallowed thickly, stepping back to regain her composure.

“What are your plans for the wedding? Would I finally see your family?”

“I barely have any family. Just the Baron Gillingham, a relative of mine, and Lieutenant Colonel Weston, a superior in the army who became a dear friend,” he said with a reminiscent smile that soon became somber. “I wonder if he’ll receive the letter on time.”

Or if he is alive.

If there was something his stint in the army had taught him, it was the fragility of life, and in their line of work, it took so little for a body to go from being living to being lifeless. The transition could occur in a second.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

While Lieutenant Colonel Weston was no longer in active service, he still worked with the Armed forces, obtaining intelligence about the French. And while the life of a spy was not as violent as that of a soldier, it was still as treacherous.

“You do not seem interested in getting to know me, Your Grace.”

Louisa’s voice nudged Percival back to reality. When he looked up, he saw the look of concern in her eyes behind her bright smile. She must have noted his somber mood and was trying to cheer him up, and for that he was grateful.

“I know enough,” he said, gazing intently at her. “I know your name, your love for your family and sweets. I would know more.” He took her hand and kissed the back of it.

They eventually moved closer to Isabella and Duncan, and Percival waved over the serving maid and paid for the refreshments the entire party had consumed.

“You did not have to,” Louisa murmured after he had bid her sister and her husband goodbye.

“I wanted to,” he reassured her. “I guess this is goodbye,” he said when his hired hackney arrived. “I will see you at the wedding.”

“I will see you at the wedding,” she echoed, waving as the vehicle pulled away.

In a few days, she would be married to this mysterious man, and she had years ahead of her to peel back the layers of his personality if he would let her.

She suspected she was up for a challenge, and for the life of her, she felt no fear, but rather a sense of anticipation.

Chapter Seven

“You look ravishing, my dear,” Lady Langham cried, wiping the corner of her eyes. “I believe you’re the most beautiful bride ever.”

Louisa rolled her eyes at the exaggeration, but as she sat at the vanity and stared at her reflection in the mirror, she was inclined to agree. She could hardly recognize the beautiful lady staring back at her—her maid had truly overdone herself.

Her wedding gown was a beautiful velvet sapphire-blue piece, the colour suiting her pale skin. The silver beadwork on the fitted bodice and the hem of her dress reflected the sunlight, giving her an ethereal glow. It was almost hard to believe that such a beautiful gown was made on such short notice. It must have cost her family a fortune.

Her hair was swept up in an elegant updo, a few strands let down to frame her face. A silver tiara was placed over it, just above the veil they would lower over her face later. It, too, glinted with the sapphires that lined it.

She felt like a queen—a very beautiful one at that. Her maid had cleverly hidden her scar with well-placed powder, and if one didn’t look too closely, they wouldn’t see it at all.

With the scar a little less noticeable, she looked nearly perfect, but it was unnerving. She had come to see her scar as a part of her she didn’t need to hide, so with it being barely visible now, she couldn’t help but feel plain.

Considering that she had little to no rest while trying to make sure everything was perfect for the wedding in such short notice, she must say that it was worth it.

“Your Duke would be struck dumb when he sees you,” Isabella commented, hugging her from behind and bending to place a kiss on her cheek. “You look absolutely beautiful, Louisa. I am almost jealous.”

“I prefer my husband speaking, thank you very much,” Louisa replied with a teasing smile, and Isabella laughed in response.

“You look absolutely ravishing, dear sister,” Selina gushed, tears gathering in her eyes.

“Thank you,” Louisa said, feeling the build-up of moisture at the back of her eyes. To distract herself, she asked, “What about my favourite nephew? Do not tell me you left him with the wet nurse.”

“As if he would agree,” Selina sniffed. “He is having the time of his life in his father’s arms. Sometimes I am positive that he forgets I exist—except when he is hungry, of course.”

Louisa laughed at the look of frustration on her sister’s face. At that moment, when nervousness and anxiety would have made mincemeat out of her, she was grateful to Selina for making her laugh.

“Thank you,” she whispered to her, and she just nodded. “How did you know I was nervous?”

“I am married, remember?” Selina smiled. “It is only normal.”

“I feel like my stomach is going to explode.”

“It will calm down once you see him. Although we should prepare you for your wedding night, so you do not faint.” Selina laughed, while Isabella snickered.

Their mother reddened but nodded nonetheless.

Louisa had not told them that her marriage with the Duke would never be consummated, but she kept silent as they lectured her, sometimes going so far that her mother had to shush them. She was flushed by the time they finished and unable to see her sisters or their husbands the same way.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“Now that you know everything you need, it’s time to get married,” Isabella intoned, pulling her up. “The Duke has waited enough for his bride.”

Louisa sincerely hoped that everything they had told her would not somehow be visible on her face. They went about their day as though they hadn’t just taught her things that should have never been spoken about before she stepped into the church.

Her uncle smiled up at her, the first she had ever seen, as she descended the stairs. Even the butler, who normally looked stoic, was wide-eyed.

She blushed and curtsied once she reached the bottom of the stairs. “Uncle,” she greeted.

“You look lovely, girl.”

“I thank you.”

“Shall we go?” her uncle asked.

She nodded and allowed him to lead her to their carriage, her heart thudding all the way to the cathedral Percy had chosen.

When she stood at the entrance of the Cathedral, her anxiety returned. She just focused on her groom, who was standing at the altar, waiting for her.

He looked regally handsome with his gelled-back brown hair and clean-shaven face, which made his scar all the more visible. But to her, he was the most handsome man

she had ever seen.

He was dressed in a well-tailored velvet jacket, a white shirt, and a silver vest. His wool breeches fit him snugly, accentuating his toned legs, and his boots shone from a good polish. He looked every bit the Duke, yet he seemed as nervous as she felt. Perhaps they had much more in common than she had imagined.

Putting on her brightest smile, she walked towards her future as his beautiful Duchess.

Percival had not thought it possible to be struck dumb by a woman's beauty, but as he stood at the altar, watching that angel walk towards him, he confirmed that it was indeed possible.

She looked radiant, smiling as brightly as she did. Despite her sheer veil, he was blinded. It was hard to believe that this beautiful woman was going to be his in a few moments.

As she progressed down the aisle, the guests faded into the background, his attention solely on her, on the brightness that he wanted to pull into himself. Her skin gleamed like the most precious pearls. His hands itched to touch her, pull her into his arms, and devour her.

When she stopped beside him, he experienced a different kind of torture, the scent of flowers tempting him to pull her into his arms and breathe her in to find its source.

Throughout the ceremony, he was lost in fantasies—vivid ones where he had the liberty to ravish the beautiful Louisa.

He had barely managed to remember to give the appropriate response when it was time to repeat his vows, surprised that his voice did not betray his desire.

When they exchanged rings, he savored the opportunity to touch the perfection of her skin. He lingered a little, holding onto her hand.

His mind conjured filthy images of those slender fingers somewhere else on his body, giving him pleasure. With conscious effort, he pushed such thoughts away, since he was already semi-erect, fast on his way to developing a full erection while standing in a church no less.

“You may kiss the bride,” the priest said, nudging him out of his self-reflection.

Percival looked down into the face of his bride. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes flitted to his and away. She was shy. He was willing to wager that she had never been kissed.

Stepping closer to her, he tilted her face up to his, forcing her to stare into his eyes. She looked so innocent at that moment, wide-eyed, her mouth a rosebud of the softest pink. It was tempting, so tempting that he decided he was fast on his way to becoming obsessed with her lips.

Considering the desire simmering in his blood and the innocence of his bride, it was best to keep the kiss as chaste as possible. He bent his head to place a kiss on her soft cheek, but she turned her face at the last moment, and their lips collided.

That was when all hell broke loose. Her lips were soft just like he had imagined and sweet. The kiss started chaste, with him pressing his lips to hers. But the kiss soon caught fire when she kissed him back, and he licked her lips until she let him in. Groaning at her sweetness, he devoured her, completely forgetting that they had an audience.

It was the sound of the priest clearing his throat that shocked him out of his lustful haze.

He reluctantly released her, inwardly cursing himself for being a fool.

He had intended for this marriage to be one of convenience, but he had already blown it to ashes with that kiss because there was no way he was going to look at her again without thinking of the kiss and wanting to repeat it.

What would happen after he satisfied his desire?

Louisa would be left to pick up the pieces and would probably hate him for abandoning her after using her body. Even if the dark part of his mind told him to sample her sweetness and be done with it, he knew there was no way he could get enough of her after just one taste.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

He could not offer her the emotional support that a wife would no doubt need. He wasn't capable of it. She was a woman of passion and life and excitement, while he was a man damaged on the inside by the things he had done.

Emotionally, he was no good to anyone, and he was not going to take her body when he could not offer her love in return.

As the ceremony ended, they walked down the aisle and were greeted by their family. Eli, Tobias, and Mrs. Owens, the housekeeper—Percival's only guests at the wedding—came up to offer their congratulations.

Soon they retired indoors for the wedding breakfast. Louisa sparkled beside him, accepting congratulations and well wishes gratefully and smiling at him from time to time as she ate from their shared plate.

She was everything he wasn't—beautiful, innocent, and bright. And while Percival knew he could not offer her those in return, he was selfish enough to want to keep her light and joy to himself.

He didn't allow himself to feel guilty because he had been honest from the start about what their marriage would look like. He knew she would grow to resent him with time, but before she could lash out, he would have discovered everything he needed about the circumstances of his brother's death.

“I think it's time for the couple's first dance,” her uncle announced.

Their guests cheered and cleared a path in the middle of the hall.

Louisa stiffened and gave Percival an apologetic look. He offered her his hand and rose from his seat.

He couldn't give her a happy life, but he could ensure that she at least enjoyed the wedding.

Her eyes widened in shock, but she placed her hand in his nonetheless.

The minstrels struck up a tune as they neared. A waltz, Percival realized. He placed a hand on her waist and took her other hand, trying hard to ignore the feel of her waist beneath his hand or the heat that traveled up his arms where he touched her.

She stared up at him with wide eyes as they danced, her cheeks red, and he wondered why. He spun her once, and everyone faded away as if they were the only people left in the world.

She moved in time with him, and he knew then that things would never be the same again.

Chapter Eight

The silence in the carriage was deafening as Louisa and Percival rode to what would be her new home, the air thick with emotions that neither was willing to express. Louisa had never imagined that this was how the marriage she had agreed to would look like, so it was a startling reality check for her.

She had expected at least minimal conversation to distract her from the nervousness that the idea of starting a new life was stirring inside her, but Percival did not seem to share her anxiety about the change in status.

But then she guessed not much was going to change in his life, after all. He was a

duke, and while she was his wife now, they were simply returning to his home. With their marriage of convenience, he'd spend the rest of his life with little to no changes to his freedom and lifestyle.

That was why he could afford to be so relaxed, slouching slightly in his seat opposite hers, his hat pulled low to cover his face, so she could not tell if he was asleep or merely resting his eyes. In contrast, she was now married to a duke who was ignoring her, and she was moving into a house where she knew no one.

In fact, the Duke was the only familiar person who escorted her into her new home, but he was ignoring her, and she could not understand why.

When she walked down the aisle towards him earlier, the flicker of admiration in his eyes immediately chased her nervousness away, replacing it with a heightened sense of awareness of his body.

Even though she knew that their marriage was one of convenience, a part of her had held on to the hope that she might have a splendid wedding night. The type that the maids giggled about in the dark corners of the manor.

The moment when he kissed her was nothing short of heavenly, for that heightened awareness tipped into desire as he virtually ravished her mouth. When he finally released her, it was all she could do not to pull him back and beg him to continue, but the look of regret on his face stopped her cold.

He had acted like it was the worst sin to kiss her, and she was left to wonder if she was so unattractive that he regretted kissing her. Had he realized at the altar that he could not deal with her scars?

Despite how ill-received her scars had been by Society, she had never truly felt inferior. Thanks to her family—her mother, mostly—she had a healthy self-esteem. A

trait that had allowed her to continue navigating the treacherous waters of polite society. She had ignored looks of disgust and pity. She had ignored the gossips and their less-than-true stories.

But in the face of Percival's rejection, her armor shattered, leaving her vulnerable to pain and injury—and she experienced the worst part of it after the kiss.

Was she so hideous that the mere act of kissing her disgusted him?

Granted, she had mistakenly initiated the kiss, but he had been a willing participant and an eager one at that.

When the priest announced that Percival could kiss her, she was flooded with anticipation and trepidation. She had watched as he struggled with his conscience. A part of her felt irritated that kissing her was such an uphill task for him. Percival might be a lot of things, but he definitely was not ignorant about what happened in the bedroom. Why, then, did he find it so difficult to kiss his bride?

She had given up hope of him performing that task when she felt his fingers on her face, tracing her jaw, his eyes blazing with resolve. He lowered his head, intent on placing a kiss on her cheek.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa could not explain why she had turned her head at the last moment, forcing him to kiss her lips. It might be the part of her that had always been lonely, the part of her that wanted to know what a kiss—her husband's kiss—felt like, and she was not disappointed.

His kiss was just like his personality—intense and overwhelming. In a few seconds, she had forgotten her surroundings and the fact that their family and friends were seated in the pews behind them.

When he had released her, she had been dazed, holding on to him for the few moments it took her to remember her own name, who she was, and the identities of the people who occupied the church.

Now that she thought about it, perhaps it was the wanton way she had responded to his kiss that had disgusted him. He had married her because he thought she was a proper lady of the ton, and she was quite sure that no true lady of the ton would be caught sharing such a passionate kiss with her husband in a church of all places!

But it was his fault!

It was his fault for eliciting such a reaction from her. She had never wanted a big wedding, so there was no obligation for her to play a part in one.

Ironically, even though she felt hurt by his reaction after their kiss, she could not regret kissing him. It was a memory that would keep her warm in the years to come when Percival left her to pursue his own life.

It was the life she had signed up for, so she did not understand the cold feeling of disappointment that settled in the pit of her stomach.

The feel of the carriage slowing down pulled her out of her reverie, and with a sigh, she moved the curtains aside to see that they had arrived at Colborne House.

She stared for a long time at the building that was to be her new home for the unforeseen future.

The manor might be dilapidated at the moment, but she imagined it was once a sight to behold in its glory days. Its majestic pillars still stood proudly, holding the slowly collapsing building up. The roof had caved in in some places, and some of the high windows were broken where the louvers should have been.

The overgrown trees that once surrounded the building had been cut down, and someone had taken time to clean up the grounds around the manor so it was a little bit more inviting than the last time she had come here.

That fact at least gave her hope that the household might be welcoming to their new Duchess and more likely to work with her on restoring the manor to its former glory.

She guessed she would need to work a lot to take her mind off the loneliness that was sure to come with her marriage. Rebuilding the manor seemed as good a cause as any to channel her energy.

Of course, it had nothing to do with the fact that a tiny part of her heart wondered if it could make the Duke despise her less—maybe even fall in love with her.

The events of that afternoon were enough to tell her that it was a pipe dream, unlikely to become reality, but it was difficult to convince her romantic heart to accept the fact.

“It seems we have arrived, wife,” he said blandly when their eyes met.

“Indeed, Your Grace,” she replied just as coldly.

If he noted the chilly tone of her voice, he did not comment on it. He stepped out of the carriage and extended a hand to help her down. His fingers lingered on her gloved ones for a fraction of a moment, sending familiar heat down her spine.

His hands were bare—his one protest against the norms. His fingers were broader than hers, his palms callused, the skin peppered with hair.

The loud sound of the driver clearing his throat snapped Louisa back to reality, only to realize that she had spent the better part of a minute staring at her husband’s hands like a love-struck fool. She felt her cheeks bloom with colour as she averted her gaze.

She marched towards the entrance of the manor, determined to put some distance between her and her annoyingly attractive husband.

Who on earth gets transfixed by and obsessed with a man’s hands? The answer, it seemed, was that she was the only one guilty of that novel brand of madness.

They got married only a few hours ago and she was already making a fool of herself. She hoped it was not a prediction of what their future would look like.

When she stopped in front of the giant iron doors, she found them quite jammed. Reluctant to request help from her husband, she put all her weight against them and pushed. Thus she was unprepared when it opened suddenly, and she realized with panic that she was falling forward.

She braced herself for the inevitable impact with the floor... before she felt masculine hands around her waist pulling her back till her back was pressed against a

deliciously firm chest.

“Careful, Duchess,” Percy whispered in her ear, sending goose bumps down the side of her neck. “We do not want you to acquire an injury so early on in our marriage.”

Louisa immediately pulled herself out of his embrace, swallowing repeatedly and running her suddenly damp hands over the skirt of her dress as she tried to collect herself.

It was concerning how easily this man could destroy her carefully conserved composure. Just one touch or the sound of his voice made butterflies flutter in her stomach.

Who is he, and what exactly has he done to me?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“Your Graces,” a voice greeted, causing Louisa to turn around.

It was the butler. Louisa recognized him from her previous adventure in the manor.

“I was not expecting you to return this early, Your Grace,” the butler then addressed Percival.

“You need not hurry on our account, Tobias. I trust that you and the other servants will be done with whatever cleaning services you hope to render. You have prepared my wife’s chamber, yes?” Percival asked with a raised eyebrow.

“My apologies, Your Grace.” Tobias winced. “It is almost ready, Your Grace. We are having some trouble replacing most of the items in the room.”

“Alright.” Percival said, stepping past the butler to push the heavy doors wider and nudging his wife inside. “I am taking the Duchess on a tour of the grounds. I will also show her some of the other rooms at the other wings of the estate. Will it be ready then?”

“Certainly, Your Grace,” Tobias replied, before retreating briskly and disappearing around some dark corner.

The interior of the manor was even creepier and darker than Louisa remembered. The staircase that she guessed led to one of the dilapidated wings of the manor was collapsing, the railing so heavily rusted that it was barely hanging onto its hinges.

“I would not recommend venturing in that direction. That is the oldest wing of the

manor and the most damaged. Please, do not go there for any reason—any reason at all,” Percival warned sternly. “Come, I will show you to the other parts of the manor.”

He led her towards the west wing of the manor, where his study was located. She remembered it from the first day she had visited although she hadn’t had the time to take in the only well preserved room she had noted so far.

It smelled like ink and paper and the floor to ceiling shelves contained books that must have been favourites of his. Her hand itched to peruse them to see what sort of things interested him.

“I am quite sure you remember this room. It is my study. It also serves as a sanctuary of sorts. I prefer to spend my quiet time here. And I do not like to be disturbed when I am here.”

She understood the unspoken message clearly, even though the words felt like a slap across the face. If she needed confirmation of the Duke’s resolve to lead separate lives, this was as good a proof as any.

Closing the door behind them, led her to another room close to the study. She knew it was his bedroom as soon as she stepped inside. It was sparsely furnished and minimalistic, just like the man himself. The main furniture was a mahogany king-sized bed and a small couch. And the only other spot of colour in the room was emerald-green curtains hanging over the windows.

Its sparseness should have dampened her curiosity, but instead, she wondered why he had not bothered to decorate. Why he was not sleeping in the master chambers. Why there was no sign of his favourite colour in his room. It was as if he had taken over the room without changing anything, not caring much for adding his personal touch.

Her eyes flitted to the massive bed that dominated the room. It was big enough for both of them to sleep in it without their bodies touching.

Her mind took the filthy route as she imagined what it would feel like to be pressed against his chest in the middle of his bed while he took her lips in one of his drugging kisses.

“Louisa,” Percy called, pulling her out of her reverie.

She was startled to find that he was standing so close to her, glowering down at her, his eyes glinting with some wild emotion she could not place.

“Yes!” she answered, her cheeks burning with guilt.

The mischievous grin that curved her husband’s lips confirmed that he had guessed the direction her thoughts had taken.

Damn the man for being so perceptive while remaining an enigma.

“I should show you the other rooms,” he said, offering her his arm.

After a pause, she took his arm, and they walked out of his room and down the hall towards a slightly ajar door.

“This is your room,” he murmured, before pushing the door open wider.

How convenient. It is quite far from his bedroom.

There were two women in the room—a buxom older woman who had brown hair the colour of chocolate and a younger lady with hair a lighter shade of brown. They worked industriously, preparing the room for their mistress. They were so engrossed

in their duties that Percival had to clear his throat rather loudly to draw their attention.

The identical looks of surprise on their faces might have been funny if Louisa had been in a happier mood. Now that their faces were turned towards her, it was easy to see that they were related because of their similar features.

“Good evening, Your Graces,” they greeted, dropping into hurried curtsies.

“Welcome to Colborne House, Your Grace,” the older woman said, moving closer to Louisa and smiling widely. “I only saw you briefly at the chapel. My name is Mrs. Owens. I am the housekeeper here, and I cannot tell you how glad I am that his home finally has a mistress.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“Thank you, Mrs. Owens. I do look forward to working with you.”

“Likewise, Your Grace,” Mrs. Owens returned, her growing smile making her face glow. “My apologies for the state of your chamber. We will finish preparing it shortly.”

“I thank you for your dedication to my comfort.” Louisa said.

“This young girl here,” Mrs. Owens continued, beckoning for the younger woman to come closer. “She is my daughter. I do not know about any other talent she might possess, but she is great with hair and has a good eye for the latest fashions. Perhaps you might take her on as your lady’s maid?” she asked, an expectant look on her face. “Unless your own maid accompanied you.”

Louisa’s maid, Betsy, had elected to remain at Langham Manor, and while Louisa felt her absence, she understood the reason behind her decision. Betsy wanted to stay with her sweetheart, one of the footmen at Langham Manor. Louisa had been happy for her and had wanted her to enjoy that love even if she would have to do without the best lady’s maid she had since her childhood.

“Indeed,” she said after taking a good look at the red-cheeked girl, who avoided her gaze. The girl seemed painfully shy, but Louisa hoped she would succeed in coaxing her out of her shell. “I suppose she will do. What is your name, dear?”

“Anne, Your Grace,” the girl replied in a small voice, staring down at the ground, her face turning redder if it was even possible.

“Anne,” Louisa repeated gently, then paused until the girl looked up. “You will be my lady’s maid.”

She was unprepared for the giant smile that transformed Anne’s otherwise plain face.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I promise to do my utmost best not to disappoint you,” Anne said, smiling and bowing deeply.

“I hope we’ll work well together.” Louisa returned her smile.

“Come, my dear. There are more places to show you,” Percival spoke from beside her, taking her arm and leading her out the door.

Louisa realized that he had used the term of endearment when they weren’t alone and that the agreement they had made would be between them alone.

They explored other rooms in that hallway that were in different levels of disrepair. He finally showed her to the kitchen, where she met the cook. She was a buxom woman with red hair and a boisterous personality, whom everyone referred to simply as Cook. According to Percival, no one knew her real name, and she kept information about herself close to her chest. She had been living in Colborne House since before Percival’s birth and had stayed on even when the estate’s finances crumbled. She was more or less a family member, and Percival treated her as such.

Cook greeted them warmly before shoos them out of the kitchen, stating that it wasn’t a place for fine folk like them.

Percival cracked a smile in response—one of the few times Louisa had seen him smile. She was unsure whether to take such a statement as a compliment or an insult, but she decided to let the matter lie.

He led her towards the foyer, presumably to show her the grounds, but just before they got there, she spotted another staircase that led to a wing that seemed to be neglected but in good condition.

“Where does that staircase lead to?” Louisa asked, turning to him.

She watched as an invisible shutter fell over his features, shielding his thoughts from her shrewd eyes.

“It leads to the old master bedroom. It had not been occupied for years. You cannot go there.”

“Why? Is there a member of your family haunting that room as a ghost?” she teased.

Percival did not share in her amusement. Instead, he clenched his jaw, a vein throbbing in his temple. Her question seemed to have hit a raw nerve, but she could not understand why.

“Heed my warning, Duchess, if you intend to stay. I think we are done with the tour for now,” he muttered, before marching away, leaving her standing there, utterly confused.

Louisa stood in the middle of the foyer, confused at how her attempt at adding levity to their conversation had failed spectacularly.

She wondered what exactly she had said that elicited such a response from him, but she guessed that the reason he didn’t take the master bedroom was at the root of his anger.

Sighing heavily, she decided to return to her room. When she opened the door, she half expected to see Mrs. Owens and Anne still cleaning up. Instead, the room was

spick and span, with nary a thing out of place.

They must have really worked hard and fast to prepare it in so little time.

She walked into the room, slowly taking in the décor as if she had not done so an hour ago. It was painted in different shades of purple and was dominated by a large bed in the middle, a matching couch, and a vanity complete with a mirror.

This room must have once belonged to a woman—maybe Percival's aunt or his grandmother.

She attempted to unfasten her gown, but she promptly gave up when she remembered how many buttons ran down the back of her dress.

“Your Grace?”

Louisa turned towards the door to see Anne poking her head into the room and staring at her quizzically.

“What is it, Anne? You can come in,” she called.

“I came to ask if you need help disrobing,” Anne said, a high flush on her cheeks.

“You are right on time.” Louisa smiled kindly at her. “I was wondering how I would go about unfastening the numerous buttons on the back of my dress.”

Anne laughed softly and stepped into the room.

Louisa was grateful that she at least hadn’t intimidated the girl into losing her sense of humor.

“When you get married, insist on a much easier dress, Anne,” she joked.

“Mother says that they make wedding dresses this way so the husband learns patience.”

“Why? Can’t he learn it in some other way?”

“She says that a man wants nothing except food and flesh, and since using food can be cruel, there’s only one way to teach him a lesson.”

Louisa laughed and shook her head, wondering whether her husband would have been patient with her dress or ripped the entire thing off her.

Her wedding dress was beautiful, no doubt, but the modiste must have taken too much liberty with the buttons, for so many tiny buttons that ran along the back of the dress. Even with Anne's help, it took several minutes to completely unfasten the infernal dress.

Louisa breathed deeply, rubbing at her middle once she was finally freed of the offending garment. She was tempted to retire to the bed that was newly dressed and looked oh so inviting, but Anne seemed to have other ideas.

"Perhaps you want a bath, Your Grace?" Anne asked, folding the dress neatly and hanging it in the wardrobe.

Louisa was about to refuse, but her body felt cramped from the long carriage ride and the tension that had settled inside her. The idea of relaxing in hot water seemed extremely appealing at that moment.

"I would love that," she replied with a sigh, but then she remembered the shortage of staff in the manor. "How will you bring up the water, though? I would hate to make you and your mother haul water upstairs."

"You do not have to worry about that, Your Grace. I will just ask the young men below stairs to help bring up the water," Anne said with a reassuring smile.

"What men?" Louisa asked, confused.

"Gabriel and Lawrence. They are Mr. Tobias's nephews. They come every day to help us women with tasks that require a lot of strength."

“That’s kind of them,” Louisa remarked.

“They are very kind. Very handsome and kind,” Anne murmured, a shy smile tugging at her lips as her blush deepened.

Louisa might not know Anne very well, but she was willing to wager that her rosy-cheeked maid had a tendre for either one or both of the brothers.

“And one of them has managed to catch your fancy?” she inquired with a wide smile.

“Oh no, no,” Anne declared fervently. But when she saw Louisa’s smile, she relented. “Indeed, but my mother would never agree.”

“Why?”

“Lawrence is handsome, but he hasn’t finished his apprenticeship with the blacksmith. She doesn’t want me to become a blacksmith’s wife.”

Louisa nodded, understanding why Mrs. Owens would want her daughter to secure a match of higher status.

“Do not despair, Anne,” she urged. “Who knows? She could agree with time.”

“I doubt that,” Anne muttered with a pout. “But I intend to weary her with my pleas.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa couldn't hold back the laugh that escaped her lips. "I do not doubt it."

"I should go now before it is too late," Anne said, hurrying out the door. She was most likely looking forward to an opportunity to talk to her handsome blacksmith's apprentice.

Grateful for the solitude, Louisa lay down on her new bed. True enough, it was warmer than she had imagined and so soft that she wondered how it had been preserved. Her mind went back to Anne, and she couldn't stop smiling.

Her marriage might be disappointing, but she was sure of one thing—she was going to enjoy living here with Anne and all the other members of the household. She would make sure of it.

In no time, the young men came up, hauled a big bathtub into her room, and fashioned a bathing corner of some sort, before filling the tub with steaming hot water. All the while, Anne stood at the side of the room, admiring the one with dark hair and eyes—he must be Lawrence. It was so amusing that Louisa wondered how she managed not to laugh.

She did not blame Anne in the slightest. Her beau was handsome, and if she weren't a nobleman's daughter, she too might have been enthralled by them.

It seemed Lawrence was also enchanted by Anne, for his eyes kept following her even as she pretended to be busy. When their eyes met, they both flushed.

Louisa smiled at their display of affection and wondered if she would ever experience

anything as sweet with Percival. It was hard to imagine him staring at her with anything other than that cold look in his eyes, but annoyingly, she didn't mind it.

Probably, she had come to prefer his cold look over Lord Pemberton's wincing and grimacing.

When the men were done filling the bathtub, they left, allowing her to shed her clothes and step into the steaming water. Anne had been an angel to suggest that she bathe, and she would definitely reward her for it. Perhaps she would give her a day off to sneak out to see a certain someone.

When she sank fully to the bottom of the bathtub, Louisa let out a long sigh of pleasure and relief, enjoying the feel of the almost too-hot water on her skin and the way it relaxed her muscles till she felt boneless, content to just float in the tub. There were very few pleasures she enjoyed, and a hot bath was one of them.

Anne returned later to help wash her hair and rinse out the soap suds on her skin with the extra bucket of water the young men had left beside the bathtub, before drying her body with a towel.

When Louisa stepped back into the room, she found that Anne had laid out not two but three dresses for her to choose from for dinner. It was obvious that Anne took her duties as lady's maid very seriously, and Louisa was glad for it.

"Your Grace, I think any one of these dresses will be mighty fine for dinner. What do you think?" Anne asked, wringing her hands anxiously.

"I think they are great. Let's go with the blue dress, shall we?" Louisa replied with a smile.

"Excellent choice, Your Grace!" Anne exclaimed, clapping her hands together and

beaming with excitement. Then, she helped Louisa into her dress and arranged her hair in artful curls around her face, softening her features.

As she stared at her reflection in the mirror, Louisa concluded that Mrs. Owens was right about one thing—Anne really had a good eye for the latest fashions. She was a gem, and Louisa felt lucky to have her.

“Where did you learn to style hair, Anne?” she asked, touching her hair.

“Do you like it, Your Grace?” Anne asked shyly. “My mother was lady’s maid to His Grace’s mother, so she taught me.”

“You are magnificent, Anne,” Louisa praised. “Truly.”

Anne beamed with pride and then eyed her mistress’s face, biting her lip. “Perhaps I might apply some powder to hide the scar?” she asked tentatively.

Louisa recognized the tone—it was the tone that everyone she met used when making comments about her scar, as if they were afraid she would descend into hysteria because they had drawn attention to the tragedy that had caused the permanent mark.

“I don’t need to hide the scar,” she said, turning to flash the girl a reassuring smile. She was relieved to see the answering smile that lit up her face.

“All right, Your Grace,” Anne murmured, but she was still biting her lip.

“What is it, Anne?” Louisa prompted. “Is anything the matter?”

“I have a question, but I don’t think it’s proper to ask it.”

“I should be the judge of that, shouldn’t I?”

“I don’t want you to get angry with me.”

“I will not be angry with you, I promise.”

Anne heaved a sigh and nodded. “If it’s not too much trouble, I wanted to know how you got the scar.”

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Louisa hadn't exactly been expecting that, and she knew had she been anyone else, Anne might have lost her job. But she didn't feel she had anything to hide.

"I got it while trying to save my sister," she answered.

Anne's eyes went wide. "Weren't you scared?" she asked softly.

Louisa paused, unsure how to answer that question. No one had thought to ask her anything, not even her family. It felt... cathartic to finally talk about it without someone pitying her.

"I was, but when my sister was in danger, I didn't have time to think," she answered with a nod. "I will do anything for my family."

Anne's eyes shone with admiration. "Your sister is lucky to have you, Your Grace."

Tears formed at the corners of Louisa's eyes, but she blinked them away and smiled at the maid, who suddenly looked worried.

"I think it's time we went down for dinner," she announced, changing the topic. She could feel the weight of Anne's relief behind her. "I should hope that Cook has dinner ready by now."

"You look absolutely magnificent, Your Grace," Anne complimented. "His Grace will be unable to tear his eyes away from you tonight."

That is assuming he joins me for dinner.

Sure enough, when Louisa stepped into the dining room, her husband was nowhere to be seen. Lowering herself into one of the seats, she set about eating dinner, nibbling slowly on her food. But it tasted like sawdust in her mouth while she waited for him to arrive. An hour passed, then another, and she had to tell herself the truth—Percival was definitely not coming down for dinner. It seemed that the dratted man would risk starvation just to avoid her.

Eventually, she rose from the table and fled to her room. Anne must have seen the look on her face, for she had quietly helped her out of her dress and helped her into her shift before swiftly leaving the room.

Louisa lay in bed for a long time, listening for any sounds that might indicate that her husband would come to her chambers, that he might help relieve some of the loneliness in her heart.

As her eyes fluttered shut, she wondered for the umpteenth time if she was so ugly that her own husband would avoid her so keenly.

Chapter Nine

Percival was not at the breakfast table. It seemed that he was about to turn it into a habit, content to starve to death just to avoid her. While she knew that her scar might have detracted from her beauty, she did not think she was hideous enough for him to decide to starve himself to death. And they hadn't exactly started on a good note, but that didn't mean he couldn't move past a little argument.

The constant wondering and guessing was feeding insecurities that she would have sworn were laid to rest, but then Percival had always been able to affect her mood beyond her control.

Despite the lonely dinner the previous night, she had still woken up thinking that she

might have misunderstood his absence and that he might join her for breakfast.

Now that she was sitting alone at the breakfast table, she felt stupid for taking her time this morning with her toilette, hoping to impress a man who obviously did not care for her.

“Splendid morning, Your Grace,” Mrs. Owens greeted with a bright smile as she bustled into the room.

Louisa immediately felt irrational resentment towards the woman rising within her. How could the housekeeper be bright and happy while she was in a funk?

“I hope you had a splendid night?” Mrs. Owens asked, pouring water into the cup beside Louisa’s buttered toast.

“It was splendid, indeed,” Louisa answered flatly, swallowing her resentment.

At her tone, Mrs. Owens turned sharply towards her, studying her with a curious expression on her face. Of course, she would have guessed that something was wrong, because even she knew that a happy bride would never be that snappish the morning after her wedding night if everything went well and as expected.

Whatever Mrs. Owens saw on her face, she must have decided to keep it to herself because she quickly plastered on a bright smile.

“The farmers brought in some fresh milk this morning. Perhaps you might want some?” she asked.

“No, thank you. I would make do with water.”

“All right, Your Grace. Do inform me if you need anything—anything at all,” Mrs.

Owens offered, before walking away.

It was ridiculous, but Louisa felt as if the woman was taking her hard-worn bout of positivity with her as she crossed the room.

“I do require something,” Louisa heard herself say, stopping the older woman in her tracks.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“What might that be, Your Grace?” Mrs. Owens asked, turning to her.

“Perhaps you could sit with me—keep me company while I eat,” Louisa requested, trying not to let her desperation show. “I come from a large household, so this silence is new to me.”

She saw the pity flicker in the housekeeper’s eyes, and she had to look away. She had enough of the pity for her scar—why on earth should her marriage be a source of pity as well?

“Certainly, Your Grace. I do have some pressing duties, but I can spare some minutes,” Mrs. Owens replied as she came back to sit across from her, looking at her with eyes filled with motherly affection.

It was so intense that Louisa averted her gaze.

“I cannot express to you how happy I am that this house has a mistress again. The last mistress was His Grace’s mother, but she died soon after having ‘em boys.”

“What of the previous Duke, my husband’s brother? Surely, he had a wife?”

“His Grace’s older brother was a very good duke, but he did not have much success with the ladies—did not know how to deal with ‘em. That was why he put off marrying for a very long time before death snatched him away,” Mrs. Owens replied with a sad sigh, shaking her head. “That is why I am grateful to have a lady at the helm of affairs. The previous Dukes were not particularly interested in rebuilding the castle. They had other... distractions.”

What distractions exactly had made them ignore the dilapidated state of their residence? Louisa wondered.

How exactly had the resources of this estate been squandered, so much so that the previous Dukes had grown comfortable with living in a manor that was literally falling apart around their ears?

Louisa suspected that Mrs. Owens knew the full story, but from the mutinous set of her lips, she instinctively knew that the woman would not tell her because of her loyalty to Percival. However, she appreciated and admired her devotion.

“I will be leaving now, Your Grace. I have to confer with Cook on some pressing issues,” Mrs. Owens said, standing up to leave.

“Thank you, Mrs. Owens. I can manage on my own.”

The buxom woman scurried out, leaving Louisa to her thoughts.

While she understood that Percival had married her solely for her dowry and social status, that did not translate to avoiding her as if she had the plague.

Why on earth would she have to sit at the breakfast table by herself, being plagued with thoughts of the possible cause of his absence? This was not the life she had signed up for, and he could not force her to live it.

Her chair made a scraping sound that was decidedly too loud as she suddenly pushed it back in a very unladylike way and stood up. But at that point, she couldn't care less—her insides were boiling with self-righteous anger.

She marched towards her husband's study—the same study he preferred to stay in to avoid her. She didn't bother knocking, she just pushed the door open and stepped

inside.

His dark head was bent over some ledgers, but it snapped up at her entrance, and he watched her with a look of slight irritation in his eyes.

He was irritated? She was the one who had been dumped in an old manor falling apart at the seams and left to her own devices.

“What seems to be the matter, Duchess?” he asked, removing the spectacles that were perched on his nose.

His tone was downright mocking, but even as she boiled with anger, she had to admit that the pair of spectacles seemed to increase his appeal even more. That thought was enough to add kindling to the already raging fire that was her anger.

How dare he behave so dastardly when he had such a beautiful face?

“It appears the matter concerns you, Your Grace. We have much to discuss.”

“That conversation will have to wait. I have a lot of work to do,” he said, turning back to the ledgers.

“I will have that conversation now, not later,” she insisted.

Percival looked up in surprise at her vehement tone. He must have understood the depth of her anger right then.

He rose from his desk, watching her curiously. “You do not have to be unreasonable to make your point.”

“I am the unreasonable one?” she asked incredulously, her voice rising. “You should

have never married me if you hated to see my face so much.”

“I married you despite the scar on your face. I never cared about your scar,” he argued, his eyes hardening. “Why would you assume such a thing?”

“I wonder,” she snapped.

“You’re being childish.”

“Yet, you’re the one who married a scarred lady to garner sympathy or to prove yourself a hero.”

“Tell me you do not believe that,” he said, his eyes narrowing in annoyance.

“How am I supposed to know the truth? You were the one who married me and dumped me in this manor, with no guidance and no friendship. I refuse to be a trophy wife. If you recall, Your Grace, I did state companionship as the reason for this marriage.”

“It is not as it seems, Louisa. I had a ton of correspondence to deal with after the wedding.”

“Conveniently after an argument,” she pointed out hotly.

There was an awkward silence as Percy slowly moved around his desk to face her.

“Do you really think...?” he trailed off, prowling towards her with an intense look on his face, forcing her to take a step back. Then another, then another, then another, until her back hit the door to the study, leaving her with nowhere to run.

He kept stepping forward till he stood so close to her that she could feel the heat radiating from his body—which, in combination with his heady scent and his intense

gaze, was slowly turning her into a puddle.

“Do you really believe that I detest you because of something as paltry as a scar?” he asked, the low timbre of his voice a hot caress to her ears, his intense gaze fixed on her lips.

Her body was hot instantly, and she couldn’t understand why instead of stepping sideways, she remained rooted to the spot. He was too close. Too tempting. Too much for her to comprehend.

“You think I do not desire you?” he continued, lowering his head.

His face was so close to hers that she was sure he was going to kiss her. And she wanted it so much. Oh did she want it.

She could see the smattering of freckles on the bridge of his nose. She had noticed them before, but they gave a wistful air to a man with such a rigid personality.

He lowered his head further, his breath fanning her cheeks. He must have had some tea earlier, for his breath smelled of it. She wanted a taste, and she wanted it from his lips.

She felt her eyes close involuntarily as his lips moved so close to hers that only a sliver of air separated them.

Her blood thrummed with anticipation, which was not satisfied when she felt him step away from her.

“I do not understand why you need to close your eyes,” he drawled, slight laughter in his voice.

Louisa's eyes snapped open as a hot flush crept up her face and neck at having been caught in his cleverly woven trap.

Cad!

She thought quickly about how she could salvage the situation and her dignity.

"I was savoring my victory, Your Grace. It seems that you have moved on from monosyllabic answers to whole sentences—such an improvement," she said weakly.

"I do aim to please," he intoned with a mocking bow.

"Well, if you do," she continued, drawing herself up to her full height, "then I require that you appear for at least one of the three meals of the day. Since you have missed breakfast, I will see you at dinner." And then she turned on her heel and made for the door.

"And if I refuse?"

Louisa paused and turned back to see Percy leaning against his desk. His face was nearly unreadable, but she saw the challenge in his eyes. He thought she would be easily deterred, didn't he? She would definitely have her revenge. One way or another.

"You will not," she replied with a mischievous smile. "You said it yourself—you aim to please. I need you to please me, husband."

With that cryptic statement, she left his study, satisfied with the dumbfounded expression on his face.

Chapter Ten

“I need you to please me, husband.”

Percival groaned as the words played over and over again in his head. God, she was killing him. He had never thought it possible for a man to die of extreme arousal, but he just might be the first.

But then he guessed it served him right for thinking that marrying a seemingly prim and proper young lady would allow him to continue to live his life the way he wanted. There was nothing prim and proper in the thoughts she had planted in his head, and if he were to show her even a glimpse of the evil her proximity stirred, he was sure she would demand that he stay as far away from her as possible.

Damn.

He didn't know how he had thought that he could marry the girl who had tempted him from the very first moment they had met and then proceed to ignore her as if she did not exist.

Now that he thought about it, Louisa was never exactly demure. In the days he courted her, he could see the signs of the fiery, bold spirit she hid behind her prim facade.

The times when she had taken him to task for his tardiness, negotiated the terms of their marriage, and teased him should have been warning enough, but he had been so preoccupied with the financial and social benefits of having a wife that he had not taken the time to think about what it would actually be like to be married to Louisa.

Those proverbial scales fell off his eyes when he stood at the altar and watched her walk down the aisle, looking as beautiful as an angel—so beautiful that for a moment, he believed that she might save him from the darkness in his soul.

With every step she took towards him, she drove his arousal and obsession to greater heights, and when she finally stood beside him, the torture worsened because the scent and heat that emanated from her body had almost driven him insane. It was rosewater and some other haunting scent that seemed to be uniquely hers.

He spent the whole wedding ceremony fighting the urge to pull her to himself, bury his nose in her neck, and breathe in her scent.

With how distracted he was, he was surprised that he had managed to repeat his vows in a normal voice. But the moment he was asked to kiss his bride, he hesitated because he understood the risk of pressing his hot, aroused body anywhere against hers.

He did not understand how easily this young lady disarmed him, reducing him to a primal caveman who just wanted to mate with his bride.

It was madness because he had decided to abstain since his return to England, simply because it was never just about satisfying desires of the flesh with women. They always wanted more, except when it was transactional, like his routine visits to his favourite brothel.

Besides, his desires had changed from sweet trysts that his new wife would have no doubt expected to hard, fast coupling that would expel the excess energy from being on active duty.

She had been so innocent earlier, her eyes closing in anticipation, and he wondered why her sweet innocence aroused him when he had sampled some of the most

experienced girls in the Continent, who flaunted their sexuality and nakedness rather than saw it as something shameful.

He wanted Louisa, he knew that much, but he knew she expected more than just cordiality between them even if she had agreed at the onset. She was a woman—a noble one at that—fed on romantic notions and hope of true love, and he had no such feeling to give her.

Every time he neared her and smelled her delicious scent or saw her lovely neck flush with desire, he was sorely tempted to change his mind and tell her that they could have a normal marriage, one that involved sharing and enjoying the pleasures of the marriage bed. His body agreed, for it was a means to satisfy the desire coursing through his body. But was it worth it to destroy her just for the selfish reason of satisfying his needs?

One thing he was sure of was that if they consummated their marriage, he would destroy her. She would scarcely be able to return to normalcy once his hands and darkness got hold of her, and he wasn't that selfish.

No woman deserved to be a casualty in that battle, least of all Louisa. If he told her as much, she would no doubt make it her life's mission to save him, but she would lose herself in the process.

So, he had decided to keep her at arm's length, content to watch her from a distance even while he stood beside her.

He maintained a cold facade even while he imagined throwing her on his bed and spreading her sunshine-coloured hair on his pillows.

He had been mistaken to think that he could only control his response to her by suppressing his lust, but Louisa found other ways to get under his skin.

She asked questions that reopened old wounds and displayed endearing quirks that he preferred not to know if he was to keep his distance.

He soon had to leave before she destroyed what was left of his resolve and self-control.

He locked himself in his study, his sanctuary, hoping he would succeed in banishing her to the recesses of his mind by focusing on the estate's ledgers. But the memory of her followed him here, feeding lascivious fantasies that kept him up most of the night, waking him up from short slumbers.

Several times, he had almost gone to her to soothe the ache that was now skin deep. He had held on, persuading himself that he was right in keeping his distance from her, that such maddening lust would eventually burn itself out if he didn't see her.

He was wrong because he had thought she would not dare come in, but then his fiery sprite of a wife did dare, marching into his study with righteous rage flashing in her eyes and heating her skin.

She was magnificent in her anger, and just like that, the banked fires of his lust blazed anew. The moment she suggested that he didn't want her, he almost laughed.

He didn't want her? How did she come to that conclusion when he was being tortured by lust that he was sure he would go mad before the week's end?

Before he knew it, he was walking towards her, a primal part of him enjoying the intrigue and wariness warring in her eyes as he cornered her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

She should be wary because the feelings storming inside him were nowhere near controllable, and the restraints on his self-control were growing lax with every moment she stood in his study.

When he loomed over, her pupils dilated with desire, and her breath came out in short pants. His eyes fell on her lips, the pink succulent flesh that had almost driven him to cause a scandal.

His mind tortured him, reminding him how good she felt and tasted and why he should kiss her again. He might have given in if it were not for the sounds of the distant footsteps of a maid or someone else in the hallway.

He slowly released her, not surprised when she demanded that he join her for dinner.

His fiery wife was bossy, and somehow it stirred a different kind of lust in his blood that told him she might not be entirely averse to the kind of entertainment he enjoyed.

He quickly dismissed that idea before it could take root in his mind and be actualized.

He wondered just how long he could stay, keeping himself in check while playing companion to his delectable wife. Just how long did he hope to keep his desire under leash while spending that much time with her?

Even if he managed to bring his aroused body under control, what about her? What right did he have to keep her in this marriage with no chance of satisfying her sexual urges?

Louisa was a passionate woman. She might not know it now, but in the future, she might look for means to relieve that sexual tension, and married members of the ton took lovers every day.

She might decide to take a lover. She seemed the loyal sort, but sexual frustration could push one to do things they never thought they would. Percival also reckoned that other gentlemen could recognize her innate passion with time and pursue her, seduce her until they shattered her resolve.

The thought of her taking a lover made his blood boil with fiery rage.

He would die before he allowed any man to touch her skin, kiss her delectable lips, and sink himself into the sweet warmth of her body. He could not bear it. She was his. She was his wife. She belonged to him, and no one was allowed to touch her.

That begged the question of what he was going to do. He could not very well force her to stay in a passionless marriage with him to feed his ego and possessive tendencies. That would not be fair to her. It might be selfish, but he admitted that if any man were to touch her sexually, it had to be him.

So, the question remained—was he going to consummate their marriage despite the consequences for his young, innocent wife?

It was difficult to make a decision when his aroused body was fervently arguing in favour of taking her.

To distract himself, he straightened and walked around his desk to retake his seat. Just to his right, he could see the pile of correspondence that required his attention. He had ignored it the previous night, unable to concentrate enough to sort through it.

Pulling the bundle towards him, he unraveled the string that held the letters together.

The first one was a letter of congratulations from the Duke and Duchess of Northwick, as well as several others, written by many members of the ton.

While it was tempting to feel flattered by their congratulatory messages, Percival knew the truth. This was their way of reminding him of their presence and establishing some sort of rapport with him.

While they did not care when he had sequestered himself in his home right after returning from the war, now they were scrambling to regain his favour. He was, after all, a duke, and while they might have little respect for him, they did have a healthy respect for his title. After all, who in polite society did not want to brag that they had connections to a duke no matter how dysfunctional he might be?

It sounded cold, thinking about it that way, but it was the dark reality outside his manor.

Humans were, in fact, selfish to the root. People hardly made connections unless they had something to gain, and Percival was not offended in the least.

He had seen even worse displays of this innate selfishness on the battlefield. After all, the war had started because of the selfishness of an aristocrat.

Many families were now without fathers, sons, and brothers because a man or a group of men could not control their greed.

Percy took a deep breath, hoping to distract himself from the dark turn his thoughts had taken. He sorted through the bundle, only to realize that they were all congratulatory messages, just as he had expected. But the last letter bore a familiar crest—that of the Baron Gillingham.

It was surprising because Eli was not one to write letters, apart from the occasional

missive when they had to meet.

Percival picked it up, reached for his paper knife, broke the seal, and read it. By the time he got to the end of the letter, he was even more puzzled.

Why exactly did his half-brother require his help to gain entrance to the Duke of Ravenmoor's ball?

Granted, the ball was usually exclusive for members of the Royal Family, dukes and their wives, and whatever aristocrats they deemed worthy.

It was a snobbish affair, in his opinion, and he didn't really care for their events. He would have sworn that Eli was not interested as well, were it not for the letter demanding his help to get in.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

What could Eli possibly want with men that he had condemned as snobbish several times?

Well, a man was allowed to have the ambition to raise his social standing.

It was a simple matter to write a letter. After all, the young Duke of Ravenmoor had been a close friend of Percival's in the years before he had gone to war.

The fact that he had to write such a letter deepened the mystery that surrounded his half-brother even though he had known him for years.

He still felt that he did not truly know him. But then a man was entitled to his own secrets.

Percival's secrets lay in the fact that he was growing increasingly smitten with the petite minx that was his wife.

He must be a masochist because even though he understood the torture that awaited him, he still looked forward to seeing her at dinner.

Perhaps she would wear one of her more provocative gowns—for his eyes only, of course.

That line of thought was enough to brand him as crazy, but he had never made claims of being sane where Louisa was concerned. He just had to make sure that his innocent, bright wife never discovered how unhinged he truly was underneath his finery.

Chapter Eleven

“I think the green is a bit much,” Louisa told Anne, biting her lip.

The maid had pulled out one of her most exquisite evening gowns when she had said she wanted to dress up a bit. She didn’t mind the dress so much and would have chosen it herself, but she wanted to look beautiful without making her effort obvious.

“It is perfect, Your Grace,” Anne argued. “His Grace won’t be able to take his eyes or his hands off you.”

She giggled, causing Louisa to turn bright red as she realized the implications of her words.

Louisa still remembered the scarring lecture her sisters had given her before her wedding, and how she had indeed felt those feelings when he had kissed her so passionately that it had taken hours for her face to cool down. Even now as she thought about it, she still squirmed, feeling unfamiliar liquid heat pool in her core.

He had shocked her when he had kissed her so thoroughly, for she had only expected a chaste kiss, and she knew if they had been alone, he might not have stopped—and worse, she wouldn’t have minded.

“Any gown but the green one, Anne,” Louisa said. “What about the burgundy one?”

“Too solemn, Your Grace,” Anne remarked, wrinkling her nose.

“Let us settle on the burnt orange gown, then.”

Anne put away the green gown with a flourish, sighing wistfully, and then pulled the burnt orange gown out of the wardrobe. Her sighs quickly turned to a cry of glee

when Louisa was finally dressed.

“You look absolutely marvelous, Your Grace!” she gushed.

Louisa couldn’t help but agree with her maid. Looking at herself in the mirror, she smiled at the woman staring back at her. The burnt orange gown did wonders for her figure, pushing up her average chest and giving her a voluminous cleavage that had her blushing. Its empire waistline accentuated the curve of her hips and small waist.

She had to agree that she looked so tempting.

“Thank you, Anne.” Then, in a fit of vulnerability, she asked, “Have you known His Grace for very long?”

“Yes,” Anne answered while tidying up the room. “I have known him my whole life.”

Oh?

“Is that so?” Louisa asked. “Can you tell me a bit about him? I know it’s a rather odd request.”

“Not at all, Your Grace,” Anne assured her, putting back the last of the gowns in her armoire. “Where do I start? I guess my mother had worked for the family since His Grace and his brother were children, and she told me that they grew up like any other boys—mischievous and always getting into trouble with their father.”

Louisa couldn’t help but laugh as she tried to imagine a dark-haired, grey-eyed young boy running around the estate, causing trouble.

“That is hard to imagine,” she admitted. “The Duke is always so stoic and proper.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“I assure you, he wasn’t always like that.” Anne laughed. “He was already a young man when I came to live here with my mother, but he was still mischievous. It wasn’t until his father passed and his brother inherited the title that they both matured.”

Louisa nodded in understanding. “Did he join the army immediately after his father’s passing?”

“No, Your Grace,” Anne answered. “He had already gone through training, but he volunteered for active service after his brother inherited the duchy.”

Louisa nodded again and wiped her palms on the skirt of her dress. “Do not find it burdensome that I ask such questions. I only wish to know a little bit more about my husband so I know how to serve him.”

“I do not find it so, Your Grace,” Anne was quick to reassure her. “I do not mind your questions. If you hadn’t asked, I might have been hard-pressed to tell you.”

They shared a laugh.

“I believe I am sufficiently late enough to make an entrance,” Louisa announced.

“Indeed.” Anne smiled mischievously. “I want to see His Grace’s reaction, but my mother would scold me for being nosy.”

“I will cover you.” Louisa gave her a wink. “Walk with me.”

As they walked towards the dining room, Anne pointed out some parts of the manor

that Louisa hadn't visited yet, and she made a mental note to do so the next day.

"We should decide what the best approach should be," Percival's voice greeted her as she approached the dining room.

Her heart was beating a staccato in her chest as she watched for his reaction.

Her effort, apparently, was fruitful, for the second she stepped into the dining room, his eyes widened a slight fraction, showing that she had indeed shocked him. But he was quick to school his features into a blank mask.

She didn't take offense that he hadn't commented on her gown when his façade had cracked upon seeing her. That was a worthy enough reaction that had her blushing as she was helped into her seat by Tobias.

"Good evening, husband," she greeted. "I trust your day was pleasant?"

She said it as a question, hoping they could at least converse as they ate, considering that she had all but forced him to have dinner with her. She was impressed that he had honoured their agreement and hoped she wouldn't do anything to push him away.

He murmured a response but didn't look at her, and she wondered if he was perhaps upset with her. She also noticed that her place setting had been moved further up the table such that she was sitting beside him, and she wondered who was responsible for it.

"My day was pleasant," she continued as she unfolded her napkin and laid it on her lap. "I hope you enjoy the menu I came up with today. You could use a change in your diet."

He didn't say anything, and she frowned as her ire flared. Why had he come if he was

going to be stubborn about it?

“If you would rather starve yourself in your study, then be my guest. But if you’re going to sit at this table with me, then I expect you to keep your sour mood outside the room so I can enjoy my meal in peace,” she sniffed, setting down her cutlery with more force than she had intended.

She noticed Tobias’s proud look and felt emboldened to scold her husband further if he didn’t listen to her.

“You’ve grown claws since we got married, wife,” Percival muttered darkly. “I cannot say I like it.”

“If you insist on being stubborn, it is only necessary that I play your game.”

She saw a muscle in his jaw tick as he fought a smile and nodded.

“I concede this argument, then,” he said. “I will do my best to make this meal pleasant for you.”

“Good.” She nodded.

She hadn’t expected him to agree so quickly, and now that he had, she didn’t know what to say. He raised an eyebrow at her in question, and she flushed as embarrassment flooded her. She hadn’t thought that far ahead. Her only focus had been on seducing him that night.

She really did need help, but who could she ask?

The question would be too embarrassing to ask, and even though her sisters would answer, she didn’t think she could stomach any more of their lectures.

“I’ve realized that I know nothing about your life,” she stated suddenly, trying to break the tension that had fallen over them.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“You know enough,” he said, not looking at her as he cut his meat into small cubes.

“Only what is available to the public,” she argued. She was getting upset for finding herself arguing more often than she liked. “I should be able to say more about you to anyone who asks than what they already know.”

“That is unnecessary.”

“It is not.”

“I highly doubt anyone would be so curious about me.”

“Then you do not know the ton as well as you think.”

“I do. I just choose not to become fodder for gossip.”

“You will end up as fodder for gossip if I’m asked questions and find myself unable to answer.”

“Where do you think one might ask such questions?”

“At the next ball we’ll attend,” she answered. “You do remember that I have agreed to help smoothen your re-entry into Society.”

He shot her an icy look, but she was undeterred.

“You should sheathe your claws, wife,” he warned. “You’re in no danger here.”

But she highly doubted that and told him as much.

He barked out a laugh, shocking her and everyone else in the room. He coughed to hide it, before schooling his features. She would have felt glad that she had succeeded in making him laugh, but she wanted him to take her seriously.

“What would you like to know?”

His concession shocked her, but she masked it with a smile.

“Everything.”

She knew he would only answer questions that didn't pertain to his private life or past, and she had kept her questions shallow but still intimate enough that no one would think them anything but a happy couple.

“Have I satisfied you?” he drawled.

He had asked that question so innocently, but his words brought a warm blush to her face.

“Indeed,” she replied. “The Ritkins’ ball in two days would find us sufficiently prepared.”

He nodded, and she rose, hoping to retire early.

“Where are you going, wife?” he asked, a teasing twinkle in his eyes even though his expression was still blank. “The deal was that we would share a meal, and I assumed you intended to feed me with your hands. Imagine my disappointment. But no matter, I took it upon myself to cover your shortcomings.”

“I didn’t think you the sort to take words so literally.”

“I’m not usually, but when it comes to you, I find that there’s really no hidden meaning behind your words.”

“Does that mean you trust everything I say?” she dared to ask.

“Not entirely.” His tone was playful, and he couldn’t help but wonder if he was flirting with her.

“In what instances would you trust me, then?”

“I cannot exactly say, but I would know when.”

“That is overconfident,” she pointed out, shaking her head and folding her arms across her chest.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

His eyes flicked to her chest briefly, then back up to her face. “I would call it discernment.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of their conversation. “It is overconfident to think you are capable of discerning the truth at all times.”

“It is, but if I have memorized one’s tells, it would be easy to.”

“And have you memorized mine?”

“I do not know you well enough to have an opinion,” he answered, throwing her words back at her.

She laughed again, shaking her head.

Incorrigible man.

“Have you seen me lie, then?”

He seemed thoughtful, then nodded.

“When?” she asked. “I never lie.”

“But you just did.”

“I didn’t.”

“Do you speak the complete truth at all times?”

“I do.”

“You’re human. We’re basically a bag of lies waiting to be harnessed.”

“That is a very grim perspective.”

“It’s being realistic.”

She threw her hands up in mock surrender. “I concede this argument,” she told him. “There is no winning with you.”

They fell silent, but the atmosphere was light, and Louisa thought that she could grow to enjoy their marriage if he remained this cordial with her.

“How do you feel about pudding?” he asked suddenly.

Louisa raised an eyebrow at the sudden change in his mood and wondered if truly he was grumpy because they hadn’t shared their meal.

“Excuse me?”

“You said we would share a meal, and I intend to do so.”

“How?”

He didn’t answer but looked smug as Mrs. Owens walked in right then with a plate and set down it between the two of them.

“Pudding,” Louisa stated.

“Indeed.”

“I love pudding,” she said, humoring him.

Percival dipped his spoon into the dish and took a bite, letting it linger in his mouth a bit longer than was appropriate, his eyes shining with mischief. He was watching to see if she would balk or rise to his dare.

She gave him a smirk of her own, dipped her spoon into the dish, and took a delicate bite. He gave her a wolfish grin, but the challenge was gone from his eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

They ate the pudding in silence, but she couldn't help but feel that the air was charged with things neither of them wanted to say, so she decided to start on neutral ground. She had taken time to observe the estate that was now hers by extension, and she had a lot to discuss with him.

"I was impressed by how well-kept the gardens are," she admitted. "Considering the few servants we have, it should have been overgrown. It certainly appears to be in much better shape than the rest of the manor."

"I owe that to Mrs. Owens," Percival said around a mouthful of pudding. "She loves gardening and pulls Tobias along when she has the time."

Louisa giggled, picturing the kindly butler working outdoors. She had noticed the cordial air between the two of them. "She does a mighty fine job."

"I will relay your compliments."

"Have you written to any contractors yet?" she asked, swallowing the bite she had taken.

"Not yet," he confessed. "I have been quite occupied trying to investigate an entry in my brother's journal."

Louisa frowned at him. She was surprised by his admission, even more than the fact that he didn't consider repairing his home an urgent matter. She had thought the former Duke's death a closed case and wondered why Percival was still looking into it.

“What did the entry say?” she asked curiously.

She didn’t really expect him to answer but asked if only to test if he could trust her with something that important to him.

“Michael noted down that he was going to sail to the Continent to look for me,” he began. “And that is rather strange because he had no reason to. I had written to him constantly so he would know I lived. There was no reason for him to leave the estate and try to find me.”

She frowned, vaguely remembering the rumour that he had passed, but it had been fleeting and was quickly overshadowed by news of his brother’s demise. For a short while, it was rumoured that the title would be absorbed by the Crown, but Percival had arrived shortly after to claim it.

“I remember hearing a rumour like that once,” she said. “It was shortly before your brother’s death was announced.”

He looked thoughtful.

“Tell me everything you remember,” he demanded, sitting up.

She didn’t mind his commanding tone, but she wondered why he was so interested in her answer.

“It started so oddly. I heard it first at the Withers’ ball, but I can’t remember who told me, and shortly after, we noticed that your brother started drinking heavily. We excused it as him being in mourning, so it was rather odd when you resurfaced after he passed.”

Percival looked lost in thought for a moment, and she wondered if perhaps what she

had said would help him come to terms with his brother's demise.

Grief radiated from him in waves that made her stomach twist, and she understood that they had been close. If anything happened to any one of her sisters, she knew it would take its toll on her. Her hand itched to cover his if only to give him comfort, but she didn't think he would appreciate the gesture.

"Who would start such rumours?" she asked.

"I will look into it," he said, finally looking at her. There was still a puzzled look in his eyes, and she felt a pang of sympathy at the sight. "I thank you for your help."

"You are welcome, but are you sure you do not need any help?" she asked. "I can understand if you're finding it difficult to accept the circumstances of your brother's death. If you want to talk about it?—"

"I don't think this was included in our bargain, wife," he reminded her coolly, but she saw a shadow of grief cross his features. "If you want to spend more time with me, you do not have to use such means. You could just ask."

She shook her head at him, seeing beyond the mask he wore. "I assure you, husband, if that were my goal, I would not stoop to using such dubious means," she told him, wrinkling her nose. "I only meant to help."

"And I am grateful, but I do not need it," he insisted. "This is no matter to bother your pretty head with."

She watched him, noting the slight tension in his posture and the way the mirth in his words didn't reach his eyes. She debated whether to press him or concede and decided on the latter.

She gave him a pointed look. “That doesn’t mean I won’t expect you to inform me once you do discover something.”

He nodded, and she doubted strongly that he would tell her anything if and when he did discover something.

“You should retire to bed now.” He smiled. “You have a full day of organizing and terrorizing the staff ahead of you tomorrow.”

She rolled her eyes at him and rose from her seat, relishing the way his eyes roamed over her again. “Indeed, I do.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

She was only two steps away from the table when the boldness to ask the question she was most desperate to ask hit her.

“Should I expect you to join me tonight?”

She could tell she had shocked him from the way his body stiffened, but she didn’t know if it was a good or a bad thing. It wasn’t proper for a woman to speak so brazenly, and she hoped she hadn’t somehow painted a terrible picture of herself.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have?—”

His sudden nearness silenced the words coming out of her mouth. His entire body was tense, and she noticed his hands curling into fists at his sides.

“Percival, I?—”

He raised a hand, silencing her.

“Do not tempt me, wife,” he whispered, his voice devoid of any warmth.

As if his words weren’t confounding enough, he stormed out of the dining room as if the devil was hot on his heels.

Louisa let out a long breath she didn’t realize she had been holding and looked at the door he had just gone through, wondering what she could have possibly done wrong.

Chapter Twelve

Louisa could not sleep. For some reason, her mind seemed hell-bent on punishing her with the embarrassing encounter she had with her husband earlier.

The blame for that encounter lay solely at her feet, as she had allowed the brief moments of camaraderie she had shared with him to delude her into letting her guard down enough that she had taken the risk of asking him to visit her bedchamber.

She had been rewarded for her courage by the sight of his warm smile fading into his usual icy demeanor, as if she had asked him to kill a person or dance naked in the streets.

It was becoming worrisome how much he avoided the marriage bed even though they had agreed on it earlier. She had thought, at least, from the way he had kissed her at their wedding that he had changed his mind on the matter.

From the discussions she had overheard over the years, she understood that men, compared to women, looked forward to their wedding nights so keenly that it was considered the highlight of matrimony.

That fact seemed not to be true for her husband, who avoided her like the plague, forcing her to take the initiative in reminding him that their marriage remained unconsummated and still vulnerable to annulment.

Maybe that was why he wanted to keep their marriage unconsummated. In that way, she reasoned, he could easily wiggle his way out of the marriage commitment whenever he chose. But it didn't seem tenable, considering that he was a duke and would need an heir if he wanted to keep the title in the family even if he had mentioned he already had a relative who would take the title.

She tried to run through the list of relatives he had but none came to mind. Perhaps she would check the library to see if she could find his family's pedigree.

But if that was not the reason, there was a chance he was impotent. Somehow, she doubted that a man as virile as Percival could be impotent. He appeared too virile and possessed an innate magnetism that she believed would not be seen in an infertile man.

But then what did she really know about male fertility?

Those reasons aside, there was one other possibility that she wanted to ignore—the fact that he was avoiding her because he found her unattractive because of her scar. That would mean that the passion they had shared when they kissed at the altar was a figment of her imagination.

If that was the case, it would hurt even more than him choosing an easy way to annul the marriage when he simply didn't require the arrangement to further his goals.

For one, she had tried to maintain a stoic attitude in regard to her scar and the changes it had brought to her life. For two, she had finally experienced what it was like not to be the object of the opposite sex's attention—a sharp contrast to the life she had led before the accident.

She had learned to stick to the walls of ballrooms with the other wallflowers—at least, there, she had not felt the need for the rigorous drills of forcing a smile and displaying perfect etiquette. There, she only had to worry about not causing a scene with her improper manners.

With Percival, she had found herself feeling things she would have failed to put a name to if she hadn't had that talk with her sisters.

She turned to the other side of her bed, biting her lip. She desired her husband, that much she could admit. How could she not, when he was entirely different from every other man she had met?

He was handsome. An epitome of masculine beauty, as far as she was concerned. But it was the darkness that she could sense beneath his facade that drew her to him. Then, there was also the confident way in which he carried himself. She found herself itching to reach out and ruffle his hair or do anything to make him lose his temper.

She sighed again and rolled onto her other side. She was confused by the rejection she had faced earlier, considering that she had seen the barely restrained heat in his eyes as they landed on her.

Sometimes, she even felt the burning intensity of his gaze on her body while she performed her duties. Based on that alone, she could safely guess that he was attracted to her. It was odd that he was reluctant to give in to his desire and consummate their union.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Instead, he seemed intent on sending her mixed messages with his words and actions. The man's mood changed so quickly that it could give one a headache.

She had conversed with him at length, enjoying his banter and humor until she had felt relaxed enough to discuss the state of their marriage and the fact that she was not really his wife, since their marriage remained unconsummated. She had taken the risk and asked if he had any intentions to visit her bedchambers that night.

But then she watched his smile drop, only to be replaced with his impassive mask. Except, this time, his eyes burned with something that closely resembled desire. Or perhaps a mix of desire or anger? Whatever it was, it had stirred the desire in the pit of her stomach.

The man was the root of her confusion. His words said one thing, but his actions said another.

Not for the first time, she felt angry that he would toy with her this way when there was a possibility that he wanted the same thing that she was asking him for.

It seemed that her husband was a contrary man, but he would have to be clear and honest soon, or else she could not trust herself not to go mad from the frustration.

The sudden sound of something falling with a loud thump in the room above startled her. It came again and again, each time punctuated by shouts.

It seemed that someone was hitting something, and whatever it was that he was hitting seemed to be crying out in pain. But then who could possibly be awake at this

ungodly hour, and who was his victim?

The yelling came again, and this time she could recognize her husband's voice.

What is he doing up there? Is he beating someone or being beaten?

It did not matter. Someone was in danger—most likely Percival—and she had to help. That thought spurred her out of her bed. Opening her trunk, she retrieved a wrapper to cover her nightgown and wore her slippers. Snagging a candle holder, she padded to the door, opened it, and stepped into the long, dark corridor.

The manor looked more hideous and haunted at night, and despite the light of the single candle she carried, a shiver of fear and foreboding ran down her spine.

How on earth did her husband manage to live here, she did not know. But then it was said that a person became blind to the imperfections in their home once they had lived in it long enough.

Tiptoeing, she avoided holes in the flooring where the wood was decaying. While she wished to rescue her husband from whatever battle he was involved in, she had no wish to be buried alive under the rubble of this manor. The manor might be haunted by ghosts of old, but she had no wish to join them that night.

“While I respect your presence here,” she said in a high-pitched voice, addressing the ghosts she imagined hovering around her, “I do not wish to die. Your son and I haven't even consummated our marriage.”

She felt silly but relieved in a way that she had acknowledged their presence, instead of trying to pretend that they did not exist.

A stream of air blew into the corridor, touching her skin in a fleeting caress. She

knew it was quite silly of her, but she felt that was a sign of acceptance by whatever spirit haunted this house.

The sound came again, jolting her back to reality—rather rudely, she might add—and prompting her into action.

Following the sound of the thumping, she moved towards the staircase—the one that was falling apart. It looked like a dead effigy in the darkness, and she was quite sure that those stairs had wide, yawning holes where the wood had rotted.

She stood on the landing, paralyzed by indecision. Her husband had warned her to avoid those stairs for the simple reason that their state made them a death trap.

As if egging her on, the thumping sound grew louder and became more erratic. The boxer, whoever he was, seemed to be in a frenzy. The sound struck fear in her heart.

While she knew the risks she was taking, she could not imagine abandoning Percival to the mercy of whatever it was that was lurking in the tower, breaking things.

She put her foot on the first step and was a little startled by the creaking sound it made. Her heart lurched into her throat with fear.

Steeling herself, she slowly ascended the steps, placing one careful foot before the other and trying as much as possible to avoid the darker areas where the wood had decayed.

Of course, there was no guarantee that the intact parts of the wooden stairs were safe, but then that was what a risk was—betting that you were right even though it was more probable that you were wrong.

Halfway up the stairs, she stepped around a particularly weak patch in the wood and

felt the flooring cave, trapping her right foot deep inside the gaping hole that was rapidly widening and making her yelp.

Swallowing hard, she focused on her breathing, tightly clutching the rusted railing. She could not die like this, not while she was still at a crossroads with her husband. She was going to find him, rescue him, and have a very long talk with him about their marriage.

She was not going to give him the chance to end the conversation just like he ended the other ones—with angry outbursts that forced her to retreat into her shell. Well, now she was even more angry than he ever hoped to be.

She was no longer going to allow his outbursts to affect the way she felt about herself. It had taken her so much to build the confidence she had now, despite the many challenges she had faced after her accident. She would not let years' worth of work go to waste just so he could feel good about himself.

Louisa felt a sense of calm slowly wash over her, bringing clarity to her thoughts. Holding on tightly to the rusted railing, she managed to lift her leg out of the hole, pulling up pieces of rotten wood in the process. Then, she hopped the rest of the way to the top of the stairs. When she stood on the landing, she saw nothing, as she had dropped her candle holder and the candlelight flickered out sometime during her venture up the stairs.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

Now, standing on the landing of the treacherous stairs, another thought occurred to her—while she might have succeeded in climbing up that deathtrap, she was unsure now how to go back down.

She suppressed the feeling of concern and fear that she could feel bubbling up to the surface. For now, she was going to focus on the matter at hand, which was to find her husband and make sure that he was all right before scolding him for causing her such distress so late at night.

She spun on her heels, her back facing the ruined staircase, and walked down the hallway towards the room the sound came from.

As she marched down the hallway, she noted that several of the rooms were in a terrible state. The ceilings in some of them hung so low that it was almost as if they wanted to collapse on the floor. In other rooms, the doors were barely hanging on their hinges, and some other rooms did not even have doors. The flooring here was even more precarious, and she had to be careful, relying heavily on her instinct more than her sight at this point. She could see a glimmer of light at the end of the hallway, which gave her hope that she had not taken such risks unnecessarily.

Soon, she got to the end of the hallway and was struck by the difference between the room there and the other rooms that occupied the same floor.

This room was much bigger than the others, and to a large extent, the ceiling and floor there remained in slightly better condition than in the other rooms. The ceiling boasted steel rings that supported a giant leather bag that she guessed was filled with sand.

Apart from the solitary leather bag, there were no other furnishings in the room except for a solitary stool that had a single shirt thrown over it. Percival stood in the middle of this room, throwing brutal punches at his leathery enemy with so much anger that he might as well be back on the battlefield.

He was shirtless, and the only stitch of clothing he had on was his trousers. One of the best pairs she had seen him wearing. In the absence of his shirt, Louisa had the chance to drink in the sight of his naked back. She had always known that he was attractive and potent, but as she watched him now with an increasing desire, she agreed that she had underestimated his magnetism and beauty. Her mouth went dry.

His skin glistened with sweat, shimmering in the candlelight. His shoulders—God, his shoulders were so broad and strong that she imagined he could throw her over one of those shoulders, and suddenly she wanted him to do that.

The thought caused nervous excitement to rise in her belly.

As he swung his hand to land a particularly vicious blow to the leather, she watched, mesmerized by the flexing muscles of his back. His back was strong and toned, peppered with several scars that were most likely souvenirs from his time in the army.

His body was one of a soldier who had fought so hard to protect his country even if it left him with memories that haunted him. While she stared at his back, the scars on his skin and his flexing muscles, she thought that those scars on his back did not even scratch the surface of the scars deep inside of him, and somehow she knew that it was those innermost scars that were responsible for him being awake this night, viciously punching the leather bag.

She longed to soothe him somehow, but he was not ready to open up to her. Something about his movements told her that he was not really present in the

moment, and she would do less harm by leaving him to his devices. By letting him let out his frustration in a healthy way without an unwanted intruder.

She made to leave but was halted in her tracks when his voice came.

“I believe I warned you not to come to this part of the manor for your own safety,” he said, his tone dangerous, a vein of anger lacing it.

“Well, you are here, the very place that you labeled unsafe. So you value your life so little?” she retorted, her annoyance taking over as well.

“It is different for me. This is my house, and you would adhere to my rules, dammit,” he insisted, his voice rising an octave.

Percival had always made efforts to avoid swearing in front of her simply because he saw her as a lady, her ears too innocent for coarse language.

The fact that he was now using those words in front of her spoke volumes about his state of mind.

Spinning on her heels to tell him off, she yelped when she felt herself sink into a hole in the floor. She let out a scream and scrambled for purchase, getting more agitated by the moment.

Quick as light, Percival caught her and dragged her to safety. As she leaned against him, panting, he hissed in her ear, “I told you to be careful, wife. You shouldn’t be here.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Itold you to be careful, wife. You shouldn’t be here.”

Louisa knew she should reply, but she was too busy trying to catch her breath and enjoying the feel of his body against hers to answer. He was so hard and so warm, his body heat seeping through the light layers of her nightgown and robe, disarming her of all logical thought.

He smelled like sweat and something distinctly male that had her inhaling deeper. It made her heady, and she wanted to get even closer to him just to breathe in his delicious scent.

“Louisa.”

His voice snapped her out of her thoughts, and she scrambled to get out of his arms, finally remembering that she was scantily dressed and that he had no doubt heard her sniffing him.

“I am sorry,” she mumbled.

His eyes roamed over her body, and the heat in them made her tingle in her most intimate places. An all too recently familiar liquid heat pooled between her legs, and her nipples hardened as she saw his eyes darken.

It was obvious that he was attracted to her, but the damned man would not act on it. Her eyes roamed down his body, and true enough, she saw the evidence of his desire straining against his breeches, causing her eyes to widen. She reddened as he caught her staring at him.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:33 am

“You should head back to your chambers,” he urged, turning away from her.

Panic flared inside her as she thought he was pushing her away once again. “Why?”

His back stiffened, and he muttered a curse under his breath.

“What do you mean, why?” he asked, still not looking at her. “It is late, and you shouldn’t be here.”

She took a step closer to him and then another. If he insisted on being stubborn, she was not going to make it easy for him.

“You are here.”

“It is my private space.”

“You made a vow that whatever was yours was mine.”

He turned to her then, his eyes flashing as they roamed over her again. “You do not intend to hold me to that, do you?”

“Only when you insist on being stubborn.”

“Which I choose to do to protect you.”

“From what? I am fairly safe here.”

“You do not know that.”

“You won’t hurt me,” she murmured. “You won’t even touch me, so I do not see how you could possibly be a threat to me.”

He chuckled under his breath. “You have no idea how hard I am trying.”

The words were said so softly that she almost didn’t hear them.

She dared take another step closer, placing a hand on his arm. He flinched as though he had been burned, but she understood as she felt the similar line of heat climb up her arms. His reaction excited her as the flames licking up her arm, spread through her entire body, arousing her further.

“Then stop trying,” she told him, meeting his eyes. “Touch me.”

The words seemed to shatter something inside him, and before she could blink, he pulled her back in his arms and took her lips in a punishing kiss. A moan escaped her, eliciting a groan from him, and his fingers tightened on her hip such that she feared she would have bruises in the morning.

His hands roamed over her body, gripping her punishingly wherever they stopped, and she couldn’t for the life of her figure out why instead of pain, she felt only pleasure.

Had she somehow become a masochist without her knowledge?

“Percival,” she begged when his teeth nipped her neck.

“You started this,” he reminded her, a predatory glint in his eyes. “Now, you’ll face the consequences.”

His hands roamed down her back to cup her buttocks, effectively lifting her so she had to wrap her legs around his waist. Her eyes went wide as he led her to a small cot at the far end of the room. She hadn't even noticed it during her brief examination of the room.

He laid her down more gently than she could have expected and covered her body with his. Instantly, she felt the difference between their sizes. He was much bigger than her, so she had to spread her legs wide to accommodate him. Her nightgown slid down her thighs, and she was achingly aware that if he looked down, he would see her sex.

She bit her lip, suddenly feeling shy, and tried to tug up her nightgown to cover herself, but the annoying man snatched her hands and pinned them above her head.

She seemed to have awoken the beast in him, she noted.

He looked nothing like the man who exercised self-restraint around her and avoided touching her with everything in him. Now, his hands couldn't seem to stop touching her.

She wondered briefly if he had longed to do it for as long as she had.

"What are you thinking?" he asked suddenly, startling her out of her thoughts.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

His eyes weren't on her. Rather, they were closed as he nipped a line down the valley between her breasts and down to her stomach. He kissed the curve of her hip, which made her squirm, and her back arched off the bed when his teeth clamped down on her.

"Percival," she hissed.

"A pound for your thoughts, dear wife," he said against her clothed hip.

Her body burned, and even the flimsy garment she wore irritated her already raw nerves. The cotton fabric of her nightgown grazed her sensitive nipples and had her biting her lower lip to hold back a moan, yet he expected her to be able to make a full sentence?

"I do not like to wait, wife." His warning was followed by a nip to that same spot on her hip.

She whimpered and shook, grateful for his weight over her, or she would have thrown herself off the small bed.

"I was thinking..."

"Yes?" he prompted in a lazy tone.

"My whole body feels like it's on fire," she began. "I feel like I might go mad if I don't get these clothes off me."

He cursed as though he hadn't been expecting that. She felt the solid heat of his desire at her core and wondered how it would feel to be completely owned by this man.

Her sisters had said it would be painful at first and then it would become enjoyable, but she was still afraid. What if she wouldn't be able to satisfy him?

"You certainly do know how to surprise a man." He chuckled darkly.

"I..."

The words died in her throat as she felt his hand slide up the bare skin of her thigh to her hip and then her abdomen, before it stopped. Her eyes shot open, and she was embarrassed to see him watching her. His hand slid up higher, baring more of her skin till she was almost fully nude before him.

His eyes glazed over as he took in her bare body, and she couldn't help but wonder if her too-generous curves displeased him. She had heard that men much preferred slimmer frames, but she had always been plumper than the average lady, which was why she chose to wear gowns that hid her figure as much as possible.

"Have I displeased you, Percival?" she asked vulnerably.

He shook his head before palming one of her breasts.

"On the contrary," he muttered, leaning down to capture one of her nipples in his mouth.

Her back bowed off the bed as bolts of heat shot through her from where his teeth and tongue worked her nipples.

“You are beautiful,” he mumbled against her breasts.

“Percival,” she groaned, tangling her hand in his hair.

She had always wanted to do so, especially at breakfast when it kept falling over his eyes. It was silky soft, and she was glad that it was long enough that she could tug on it, since he seemed hell-bent on making her scream with the naughty things his tongue and teeth were doing.

He strummed her body like it was a well-tuned instrument he had been playing for years, eliciting sounds from her that she hadn't known she could make. She was grateful to his previous lovers, who had no doubt given him all the practice he needed to be as proficient a lover as he was.

When his lips started to move lower, her eyes widened, and she tried to stop him, but he only fixed her with a searing look.

“I can smell the sweetness of your desire from here, wife. Wouldn't it be wicked not to let me taste it?”

He had a very naughty mouth, that much she had noted about him, and the things that spewed out of it sent heat through her body. But she tried to relax into his caresses even as his tongue slid down her body.

She had thought herself prepared for anything, but she hadn't expected the oddness of his tongue tasting her most intimately. His eyes met hers, a wicked gleam in them, and he groaned against her core as his tongue slid deeper between her folds, exploring her.

She squirmed against him, but his hands held her hips down. He groaned against her sex as if in appreciation, and more liquid heat pooled between her legs.

“You taste better than blueberries,” he murmured, sniffing her.

A hand slid down, and then he slid a finger into her. His eyes darkened in rapture as he watched his finger slide in and out of her. He moved deeper, slower, and then faster before he added another finger.

“You feel heavenly.”

Why he had to keep saying such damning words, she would never know.

She writhed, uncertain of the unfamiliar terrain they were traversing even as she felt pleasure build low in her belly. Her fingers dug into his hair when he nipped her pearl even as his fingers moved in and out of her.

“Please,” she begged.

But she didn’t know what she was begging for—she could barely hold back the sounds escaping her throat. The whole house must have been aware of what they were doing, but she didn’t care. It was increasingly difficult to make any rational decision, with him exploring her body so intimately.

The ball of pleasure in her belly grew and grew till she was clawing at his shoulders, and then the world exploded in a vision of white so bright that she thought perhaps she had died of pleasure. There was nothing but silence and a blissful feeling, as if she was floating.

She didn’t know how long she remained there, but when she finally remembered with whom and where she was, her body spasmed and jerked, and she wondered if this was how it always was between a man and a woman.

She flushed as she recalled where his mouth had been and what his hands had done to her, but she couldn’t help but feel like something was missing. There was still a void that needed to be filled, and she wondered if he would perhaps do it.

She opened one eye, stealing a glance at him, and was surprised to see him lying next to her so casually. He had one arm wrapped around her, the other over his eyes, and he looked in no hurry to move. She frowned, lowering her head back to his chest. She closed her eyes again, relishing the aftershocks of her climax.

That can't be all, can it?

He hadn't even undressed.

She couldn't even ask the question, as she worried she would dampen the mood. Her eyes were still too heavy to open, and her legs felt like jelly. If she tried to stand up now, she would surely fall.

She smiled to herself, recalling how he had pleased her, and she couldn't help but wish he would do it again. Her sisters' words hadn't been enough to describe just how wonderful intimacy between a man and a woman was.

She sincerely hoped that what had happened would thaw the ice wall her husband was hell-bent on keeping between them because now that she had experienced pleasure at his hand, she knew there was no going back.

"You should get back to your chambers," he announced suddenly, shocking her.

Her eyes shot open, and she realized she would have likely fallen asleep if he hadn't spoken. She scrambled off him and righted her nightgown, feeling ashamed by how exposed she had been.

"Pardon?" she asked once she was covered, wondering if she heard wrong.

"You should head back to your chambers now," he repeated tonelessly. "It is getting late."

She nodded and rose from the cot, stumbling a little but then steadying herself on still wobbly legs. She was surprised that he led the way but said nothing. Perhaps there was still hope.

She was careful as they went down the dilapidated stairs, and she realized that she was indeed lucky she hadn't hurt herself in her bid to find him.

When they finally stood outside her door, she turned to him.

"Will you be sleeping here?" she asked, smiling up at him shyly. "I do not know if my bed is big enough to?"

"I won't be joining you tonight or ever."

She frowned, wrapping her arms around herself. "May I ask why?" she asked. "Did I do something wrong? Did I not... Did I not please you?"

"This was a mistake. It should have never happened," he told her, not looking the least bit remorseful. "I took advantage of your innocence, and I am sorry. I hope you find it in yourself to forgive me for breaching our agreement."

"You didn't breach it. I gave my permission."

"Have a good night."

"We are not done talking."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Perc—"

He didn't even let her finish—he turned on his heel and left.

Why was the bloody man so dense?

She walked into her chambers in a daze and climbed into bed, trying to understand how his mood could change so quickly. It almost felt as though she had dreamt the whole encounter. If her legs still didn't quiver, she would have believed it was all a figment of her imagination.

A tear escaped her eye and then another till she was sobbing into her pillow.

“Damn you, Percival,” she cursed, grieving her dashed hopes.

She had hoped that, with how vulnerable she had been with him, they would at least develop some semblance of a friendship, but now she knew that wasn't meant to be.

Anger flooded her, and she frowned, her heart heavy with grief at the hope she had felt had been dashed against the wall. She wasn't even demanding that he love her, for the way he chose to avoid her. All she wanted was something that would benefit him too. Why couldn't he see that?

She sighed and turned onto her other side, wondering how she could ever hope to seduce the stubborn man she had married.

Percival groaned, slapping the wall when he was sure he was far enough from Louisa's chambers that wouldn't hear him take out his frustration on his crumbling estate.

He made a terrible mistake by sampling his wife's body the way he had, but she had presented herself to him, wrapped in a white nightgown that did nothing to hide her curves from his ravenouseyes. He was unable to resist the temptation, not when he had burned with lust for her since he caught her staring him down without a hint of fear all those weeks ago and when her lips had uttered those damning words.

"I do not know you well enough to have an opinion."

"Dammit," he cursed, slapping the wall again.

He had known that she desired him as well, or else she wouldn't have dressed the way she had for dinner, when it was just the two of them. That accursed gown had shocked him.

He knew she was beautiful, but she had looked resplendent in that gown, and nothing had forewarned him that when she put in the effort, she could be stunning.

It was a miracle that she hadn't been snatched by another gentleman long ago. But then again, the ton were a vain lot, so Percival wouldn't have put it past them to relegate her to the wall because she had a scar.

He managed to get to his room but decided against trying to sleep, opting to indulge in his brother's liquor cabinet. Michael had a fine taste for whiskey, and the sip Percival took confirmed it. He lay down on his couch by the fire, his mind wandering back to Louisa.

She would no doubt hate him now for the way he had dismissed her, but it was necessary that she did so she wouldn't be tempted to repeat what she had done.

She looked beautiful, writhing beneath him. Her innocent response to his ministrations had aroused him painfully, and even now, the flames of desire still

burned hotly in his body. And she had flushed just as beautifully everywhere. Even between her silken pale thighs.

He groaned again, picturing her softness. Her breasts were more than handfuls, made for kneading and caressing, tipped with pretty pink nipples that tasted sweeter than berries.

Her cries of pleasure would definitely haunt his waking and sleeping hours, that much he knew. The scent and taste of her were thoroughly branded on his tongue and nose.

In all his philandering years, he had never smelled something so sweet, and it was almost annoying how the one person he couldn't have was the one his entire being craved.

When he chose to marry her, he knew he would be playing with fire, but he had thought it a small flame, not this conflagration that would consume him if he wasn't careful.

Blood pounded painfully in his member, and if he hadn't sworn off the act, he would have taken himself in his hands and relieved himself.

"Damn."

He couldn't lose himself too quickly just because his wife's body happened to look like every man's wet dream. He had a lot to accomplish, and he couldn't let her consume too much of his thoughts, or else he wouldn't get anything done.

It would be too easy to sink into her and let himself enjoy her silken heat, but at what cost?

If she got with child, could he live with himself, knowing that he would make a

terrible father?

Even if she wasn't with child, with time she would come to expect love and would start demanding more from him than he was willing to give. So, no. He would uphold their agreement and stay away from her even if it hurt her.

She would thank him eventually, but until then, he would do his best to avoid putting them in situations that would make him lose his self-control the way he had.

He sighed, as the alcohol in his system only made him less able to resist the thoughts of his beautiful wife. He was in trouble, and if he didn't save himself soon, he would fall into a pit he wouldn't be able to escape from.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

He rung the call bell on the wall and waited till he heard the familiar knock on his door.

“Enter,” he called out.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“I need a cold bath.”

“You would have more luck swimming in the lake,” Tobias chided.

Percival raised an eyebrow at the man’s tone and noted the disapproval in his eyes. “What is it, Tobias?” he asked with a glare.

“What do you mean, Your Grace?”

“Do not play coy.” He frowned. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“I heard her crying.”

Percival frowned darkly. “And I should be concerned about that because...?”

“I heard other sounds before that,” Tobias stated. “I thought things were getting better between the two of you.”

“I remember that it was you who suggested I marry her to build my reputation. I don’t think making her happy was one of the things you mentioned.”

“You’re being a child.”

That was the second time someone had called him a child. He didn’t think he liked that very much.

“I’m only stating facts.”

“Why don’t you want to be happy?”

“I am perfectly happy,” Percival insisted. “I have everything I could possibly need. A beautiful wife with a dowry sufficient to repair my estate.”

Tobias shook his head. “I do hope you do not ruin everything good in your life before you decide to change.”

“Why are you suddenly giving me this lecture?” Percival asked the man who had been in his life since the day he was born. “You know me, not her. You have always been on my side.”

“That was when I thought you still had a conscience,” Tobias scoffed.

“This is not the first time I leave a woman after bedding her. You know that as well as I do.”

“Indeed, I do, but you’ve never hurt innocents.” He could feel the butler’s disapproval. “It was why I respected you.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you, then. But Louisa is my wife, and I will do with her as I see fit.”

“Then I believe it is time I sought employment elsewhere.”

“Tobias.”

“If you cannot make her happy, then I suggest you let her go without ruining her.”

The sound of the door slamming shut stunned him, and he frowned in anger.

Why couldn't they see that was exactly what he was trying to do?

Chapter Fourteen

Louisa woke up the next morning feeling a toxic mix of anger and frustration swirling in her chest, where elation had been in the moments she was cocooned in her husband's warm embrace until he had jolted her cruelly back to reality.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

She thought that the moment when she got injured was the most painful experience of her life, but it seemed the events of the previous night were jousting for that position.

Percival was so cruel to tease her body and spirit to the heights of ecstasy and then plunge her back into despair before she could catch her breath. She had cried herself to sleep, swearing to completely ignore him, but the moment she opened her eyes, she was hit by a fresh wave of despair and anger. A dull ache bloomed in her chest, and she rubbed the spot above her heart in the hope of relieving it.

A part of her, the part that was already half in love with Percival, argued that he might have a good reason for rejecting her, especially when it seemed that a lack of attraction was not the cause. She guessed that his reason was tied to the scars hidden beneath the surface, the ones he refused to talk about. That lovesick part of her urged her to be patient.

The other part of her, which was more logical and had a better sense of self-preservation, argued that she had waited and cajoled him enough. It was now time to take charge of her life and or ignore the capricious nature of her husband if she intended to keep a firm grasp on her sanity.

Remembering the embarrassment and frustration she had felt the previous night following his rejection, she was tempted to remain upstairs and take her breakfast in her room in the hope of avoiding him and the feelings of shame and despair that would surely overtake her if she ate in his presence. But she was no coward.

If she had been, she would not have survived the wagging tongues of the ton and the poisonous words that some of them spewed under the guise of consoling her. If she

had survived such a dark time in her life, then she believed that she was equipped to handle whatever curveball life threw at her. Besides, she was not the one at fault here.

She only wanted the intimacy that was her right by marriage. The fact that he decided to hold back and deny her that pleasure was his fault, and his reasons were best known only to him, since he had refused to share them with her after several attempts on her part.

The lovesick part of her argued that she had signed up for this when she agreed to a marriage of convenience, but that argument was weakened by the fact that she had requested companionship, and sexual congress was another type of companionship—at least for married couples.

Besides, if he wanted to keep their relationship that chaste, he shouldn't have been that handsome, shooting her heated glances from beneath his impossibly thick lashes.

How was a lady supposed to resist such potent masculine appeal, especially when it was so obviously one-sided? Now that she had experienced the pleasure his touch could wring out of her, she wondered how she was going to return to their earlier passionless rapport without longing for another taste of the bliss she could find in his arms.

That thought almost solidified her plan to continue hiding in her room, but she was not going to give him the opportunity to gloat, because if there was a chance that he realized he could hurt her that deeply, there would be nothing stopping him from doing it in the future.

Climbing out of bed, she tugged on the bell pull, and in no time Anne arrived to help with her morning ablutions.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” the maid greeted with a bright smile, her face glowing

with so much happiness that Louisa felt some of her melancholy fade away.

“Good morning, Anne. I hope you had a good night’s rest?” Louisa asked offhandedly, plastering a smile on her face.

But it must have been unconvincing because Anne’s smile dropped, and she furrowed her brow.

“I had a good rest, Your Grace. But I do not think you had a good night,” Anne ventured, her voice ringing with concern.

“Why would you think that, Anne?” Louisa asked, patting her face self-consciously.

“For one, your eyes are rather red-rimmed and swollen,” Anne began, coming closer to examine her face. “Have you been crying, Your Grace?” she asked, her eyes widening in alarm.

Louisa could not fault the maid for her reaction. After dressing and styling her to perfection the previous night, Anne would have expected to see a happy and contented mistress come morning. Instead, she had to deal with a bedraggled one, who looked like she had been dragged through the fires of hell and had cried her eyes out all night long.

Forcing a smile, Louisa sought to distract her. “It’s nothing that a bowl of cold water and a bit of powder won’t fix. I would prefer to have my bath drawn immediately, since I am joining the Duke for breakfast. I trust that Lawrence can arrange for that with his brother. Could you please inform them?” she asked in a rush.

She could see the questions in her maid’s eyes, but something in her expression must have convinced her of the futility of pressing the issue.

“Certainly, Your Grace,” Anne said with a deep curtsy, before leaving to carry out her orders.

While Louisa liked Anne and was fast becoming friends with her, she was not quite ready to delve into the subject of her marriage with her. After all, the maid was still a stranger, and Louisa hardly had her loyalty.

Her marriage was fragile enough—more fodder for the gossip mills would no doubt tear it apart. Besides, no matter what happened, Percival was the head of the household, and she would not do or say anything that could diminish his authority in the servants’ eyes.

She suspected that Anne felt hurt by the curt way she had avoided her question, and the maid would most likely go complain to her beau about how upset she was. Louisa just hoped that they would wrap up their lovers’ conversation fast enough and promptly deliver the buckets of water so that she could have the steaming bath she ached for.

Fortunately, Anne returned shortly after, with the strapping young men hot on her heels, hauling buckets of steaming hot water. While they seemed to be fit and capable with their bulging muscles and intimidating heights, they would also need help when Louisa started redecorating the manor. She made a mental note to hire more servants in order to lighten their workload.

When the tub was filled, she quickly lowered herself into the water, enjoying the relaxing warmth. She felt her anger towards her husband ebb and fade away long enough for her to dress up and head down to the breakfast room.

But her anger seemed to increase tenfold when she walked to the breakfast table. Percival was already there, sipping from his teacup and tearing bread into small pieces before popping them in his mouth.

It was so annoying to see him so unruffled and delicious in his shirtsleeves, his unruly hair falling over his eyes and softening the sharp lines of his face.

She must have made a sound because he looked up from the newspaper, his eyes flashing with some feral emotion as he looked at her from head to toe, his gaze leaving a trail of heat in its wake.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

The fact that he could so easily arouse her with just a glance infuriated her. While he looked as refreshed as always, she felt terrible after spending most of the night weeping.

It was not fair.

“Good morning, wife. I trust you had a good night’s rest?” he asked.

“I did. Thank you,” she lied.

He peered into her face, his eyes narrowing in doubt. The state of her face might have given him a hint that she was not being completely honest. He opened his mouth, then promptly closed it, probably deciding to keep whatever comments he had intended to make to himself.

“I have decided, dear husband, that you do not have to pay attention to me and share meals with me. You are free to return to your daily activities without having to endure a dreary meal with me,” she said, a fake smile playing on her lips.

She had thought that her husband would be pleased by the news, seeing as he was doing his best to avoid her. But instead of relief, she watched as a frown of disapproval crossed his face, followed by something akin to anger. She ignored him, picking at the breakfast spread before her to fill her plate even though she had no appetite.

“I would like to visit Isabella. It has been ages since I last saw her,” she added in a rush, peering at her plate and twirling her fork in her food, studiously avoiding his

gaze.

No reason to explain that by ages, she meant the previous month. She would do anything to escape the tension building between them, so thick that she could slice through it with a knife.

“Thank you for the meal, Your Grace,” she said, standing up to leave the room, even though she had barely taken a bite of her food.

She doubted she would have been able to eat with her stomach tied in knots.

As she walked away from the breakfast table, she felt the heat of his gaze on her till she disappeared down the hall.

When she got back to her chambers, she found Anne tidying the room and replacing the bedding. The maid helped her change into an indigo walking dress with a matching cape that was lined with fur.

Louisa then went downstairs to find that the carriage was already ready and waiting for her. She guessed she had Percival to thank for that. This was one of the little ways he stole her heart every day. It was particularly annoying that he insisted on holding on to his heart even though he had full possession of hers.

The footman helped her into the carriage, and in no time she was off to visit Isabella at her estate where she lived with her doting husband. It was only a few miles away from Colborne House, but she understood that the pressures of parenthood made Isabella and Duncan unable to visit her since she moved in there.

A part of her was happy to have a respite from their overprotective tendencies, but the part of her that was lonely missed her sister and longed for the familiar sound of her chatter.

Louisa was pulled out of her reverie when she felt the vehicle slow down. When she drew back the curtain, she found that they had arrived at her destination.

Fangsdale Manor looked simple, almost noble in appearance. Although Duncan was a rich man by all standards, he had a preference for a humble and simple lifestyle, just like her sister, who was also his wife.

Stepping out of the carriage, Louisa walked up the short flight of stairs that led to the massive front door. She knocked a few times, and the door was opened by the kindly butler, Felix, who smiled in welcome.

“Your Grace,” he greeted with a deep bow, smiling broadly. “It is a pleasure to see you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Felix. Please tell me that my sister is inside.”

Before the butler could open his mouth to respond, the sound of an annoyed infant wailing his outrage tore through the hall.

“That would be the young master,” Felix said with a rueful smile. “Her Grace is with him. The blue room, I believe.”

“Thank you, Felix.” Louisa gave him a grateful smile as she handed him her coat and then headed in the direction of the blue room.

Sure enough, when she got to the room in question, the door was ajar, and she could see Isabella sitting with her son on her lap, making cooing sounds as she tried to distract him.

The picture brought a smile to Louisa’s lips. Her nephew might be little, but she could already tell he would grow into a hellion. She wished her sister luck when the

time came.

She pushed the door open wider, causing her twin sister to look up in surprise. Her tired face split into a bright smile.

“Lou,” Isabella greeted. “It is so great to see you!”

She stood up and balanced her son on her hip while she pulled Louisa into a sideways hug with her free hand. When she released her sister, Isabella stared into her face, a frown creasing her brow.

“You do not look well,” she stated bluntly.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“What a way to greet your sister, Isa,” Louisa drawled, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. She went to sit on the sofa. “I could say the same about you. You look even worse than I do.”

“I have a valid reason for that. Little Georgie is teething, and as you can imagine, it causes him a lot of pain. He was up all night, which means he kept us all awake,” Louisa countered, rubbing her hand down her face wearily while stifling a yawn.

“That must be quite difficult,” Louisa noted sympathetically, taking the baby from her sister’s arms when he flashed her a toothless grin. She cradled him against her chest, inhaling his soothing baby smell.

Seeing how adorable Georgie was, it was no mystery that his parents were willing to forego sleep in order to keep him happy and comfortable. But then he was probably one of the luckiest babies in the English ton because he had parents who loved him unconditionally and wanted to care for their children themselves, even though they could afford to leave such hard work to the nursemaids.

Most couples in the ton were content to wait for their children to start walking before getting involved in their lives.

“What is your excuse, then?” Isabella asked, snapping her back to the present.

“I am well, Isa. There is nothing to worry about.”

“I would wager my entire wardrobe that you are not well. You wouldn’t be here, visiting me in the middle of your honeymoon, with dark circles under your eyes so

big that it's a miracle they are not weighing them down."

It was no use lying to Isabella. Not when she was the most sensitive member of the family. That trait, in combination with their unique bond as twins, meant that she could sniff out any lie before it even left Louisa's mouth.

"I had a fitful night if you must know," Louisa admitted reluctantly.

A mischievous smile spread across her sister's tired face. "It seems that your husband kept you awake all night. If that is the reason behind those bags under your eyes, then it is quite acceptable. Perhaps Georgie will have a cousin very soon," she said, giggling conspiratorially.

Louisa could feel her face turn red in embarrassment, but Isabella seemed to enjoy her discomfort because she laughed even louder.

"I do not think Georgie will have a cousin anytime soon," Louisa replied dryly.

That statement immediately brought her sister's laughter to a halt.

"Why?" Isabella asked, nonplussed. Her mouth dropped open in realization a moment later. "Do not tell me that you haven't consummated your marriage."

Louisa opened her mouth to answer but then was interrupted by the sound of the door opening and the nursemaid coming in to take the sleeping Georgie from her arms.

Isabella waited for the nursemaid to leave before standing up and shutting the door firmly. Then, she walked back to the sofa and sat beside Louisa. "Have you not consummated your marriage yet?" she asked in a hushed voice, concern etched on her face.

“Not exactly...” Louisa started, her face reddening with embarrassment. “He pleased me, but we did not do the final deed. I am still a maiden. Perhaps he did not find me attractive enough to bed me.”

Isabella burst into laughter, laughing long enough that Louisa’s annoyance flared.

“Percival is attracted to you all right,” she said after her laughter finally died down. “The man was devouring you with his eyes on your wedding day. I was almost afraid he was going to ravish you right there on the altar when you kissed him. Your husband desires you a lot, trust me on that.”

“Then why does he avoid me and my bed?” Louisa blurted out in frustration.

“Well, because he is a man, and men do have a reputation for being idiots sometimes.”

“So how do I get him to come to my bed? The man is driving me crazy. One minute he is so kind, seducing me with his care and gallantry, and the next minute he is pushing me away. I came here to speak to you, see if I can get some advice, since you are married.”

“Well,” Isabella began, placing a contemplative finger on her chin. “I think the best way to solve this is to give him a taste of his own medicine. Ignore him while making sure to dress in a very enticing way.”

“And what if we just keep ignoring each other forever? I do not wish to drive him away.”

“That is where your attire comes into play. You are going to seduce your husband. Appeal to the primal, possessive part of him. Men sometimes do not realize how much they want something until it comes to their notice that other men find that thing

attractive. It is in their very blood. Jealousy can be a motivating factor, sometimes,” she explained, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

Somehow, Louisa suspected that Isabella had used this trick on her husband.

“I do not think I will succeed in using such tactics to seduce him,” Louisa sighed, avoiding her sister’s gaze as her cheeks burned with embarrassment. “My husband is a very confident man. I am more likely to embarrass myself, and he would laugh himself to tears. I would rather concentrate on the changes that need to be made at the manor. That will be a sufficient distraction until he deems it fit to visit my bedchamber.”

“Whatever you say, Lou. Whatever you say,” Isabella drawled with a knowing smile.

Louisa immediately looked away in embarrassment. She knew what that smile meant. She might just be the one to visit his bedchamber and seduce him, after all. She just hoped it never came to that. She would die of mortification.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“How is your husband?” she asked, in an attempt to change the topic.

“He is getting a much-needed rest. He didn’t sleep a wink last night because of Georgie’s wailing. I was about to go to sleep myself before you arrived.”

“Do not let me keep you from your sleep. You need all the rest you can get,” Louisa said, standing up. “I am so grateful you took the time to listen to me complain about my woes.”

“Nonsense,” Isabella scoffed, pulling her into a hug. “You are my sister. I would do anything for you.” Releasing her, she took her hands in her own and gave them a gentle squeeze. “Do have a safe trip back and keep in touch. I promise to visit you soon.”

“Perhaps we might see each other soon. Are you attending the Ritkins’ ball this weekend?”

“Yes, I believe I am”

“Excellent!” Louisa beamed. “We’ll see each other then. Please extend my regards to your husband.”

“Of course,” Isabella said, leading her to the front door.

She hugged her once again and stood at the door while Louisa boarded the carriage, and she waved at the carriage when it pulled out of the driveway.

Louisa already missed her sister's company. At least she would see her in two days. She now had something to look forward to as she faced the long, dreary days ahead.

When Louisa arrived back at the manor, Tobias opened the door with a bright smile on his face.

"Good day, Your Grace. I hope you had a good visit."

"It was splendid, Tobias." Then, unable to resist, she asked, "Is the Duke inside?"

"Yes. In his study, Your Grace."

"All right," she said blandly, handing him her coat and then hurrying up the stairs to her room.

She just wanted to be sure where Percival was, so she could avoid him as much as she could. Nothing more, nothing less.

She undressed with Anne's help and soon went back to the drawing room wearing one of her new day dresses, which clung to her upper body, accentuating her large breasts. The bodice was a little daring, but that was the state of the clothes that made up her wedding trousseau.

Once she stepped into the hall, she found Mrs. Owens, and together they curated a list of urgent repairs. She agreed that carpenters would be needed to fix most of the ceiling and the collapsing staircase. The same was true for the blacksmith because so much of the cookware was rusted, affecting the productiveness of the cook.

The cook barely complained, but then Mrs. Owens was quite perceptive and had seen how hard the woman struggled to make good meals for them. She had made a mental note of what was needed.

After over an hour of wandering around the house and writing down what was needed, they decided that the carpenters' and blacksmith's services were the most pressing of all.

"Thank you for your insight, Mrs. Owens. It was truly helpful," Louisa said when they concluded their tour.

"I should be the one to thank you. I am so excited to give this manor a new look and bring it back to its glory days. It was magnificent, back in the day. I cannot wait to see that again."

"I truly hope we will be successful. I will show the list to my husband. We will have the labourers working here tomorrow morning if everything goes as planned."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Mrs. Owens said, bouncing on her heels in excitement, her face wreathed in smiles. Her infectious joy brought a smile to Louisa's lips.

With how excited the housekeeper was, one might think it was her family home. But then the servants here were more or less like family to Percival, even though the dratted man did not know nor acknowledge it.

Now that she had the list, Louisa had to speak with him to secure the funding she needed. She might have sworn off seeing him, but this was a very urgent matter that affected the entire household. She was willing to swallow her shame and embarrassment to get the work done.

Marching to his study, she could hear hushed voices. She knocked once, then twice, before she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Percival looked up, his eyes flashing when they landed on her. That look, in combination with the glasses that perched on the tip of his nose and the hair that fell

over his eyes, made desire coil deep in her belly, discomfiting her.

He was poring over some ledgers with his butler, but when he saw her, he stood up.

“Good day, wife. I trust you had a great visit with your sister?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“Yes, I did,” she replied, coming to stand in front of his desk. She handed him the list. “The manor has been quite dreary of late. I believe we will do well with a bit of colour. Besides, I think it prudent that we begin the repairs for the safety of everyone in this manor.”

Percival’s pupils dilated with heat, and she would wager that he was remembering what it felt like the previous night when he gave in to the temptation and ravished her.

She felt an answering warmth bloom in her core, her eyes fixed on his full lips as she remembered the pleasure they had wrung out of her. With conscious effort, she tore her gaze away, staring at a point above his shoulder.

“I trust that my uncle has paid my dowry. We must use it to fix the manor. Please take a look at the list—I’d appreciate your insight on the matter.”

With that, she stepped away from the desk and turned to face the bookshelves that lined the room. Louisa would have never claimed that her husband was the reading type, but the shelves here were full of books ranging from topics like History, Science, Arts, Plays, and Poetry.

Suddenly, Percival’s study became more interesting. She would not mind spending time here if it meant she could get access to the books.

Distantly, she could hear Percival giving Tobias instructions about the estate. The sound of the door opening and closing told her that the butler had gone to carry out his master’s orders.

“They are arranged in alphabetical order. My brother had a very unique system. I would prefer to have them arranged by genre—it would be easier that way, in my opinion,” he said from beside her, the heat of his breath making goosebumps spread across her neck.

“Then why didn’t you arrange them according to genre, as you would have preferred?” she asked quietly.

There was a pause, long enough that Louisa thought he wouldn’t answer.

“It appeases my sense of order,” he replied. “So, there is no need to change it.”

Louisa suspected that there were other reasons behind his reluctance to make more changes, but she decided not to pry.

“I’m borrowing this one,” she said, taking out a book of Byron’s poems. “I promise to return it where it exactly was.”

With that, she walked away from him and the conflicting emotions he evoked within her.

Chapter Fifteen

“Her Grace has requested that dinner be brought to her chambers,” Tobias said when Percival inquired about his wife’s absence in the dining room.

“Thank you, Tobias. Please ensure that she has her meal sent up to her,” Percival instructed in a calm voice that belied the storm brewing beneath his breast.

Since the passionate night they spent together, his wife had become withdrawn and a shadow of her usual vivacious self.

It might have something to do with the cruel way he had rejected her after their delicious interlude. Even now, he could still taste her on his lips, and his fingers itched to touch her satiny skin.

All he could say now was that he was right. One kiss, one touch hadn't been enough. Instead, now he had filthier fantasies that tormented his sleeping and waking hours.

He had always desired his wife, of that much he was aware. His adventure into pleasuring her seemed to turn that desire into a blazing furnace that was threatening to consume him whole.

Perhaps it was best that she was avoiding him, saving him from himself and the nearly uncontrollable urge to ravish her without any thought for the consequences. When he stood next to her, mesmerized by her scent and the maddeningly distracting gown she wore, he knew he would have given in to his desire if she had not left when she did.

This was not what he had imagined his convenient marriage would look like. For one, he had not expected that he would be this consumed by desire for his wife. No matter how he thought about it, she was at fault. She was the one tempting, teasing, and seducing him with every minute movement of her hands, her delicious smiling lips, and her thickly lashed warm brown eyes, which he could drown in a happy man.

He had done his best to stay away from her, to give them a fighting chance to maintain the chastity of their marriage. But his stubborn wife had insisted on him joining her for at least one meal every day, effectively placing him close to the temptation that was her.

He had endured—oh how he had endured—even when every movement of her lips as she ate sent a bolt of heat to his groin until he was perpetually aroused and increasingly envious of her cutlery and the way they rested between her lips, where

his tongue longed to be.

Now that he had gotten attached to eating with her and watching her eat, she had the guts to suggest they go back to staying apart. The rational part of his brain argued that it was best for his peace of mind, but the other part of him that was consumed by her wanted to spend any time he could get with her, no matter how brief it was. She could not just decide to deny him that pleasure just because she could.

He was the head of the household, and if he wanted her to come down for meals, she was going to, even if he had to drag her down the stairs.

He stood up, ignoring the sound the chair made against the floor, and went upstairs, taking the stairs two at a time until he was standing in front of her chambers.

He raised his hand to knock but then halted when he heard a faint sound. Listening closely, he realized with horror that it was sobbing.

His wife was sobbing.

Her sobs became shorter, and each sound was like a dagger to his chest.

“Wife,” he called, knocking softly.

Her sobs ceased immediately, the room falling so silent that he thought he might have imagined the sound.

“Louisa,” he called again, his voice rising an octave as he knocked harder on the door. “Are you all right?”

After several minutes of knocking and calling her name, it became quite clear that she did not wish to speak to him, and no matter how beastly he was rumoured to be, he would never force her to do anything she did not wish to do.

He stepped away from the door and headed down the stairs. As soon as he was outside, he asked that his horse be saddled, ignoring the incredulous look the stable hand gave him. Percival could hardly blame him, as no man in his right mind would decide to take a leisurely ride on such a cold night.

It was either that, or he would throw himself in the icy waters of the lake again, in the hope of calming his body and mind. But with how frequently he swam in the cold lake, he ran the risk of catching his death.

That left him with two options: either surrender to the desire he felt for his wife or find other ways to bring his urges under control. Since the first option was not possible, he was stuck with the second option—riding in the middle of the night long enough to tire himself and clear his head.

Soon, his horse was saddled and ready, and he mounted it and took off, letting Hades have his head when they turned onto the open road. The horse seemed to enjoy it after being cooped up inside for so long. After some time, Percival regained control of the horse as it began to slow down, obviously growing tired.

He nudged the horse into a brisk walk when he noticed they had somehow ridden into Mayfair. He stopped in front of Gillingham Manor and handed the reins to the stable hand. He bounded up the stairs and lifted the heavy knocker on the door, before rapping a few times.

The door was opened by the aged butler, who looked slightly annoyed to be roused from his sleep. When he noted who was standing before him, his annoyed expression turned into the blank mask that butlers were known for.

“Good evening, Your Grace. His Lordship is in the drawing room, I believe,” the butler said before Percival could ask for his half-brother’s whereabouts.

“Thank you,” Percival replied, handing him his coat and marching purposefully into the house in search of Eli.

He found him, eventually, sitting cross-legged in the drawing room and nursing a glass of whiskey. A look of surprise flashed in his eyes when he saw him.

“Quite surprising to see you here, Your Grace. What brings you to Mayfair? Let me be the first to say it—you look like hell,” Eli drawled.

Percival flashed him a warning look, but instead of being chastised, Eli chuckled in amusement.

“If I look like hell, you look like a drunk. You seem to have liquor with you whenever I see you,” Percival noted, taking a seat opposite him and crossing his legs,

making himself at home.

“You might be the one with an affinity for spirits, since you always find me drinking,” Eli shot back. He drained his glass and then headed to his liquor cabinet. He staggered as he moved showing he had deeply imbibed but was somehow was still able to move.

He held out an empty glass to Percival.

“Could I tempt you?”

“No, thank you,” Percival muttered, waving his hand dismissively. “I need my wits about me.”

“Suit yourself,” Eli said, refilling his glassing and heading back to the sofa. “Tell me, Percy, you do not seem to be enjoying your honeymoon. Does marriage not agree with you, after all?”

“There is nothing wrong with my marriage, just my wife.”

“I would argue that they are one and the same, but do tell,” Eli urged, leaning forward while staring at Percival with rapt attention. “What have she done?”

“She has sequestered herself in her room, denying me entrance, refusing to talk to me...” Percival trailed off in frustration.

“If I remember correctly,” Eli spoke up after a pause, “you told me that your marriage was one of convenience and that you wished to live separate lives. She is doing exactly that—living separately from you.” He splashed some brandy into his glass. “I am sorry, Percy, but I do not see the problem here.”

“Yes, I did agree to living separate lives, but she was the one who demanded that we share meals and attend social events. She asked for companionship. I was doing my best to grant that request when she decided she didn’t want it any longer. She wanted what we had at the beginning of our marriage. She cannot just change everything as she likes. It does not just affect her, but me as well,” Percival grunted, breathing deeply to calm himself.

“Percy,” Eli began. “It seems to me that you have fallen in love with your wife.”

“Nonsense,” Percy snorted. “I would hardly fall prey to such a useless emotion. I do care about her, but it is nothing like the foolish emotion that Byron and his cronies whine about all night long.”

“Well,” Eli drawled, a mischievous smile playing on his lips, “while it is a well-kept secret that women can be... mysterious in their own way, I do not think the change in her behaviour happened without any reason. Perhaps you will tell me what happened?”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“Well,” Percival began after a pause, shifting uncomfortably under his half-brother’s knowing gaze. “She did ask that I visit her bed, and I refused.”

“Well,” Eli said, chuckling, “I think that is a good enough reason to be annoyed. But why are you avoiding her bed so keenly, if I might ask? I know several men in England who would beg for the attention of their wives.”

“You know why,” Percival replied bluntly.

“I do not believe I do,” Eli countered, his eyes wide with mock innocence. “I heard your wife is scarred—perhaps you find her too ugly to bed her?”

“You would do well to watch your tongue,” Percival warned, his voice dropping to a menacing growl. “Do not talk about my Duchess that way. I do not take kindly to it.”

“My apologies, Percy,” Eli offered, raising his hand in surrender. “Curse my curious tongue. I just wanted to help you get to the root of your marital woes. I apologize if I have angered you.”

“Apology accepted, Gillingham,” Percy said sullenly. “Thank you for listening to my complaints.”

“I am happy to be of assistance,” Eli returned with a happy smile. “Though I firmly believe that the answer to your woes lies within you and the feelings you harbor for your fair wife.”

Louisa woke up annoyed and sad. Having come to terms with the fact that her husband probably did not find her attractive, she had resolved to live the rest of her life ignoring him. But it seemed that was easier said than done, for the moment he sat down to rest from the day's activities, she had been immediately overwhelmed by a melancholy so acute that she had burst into tears.

She had committed the worst crime a lady stuck in a marriage of convenience could ever make—she had fallen in love with her husband when he did not feel the same.

She did not know how much and how long she could bear his rejection. Already she could feel resentment building in her heart. She loved him, but she did not think he was worth losing her sanity.

She was dragged out of her reverie by the sound of her husband knocking on her door. The sound filled her with equal parts anger and embarrassment. There was no way she was going to allow him to see her in her disheveled state, so she had kept quiet, wishing that he would go away and allow her to pull herself together.

When she heard the sound of his footsteps retreating, instead of the profound relief she had hoped to feel, a curious blend of disappointment and loneliness welled up inside her, tightening her chest.

She had taken dinner in her room, and afterward, she had stayed up for most of the night, waiting for her husband to return while her mind conjured images of him engaging in salacious activities with someone other than her.

She wondered if he had gone to visit a mistress in town. It was widely known that most noblemen kept mistresses to spare their wives' 'sensibilities'. It was definitely not out of place if Percival had one, especially since he had made a habit of avoiding her bed. But Louisa was not comfortable with it. Not at all.

The thought of him in some other woman's arms made her blood boil with jealousy. He had promised her fidelity, and he was going to keep his vow. She would make sure to remind him of it. She could never share her husband with anyone, no matter the circumstance. He was hers. He belonged to her just as she belonged to him.

Getting out of bed, she caught a splash of colour out of the corner of her eye. She turned to see a large box on the only sofa in her room.

She picked up the box and unwrapped it to find a glittering masterpiece of a ball gown. It was sapphire-blue with an empire waist and a v-shaped neckline, and it came with arm-length gloves.

It was absolutely beautiful.

The box also contained a note that told her that the beautiful creation was a gift from her husband for their first ball together as a married couple.

Just like that, her anger vanished into thin air, a hopeful anticipation taking its place. Wherever Percival had gone the night before might have brought about some change in him, but she was hesitant to trust its durability.

She was unwilling to take any risk with her heart should he decide to change his mind, like he often did. But her heart, the foolish organ, was already beating an excited tattoo in her chest. She truly hoped, for both their sakes, that this was a sign of vulnerability on her husband's part because she did not think her heart could take another cruel rejection.

After folding the dress back into the box, she prepared for the day ahead, performing her morning ablutions, bathing, and dressing with the help of Anne, who seemed more excited than she was about the new dress. Louisa couldn't blame her; the dress was indeed a fashion enthusiast's envy.

In no time she was standing in front of her husband's study. She knocked once, and when his unusually soft voice bade her entry, she stepped inside.

His strong back was turned to her. He appeared to be intently gazing at something beyond the windows. She was contemplating stepping closer to see what it was when he turned to her, his grey eyes twinkling with a familiar light as they settled on her face.

"Good morning, Duchess," he greeted, a rueful smile curving his lips. "I trust you had a good night's rest?"

"I wouldn't say it was good," she replied honestly, walking towards the nearest shelf to peruse its contents. "I can only say it was sufficient. Thank you for your concern."

"You are welcome," he replied from somewhere behind her, his rumbling voice making goosebumps spread across the tender skin of her neck.

Turning abruptly, she forced herself to look into the blazing brilliance of his eyes. "I came to thank you for the dress—it is absolutely beautiful. Thank you."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“You deserve that and more, Duchess. In case you do not realize it,” he continued, shifting his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot, “I am apologizing for my horrid behaviour these past few days.” A self-deprecating smile touched his lips. “Do you think you can forgive me?” he asked, boyish hope flickering in his eyes.

“It would be quite terrible of me not to accept such a magnificent apology, don’t you think?” she asked with a teasing smile. “Apology accepted, Percy.”

“Why, thank you, Your Grace,” he offered with an exaggerated bow, coaxing a laugh out of her. “But I do believe the dress is missing something.” He hurriedly opened his desk drawers and rummaged through them.

“The dress is a masterpiece. I hardly think it requires any more embellishments,” she said, her eyes following his movements greedily, drinking in the play of sunlight on his hair and his broad shoulders. The ones that she was presently fighting the urge not to touch.

“Trust me when I say that what I have in mind will be perfect...” he trailed off as he continued rummaging through his desk drawers.

Suddenly, he let out a cry of triumph.

“Here it is.” He pulled out a small box and handed it to her, a wide smile on his face. “Open it.”

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, she took the box carefully and placed it on the desk, before opening it. She was immediately struck dumb by the brilliance of the sapphire

that winked back at her from its bed in the velvet lining of the box.

“Percy,” she breathed, looking up into his proud face. “This is beautiful.”

“I thought it would complement your fair skin and brown eyes,” he said in a low voice. “Turn around let me put it on you.”

She turned her back to him and waited while he brushed her hair over her shoulder, baring her neck and leaving it vulnerable to the warmth of his breath and the feverish sensations his fingers stirred when they brushed against her skin.

When she felt the cold stone settle on her skin, she had to suppress a sigh of relief at finally being released from the tortuous sensations that Percival wrought just by being close to her.

“It is perfect... the perfect contrast to your eyes,” he said hoarsely as he turned her around, his hot gaze heightening the feverish sensations within her.

“Yes,” she replied, averting her gaze.

She reached blindly for a book on the closest shelf, said a thank you, and muttered something about returning this book as well before she nearly ran out of the room to escape the lust that radiated from her husband’s body in waves.

No matter how she thought about it, her husband was dangerously attractive, and he was most lethal to her self-control when he was being attentive to her.

God save her because a few more of these tender moments and she might throw herself at the man, not caring if he rejected her or not. It was a testament to the fact that she thought it was worth it if he would kiss her like he had on that long-forgotten night, less than a week ago.

The man was slowly driving her mad, and somehow she could not bring herself to care.

She was a vision straight out of his fantasies, Percival thought as he watched her descend the stairs. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for her to join him. She was a siren sent to torture him to death with desire.

The sapphire-blue gown she wore had a fitted, low-cut bodice that offered ample view of her cleavage, which was quite generous. The skirt of her dress draped over her hips delicately, accentuating her curves. The sight of her stirred his arousal such that he contemplated taking her back to her room and ravishing her.

In the end, his sense of honour won out. He led her to the carriage and handed her in, before taking his seat opposite her. He couldn't stop staring at her. He seemed to have developed an obsession with her lips—those plump, sassy, delicious lips that glittered invitingly, tempting him to have a taste. And he desperately wanted a taste, especially since he knew how soft and sweet her lips felt under his.

With great effort, he tore his eyes away from the temptation of her lips, only to stare at her shamelessly flaunted cleavage. The modiste had made the dress with catching gentlemen's eyes in mind, and she had succeeded spectacularly because Percival's eyes were roaming over his wife's body and his hands were curled into fists at his sides, itching to touch her. The dress, and the woman who wore it, seemed to have been designed to drive him mad with desire.

His eyes flicked to her face to see that she was blushing furiously, obviously aware of his obsessive stare.

“You look beautiful,” he offered, his voice hoarse with desire and the effort to hold on to the thin tethers of his self-control.

“I thank you, Your Grace,” Louisa replied demurely, wringing her hands nervously.

That action drew his eyes to her hands. How slim and pale they looked, and how good they would feel as they tightened around a certain part of his body. That thought was followed by lucid fantasies of making love to her in this carriage. Of laying her delicious body on the seat, her hair flowing like sunlight through his fingers while he drew out her moans until he pushed her to the pinnacle of her pleasure, watching her splinter apart while he buried himself in the warm heaven of her body.

His fantasies grew even hotter and filthier from there, and by the time they arrived at the ball, he was sporting a full erection that did not look ready to subside anytime soon.

By sheer force of will and some hastily conjugated verbs in Latin, he managed to bring his body under control—at least enough for him not to look like he had stuffed a wooden piker down his pantaloons.

Taking her arm, he led her into the ballroom, where the ton had gathered for one of their many balls. The silence that fell over the room the minute they were announced was ominous. Every eye was glued to the entrance, where Percival was slowly leading his wife to the center of the room.

Instead of feeling embarrassed, a primitive part of him enjoyed watching the emotions on their faces, usually starting with curiosity, then disgust when they spotted his face, then dismissal as they shifted their focus to his wife.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

He didn't blame them—this was the first time he was making an entrance into polite society as the Duke of Colborne, so it was only natural that they were curious. Some of them even looked disappointed that he did not have horns or fangs coming out of his lips.

When they found him too ordinary or disgusting, their gazes naturally gravitated to the beautiful woman on his arm.

At that moment, he wondered why anyone would think that her scar detracted from her charm when most of the gentlemen were staring at her in fascination, their tongues almost lolling out of their mouths. Their lascivious interest was so obvious that he fought the urge to knock some of their teeth out so they kept their tongues in their mouths and their offending eyes off his wife.

Looking down into her face, he could see the pity swimming in the warm depths of her eyes. The emotion made him uncomfortable. Of all the emotions he wanted to see glittering in her warm brown eyes, pity was not one of them.

“I need a drink,” Percival muttered under his breath, looking around the room in search of the punch bowl while studiously avoiding his wife's gaze.

“You can go, husband. I think I spotted Isabella somewhere in the crowd. I will go look for her.”

“All right,” he said, nodding.

He gently released her arm before striding off in search of a drink to drown out the

anger and loneliness that seemed to consume him under the scornful eyes of the ton.

Chapter Seventeen

It had been less than thirty minutes since they arrived, and Percival could already feel the ache under his shoulder that demanded he return to the comfort of his home. But he had chosen to attend one of the frivolous affairs that made up the Season in the hope that he might build his reputation and increase his standing.

Unfortunately, he did not make any progress because he could only see scorn and disgust on the faces before him. That was why he was standing at the fringes of the ballroom, nursing a glass of bad punch while he considered the merits of ignoring polite society and returning to the comfort of his sanctuary.

At the very least, he mused, he deserved to have a stiffer drink. Whiskey, perhaps, if he was going to endure this spectacle any longer.

“Your Grace,” someone greeted, drawing his gaze.

He guessed that the man was of high rank from his well-tailored, bold-coloured clothes.

“It is an honour to have you here with us,” the dandy continued, his smile saccharine sweet.

“I do not think the other guests feel the same way,” Percival replied dryly, before taking another sip of his punch.

“It is just the shock of seeing you in person. Many of us, myself included, believed that you were not real. Your reputation is fit for folktales.”

“And scary stories, I imagine,” Percival drawled.

“I do not—” the dandy sputtered.

“I guess it also serves as a good story to laugh about in your clubs,” Percival continued, totally ignoring the man’s attempt to defend himself.

“Well, I never?—”

“What do you want, Lord...?”

“Glassington,” the dandy supplied. “I was hoping to tempt you into a business partnership. Rutherford had promised to share profits if we invested in the railways being constructed across the Continent. It will be hugely successful, I tell you,” he crowed, so happy with himself.

“Why do you need a business partner even if you have one already?” Percival asked, fixing Lord Glassington with a sharp look. “Besides, I do not have the money to invest.”

“But you are a duke,” Lord Glassington pointed out, his eyes widening in surprise.

“I should think that by now, you would have realized that not all dukes are wealthy,” Percival replied, a rueful smile on his lips.

Quite typical of a dandy to be clueless about money and how it should be handled. Lord Glassington had probably invested some money in that scheme in the hope of making more money to buy new clothes, accessories, and gel to keep his hair flattened to his head.

Percival, on the other hand, could not afford to be careless with money, especially

when the business scheme in question was as shady as a backwater alley in London at night.

He was married now, and he had a duty to make sure that his wife lived in a respectable, comfortable home. It would be so stupid of him to gamble with her dowry when he could use it to improve their home. She had placed her trust in him, and he was going to do everything to honour it.

“You are so different from your brother,” Lord Glassington sneered. “He was more adventurous, generous, and lively—unlike you, gloomy as the storm brewing outside.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

The comment piqued Percy's curiosity, causing his eyes to narrow in suspicion.

"You knew my brother?" he asked in a low voice, stepping closer to the man.

Lord Glassington eyed him warily. "We were friends... sort of... yes," he replied, his wariness growing when Percival's face darkened. "Why do you ask?"

"I have been looking for Micheal's friends for some time now. It seems I am in luck today," Percival murmured, his eyes glittering.

"Why would you want to meet his friends?"

"To see if any of them had seen him on the day of his death."

"But he died in an accident..." Lord Glassington's eyes widened with disbelief. "Do not tell me you suspect that his death was not natural."

"Of course, his death was not natural. He died in an accident, Glassington", Percival pointed out in a slightly mocking tone.

"You know what I mean," Lord Glassington whispered urgently. "You think he was killed by someone? A nobleman, perhaps?"

"Precisely," Percival answered, keeping his expression carefully bland.

"Your brother left us at the club, and several hours later, we received news of his death. I did not detect any foul play."

It seemed that his brother was given to making bad investments and frivolous living, which had resulted in the dilapidated state of the manor. Another consequence of leading a lifestyle of drinking and gambling was that one easily acquired enemies—both loan sharks and losers. Any one of them could have killed Micheal.

“Do you know anyone he might have had a falling out with before the accident?”

Lord Glassington placed a contemplative finger on his chin. “I do not remember any. Micheal was lively and rather entertaining. It is almost impossible for him to have enemies.”

Of course one tended to attract a lot of friends once word spread that one was quite reckless with money.

Percival was about to ask the man if he knew anyone who could provide better answers to his questions when another gentleman interrupted them. He recognized him as the dissolute Duke of Banbury.

“Colborne,” Banbury boomed, grabbing his hand roughly and shaking it until Percival feared the man might pull his shoulder out of its socket. “Fancy seeing you here. It seems you have finally decided to descend from your ivory tower to grace us lesser humans with your presence,” he said with a self-deprecating chuckle. “I, for one, am grateful that you did not truly die on the battlefield. That would have been such a profound waste. I was beginning to wonder if tales of your return were just fiction, but it seems I was wrong. Welcome back.”

He slapped Percival on the back with a meaty hand.

“Now that you are back among us, you must attend my house party. It promises to be quite enjoyable and invigorating. You will even get to shoot some game.” He barked out a laugh, his jowls and belly shaking.

“While I appreciate the offer, Banbury, I do not think I am ready for such events yet. I regret to decline your offer.”

“Do loosen up. I do not see the reason why you would refuse my kind invitation—unless, of course, you do not know how to shoot. It is nothing to be ashamed of, I assure you,” Banbury said, his lips curling into a mocking smirk.

“You seem to forget, Banbury, that I am a retired soldier, and you definitely could not become one without passable shooting skills. In fact, it is a testament to my skills with a rifle that I still stand before you today alive and well. I wager that I have gained more experience shooting in my years in the army than you have your whole life,” Percival scoffed with barely concealed anger.

“I’m only declining your invitation because I refuse to kill anything innocent. I have seen enough death in my life to last me a lifetime or even more. I do not want any more blood on my hands, both human and animal. You are welcome to enjoy your sport, but do leave me out of it.”

Percival didn’t blame the man because he had not experienced the horrors of war. The sadness of knowing that with one snap of your finger, you could take lives. Granted, they were his enemies, but the shock on their faces as the light left their eyes was imprinted in his mind and haunted his dreams. Even now, any sudden loud noise could throw him into a panic, making him feel as if he were back on the battlefield, where grenades and bullets flew with reckless abandon, leaving death in their wake.

They did not understand the reality of shooting a living being because they had not endured the hell that he had.

Chapter Eighteen

“I’m only declining your invitation because I refuse to kill anything innocent. I have

seen enough death in my life to last me a lifetime or even more. I do not want any more blood on my hands, both human and animal. You are welcome to enjoy your sport, but do leave me out of it.”

Louisa stopped in her tracks and looked at Percival, seeing him in a new light. She had been making her way towards him because they had been apart for too long and he had yet to ask her to dance—which was appropriate, since they were newlyweds. Now, all thoughts flew out of her head but the fact that he shared her views on the matter.

She had never understood the need to kill innocent creatures for sport when most of the kills were hardly ever eaten. She had decided it was one of the things that she would never understand, seeing as she was a woman, but she was glad that her husband shared her opinion.

“It wouldn’t be for sport, Colborne,” the man she identified as the Duke of Banbury declared. “They are giving their lives for a worthy cause.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

Louisa admired the man's grit while dealing with her husband. He lacked wisdom—surely he did, or else he would not have dared to speak those words. Especially not to her husband, whose face looked worse than the clouds on a particularly stormy day.

“I can't say I'm surprised that you would rather delude yourself into thinking that you're doing the country a great service in your high-back chair in the House of Lords and your frippery than giving your life for a worthy cause, as you put it.”

Banbury's smile dropped, his face paling with each word that Percival spoke, and it had taken everything in her not to burst into laughter. It was almost hilarious how her husband had sapped the smarminess out of the men surrounding him with only a few words.

Louisa sighed, shaking her head. Percival had asked her to help restore his reputation, but if he continued acting the way he did, there would be nothing left to restore eventually.

“I had better mingle with some of the other guests,” she heard Banbury say, his eyes darting around before he scurried off.

Percival sighed and shook his head perhaps, regretting the harsh way he had spoken. The action brought a smile to Louisa's face as she regarded him. He really was so boyish in his mannerisms sometimes that it made her forget he was a fearsome duke.

She raised her hand to draw his attention, but then she stopped when laughter from beside him drew his attention to who must have been a friend of his.

The man was slightly shorter than her husband, but he was just as broad, with dark hair and grey eyes. He was handsome, and she couldn't help but note the slight resemblance to her husband.

She shook the absurd thought out of her head, realizing that it was their similar colouring that was playing tricks on her mind. She recognized him as Elijah Balfour, the Baron Gillingham, and decided to wait till he noticed her.

They must have been really close because he kept laughing despite receiving a warning look from her closed-off husband.

"I'm sorry, Percy." He chuckled. "I cannot help but find it amusing how you chased him away."

"It was rather foolish to try and insult my shooting skills to get me to accept his invitation."

"How was he to know that you wouldn't be moved by such childish mind games?"

"He was sorely unprepared to deal with me," Percival replied, before downing his drink in one angry gulp. "They all are. I'm almost disappointed that they haven't changed their tactics since I left."

"They didn't have the opportunity, Percy," the Baron said. "It has been dreadfully dull here."

"How have you survived this long without running mad?"

"I had Michael, and now I have you."

Percival snorted. "I do not intend to play nice for very much longer."

“Not even with me?”

Percival’s answering glare had the Baron laughing again.

Lord Gillingham seemed like a man with an easy smile. Louisa wondered how the two of them were friends, considering the differences in their dispositions.

“You haven’t even started playing nice. You should not have been so hard on the Duke,” Lord Gillingham scolded playfully. “After all, you two are old friends and might have been family had you not jilted his daughter.”

Louisa’s eyes widened at the revelation.

Percival had been engaged once? And he had jilted the lady?

“Do not remind me,” Percival groaned. “And I didn’t jilt her. I had to end things because she would not have wanted to marry a soldier who may or may not have come back alive.”

“What would you call it, then?” The Baron laughed. “I remember how she cried when you told her you were going to war. Michael and I couldn’t stop laughing at the look on your face.”

“I cannot wait to see you fall in love.”

“I do not intend to experience such a sentiment, and you know it,” the Baron snorted. “I would doubtless court anyone because I want to.”

Louisa stumbled back, deciding that she had heard enough.

She didn’t know why, but disappointment coursed through as she realized that

Percival would have been married to a woman he actually loved and would doubtless have had children of his own had things gone differently. He wouldn't have been in a loveless, passionless marriage.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

As a second son with no title, he wouldn't have been forced to marry or have children for the sake of continuing the line.

She walked away from him—stumbling, if she chose to be accurate—needing air and space to process what she had heard. She had deluded herself into thinking that perhaps, one day, they would come to have a normal relationship like all married couples did, but he had not even chosen her because he liked her. He had chosen her because she was a convenient way to fix his problems without having to exert himself. She had been an all too willing, easy solution.

It was almost too much to bear, and all she needed was to be by herself, preferably away from the prying eyes of the ton, who would have no doubt quickly spread the word that the new Duchess was crying. The balcony was only a few steps away, and she could already sense the cold air.

“Being a duchess suits you,” she heard suddenly from behind her, and she drew to a halt.

Dammit.

She groaned inwardly. Just when she thought she could escape, someone had to demand her attention.

She took a quick, steadying breath, wiping her face and eyes in case any errant tears had escaped before turning to face the culprit. And she was surprised to find Lord Pemberton standing before her.

“Lord Pemberton,” she greeted. “Good evening.”

“Good evening to you too,” he said with a bow. “I feel like I have barely seen you since you jilted me for your Duke.”

She noticed that he hadn’t once winced or looked upon her with pity as he used to, and she wondered what could have brought about the change in his demeanor.

Perhaps now that he wouldn’t have to marry her, he could stomach the sight of her?

“I would hardly call what I did jilting,” she countered with a smile. “You and my mother assumed I was courting anyone. You could have asked.”

“I saw no need to, considering you went along with it.” He smiled back. “Almost as though?—”

She didn’t let him finish.

“How can I help you, Lord Pemberton?” she asked. “Surely you didn’t just come to reminisce about the past, and I’ve been married long enough that it would be more appropriate for you to send me your felicitations.”

She sincerely hoped he didn’t hold a grudge against her and didn’t intend to get revenge. It wouldn’t be unexpected, but she wasn’t in the mood to deal with that currently.

“I came to ask you to dance.”

“Excuse me?”

“I would like to dance with you,” he reiterated. “Is it a strange thing to ask?”

“Why?” she demanded, hoping no one had heard the odd request.

“We are friends, are we not?” he pointed out. “Is it odd for friends to share a dance?”

“I cannot dance with you when everyone knows that we courted once,” she explained, wondering why he would suggest it, let alone think it. “It isn’t proper.”

“I only made the proposition as a friend, Louisa.” He smiled. “I know you are happy with your Duke, and since when have you cared what the ton think?”

“I don’t exactly care what they think, but I am married now. I wouldn’t want to make the wrong impression.”

“I can understand that, but your husband doesn’t seem very keen on showing you the same courtesy,” he sighed. “I mean, he hasn’t even asked you to dance.”

Louisa frowned deeply to show her displeasure, even though she worried that everyone present had somehow glimpsed her sadness.

“You cannot manipulate my emotions to get me to dance with you, Lord Pemberton,” she huffed, peering down her nose at him. “And my husband is busy reconnecting with old friends of his who wouldn’t appreciate you slandering him.”

“I have tried being polite,” Lord Pemberton said, undeterred by her threat. “There’s no need to resort to threats. I know just how powerful your husband is.”

“Yet, you would dare to cross him.”

“A man needs to have his feathers ruffled every once in a while,” he answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“I sincerely hope that, for your sake, he would find as much humor in this situation.” She shook her head.

She couldn't deny that the prospect of dancing excited her, and since no one had dared to ask her, she had resigned herself to sticking to the fringes of the room.

“If he doesn't, you will do your best to sweeten things with him, won't you?”

She snorted, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

Lord Pemberton laughed and slapped a hand on his thigh. “You've always been much too proper, Louisa.” He gave her a wink. “It is nice to see you loosening up. I will keep this between us.”

“At what cost?” she asked teasingly.

“A dance or two,” he answered thoughtfully. “We shall see as the night goes on.”

She sighed and shook her head with a laugh. “I can't recall you being this stubborn.”

“There are a lot of things you do not know about me, my dear.” He grinned at her wolfishly. “Now come, we are about to miss the first dance.”

Louisa let herself be led to the dance floor. It had been an age since she had danced, and it was nice to feel the music in a way she hadn't for so long.

She curtsied as Lord Pemberton bowed, and she noticed from his movements that he,

too, enjoyed dancing.

“You are a rather graceful dancer, Your Grace,” he commended, stealing the words out of her mouth.

“Likewise, My Lord.” She smiled.

They spun again and bowed to each other. Eventually, Louisa felt a great weight lift off her shoulders. She found herself not worrying about the conflicting feelings she had for her husband or the grimness of the life she had resigned herself to. Rather, she felt only the rhythm of the music in her veins and the familiar stirring of her blood as she danced.

Since the accident, she had danced only a few perfunctory dances with gentlemen her mother had tried to marry her off to, but there had been no enjoyment, considering her partners looked like they would rather be anywhere else in the world. She only had to concentrate on carrying out the steps with precision and showing no emotion. But with Lord Pemberton, she felt the playful flirtation in their movements.

She couldn't help but wonder how it would feel like if she and Percival were to ever share a dance. Considering how unyielding he was, she suspected he would lead the dance. Would he even remember the steps? It would have been an age since he last danced.

“Where did you go, dear Louisa?” Lord Pemberton asked, spinning her around.

“Nowhere you need to worry about,” she answered with a wink.

He laughed and bowed as the first dance ended, before leading her into the next. Her blood roared, and her feet ached, but she was having too much fun considering the impropriety of dancing twice with him.

She noticed a few eyes on them and noted that the Viscount seemed to revel in the attention. They had danced more than one dance, after all. The ton's questioning stares were not unfounded. Perhaps she should end the dance before any unkind rumours would begin.

"Everyone is staring at us," she murmured, looking around the ballroom again. "I think we had better stop. We've been too improper."

More eyes swiveled in their direction, and it was starting to make her uncomfortable, as she couldn't tell what their expressions meant.

"You have misjudged their intentions, dear Louisa." Lord Pemberton smiled as he eyed the crowd. "Can't you see the admiration in their eyes?"

Admiration? Why?

"You are rather beautiful tonight," he continued, as though he had heard her thoughts. "And we do make a striking pair, even though you are married."

She gave him a reproachful look, and he laughed again.

"We do. It's a shame you had to marry someone else before I realized you were a diamond in need of polishing. Nonetheless, I know how to cut my losses."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Isabella amidst the crowd that had gathered, and her sister winked at her, causing her to laugh. That was a look she could interpret.

Lord Pemberton raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I just wonder why it has taken me so long to see it," she explained.

“That we are a striking pair?”

“No.” She shook her head, rolling her eyes at him. “That I have been hiding away all this time.”

“Have you decided you want to shine, little diamond?”

She looked him in the eyes and nodded.

She was tired of being relegated to the wall. Tired of the boring life she had led before. Tired of waiting to be noticed, when she could have put herself in the spotlight.

“Then come, let us make you shine.”

Chapter Nineteen

“This is rather dull,” Percival commented, casting an eye over the room. “I’m starting to recall why I shunned societal events as long as I did.”

And indeed, he was.

By anyone else’s standards, the ball would have been considered a success. But to him, it was dreadfully dull, and that was putting it mildly. He was starting to resent the stilted conversations and games they all played, as compared to the carefree conversations he used to have with his comrades in arms.

Thinking back to his camp, he sorely missed his brothers in arms and their easy camaraderie. Despite the cold and harsh conditions, he had always felt warm around them. They had comforted one another in times of loss and rejoiced with one another in times of happiness. He certainly hadn't missed walking on eggshells the way he had to do with the ton.

He would give anything to escape it all, but he damn well couldn't if he didn't want to make an enemy of the Crown. Thankfully, he had Eli to at least converse with. The man was a welcome respite from the dreadful lot he was to pick from.

"I do not think your wife thinks so," Eli quipped with a smirk.

"Why do you say so?" Percival asked, looking around for her.

They had barely spent a minute in each other's presence since they had arrived, and he was starting to wonder if she had somehow forgotten that the whole point of them coming to the ball was to show the ton that they were very much in love.

Eli pointed in the direction of the dance floor, and Percival frowned, wondering why he would, considering Louisa knew better than to dance with another man.

His eyes narrowed, and his eyebrows knitted together when he noticed the way she smiled gaily while being spun in another man's arms—and not just any man, but her previous suitor.

"She seems to be enjoying herself, isn't she?" Eli teased, grinning wolfishly. "Isn't that Lord Pemberton, her previous suitor?"

Pemberton. What a silly name.

It fit the man perfectly, considering how silly he was dressed. Percival knew he was

being petty, but seeing how happy his wife was in the Viscount's arms made him angry.

Yet, he didn't want to admit the reason to himself.

"It is, isn't it?" Eli continued, either unaware or uncaring that he was irritating him. "I wonder if perhaps there is some unfinished business between them. Perhaps?—"

"Don't you dare," Percival warned darkly.

Eli raised his hands in surrender, but his eyes still glowed with mirth.

Percival wondered then why he chose to maintain the relationship between them.

"I'm only trying to help lighten an otherwise tense mood."

"There is no tense mood," he gritted out, placing his glass down on one of the tables with more force than he had intended.

A gasp alerted him that he had shattered the glass, but he paid no attention to it even as a footman cleared away the spilled wine and checked his hand for cuts. He yanked his hand back and discarded his stained gloves, before making his way to his wife, who still hadn't noticed the commotion she had caused.

He pushed past the couples on the makeshift dance floor, who glared at him for ruining their rhythm, but he ignored them till he was standing behind his wife and her all-too-willing partner, from the looks of things, waiting till she spun around and faced him, before he took her hands and pulled her flush against his chest.

As much as he'd have liked to deny it, he admired the way her cheeks flushed whenever he was near her. He enjoyed the sight of her pale skin turning red, from her

cheeks to her neck to her very ample cleavage, which she had let another man see.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

Rage buried the desire he had been feeling, pushing him into step with the dance.

“That was rude,” she scolded. But her words lacked heat, and she was unable to meet his eyes.

“Dance, or you’ll cause a scene.”

“More than you already have?” she asked, casting a glance around the room.

“Indeed,” he answered without remorse. “You seem to enjoy dancing.”

“I did,” she answered stubbornly, still not moving.

His ire flared, but he quickly pushed it down, not wanting to scare her even though he badly wanted to shake her.

How dare she enjoy dancing with another man? And not just any man, but a former beau.

“It isn’t right for us to be seen dancing publicly,” she tried again.

“Is it more wrong than you dancing with a former suitor?” he snapped.

Her cheeks reddened again, and he frowned at how the innocent act doused the flames of his anger.

“Percival.”

“I do not care what the ton thinks of it,” he told her firmly. “I want to dance with my wife, and I will do so. They can wag their tongues however they like.”

She bit her lip as if in quiet contemplation, and the action sent heat through his blood. Then, she nodded, taking her position as the musicians began playing the next song.

A waltz, he noted.

Percival had only ever danced the waltz when he wanted to play and seduce, and now he would be dancing it again with his wife. It was almost too fitting a punishment for her.

Her eyes widened as realization dawned on her.

He performed the first steps of the dance, his hand firm around her waist, and again she was flush against him. His hands pulled her into him as he led her into the movements, gliding across the floor with ease. Their closeness was scandalous in every sense but he didn't care.

He noticed the change in her as she moved. She was graceful and channeled her inner vixen well for the steps, and he wondered just who had taught her to dance like that. Her movements were fluid as she followed his leading so submissively.

He was supposed to be seducing her, but he found himself effortlessly seduced. The feel of her slim waist beneath his hands made images of her spread out beneath him as his tongue tasted her intimately flash through his mind. He groaned as intense lust shot through him, his body taut with tension and the need for release.

The dance reached its crescendo. She gave him a sultry smile, looking up at him from beneath her thick lashes, and he frowned, pulling her harder against him. If he hadn't danced with her, she would have smiled at Lord Pemberton the same way.

“Percival,” she gasped at the way his hands gripped her.

“I will not have you smiling at any other man like this,” he warned.

“What are you doing? This is?—”

“You are mine, Louisa,” he growled. “Mine. I will not share you with any other man. Remember that.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock, the dance effectively forgotten. But before she could speak, the dance came to an end, earning them cheers and claps from the guests.

“Perc—”

He walked away from her before she could finish, angry with himself for losing control and angry with her for causing him to.

Damn. He had lost control terribly.

He felt her eyes on him as he walked away from her, but he needed to leave as quickly as he could. If he stood next to her, breathing in her heady scent, he was sure he would have done something as stupid as kissing her so soundly that all the men would know that she was irrevocably his.

God knew that he wanted to.

He wanted to do more than kiss her. He wanted to yank up her skirt and taste her and mark her with his teeth so she would no longer forget who she belonged to.

He went back to the refreshments table and poured himself some punch, even though he wanted something stronger to quell the lust roaring in his blood.

Damn. His wife was wrecking his carefully constructed self-control, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Who would have thought that you would still move so well after being away for as long as you have," a familiar voice said next to him.

He looked up to see an old schoolmate.

Victor Bradbury, the Duke of Heathonton, smiled as he walked up to him. He had his usual cronies around him, and frankly, Percival was in no mood for subtly barbed conversation.

"He had always been the best at dancing, don't you remember, Victor?" Meryn Heathers, the Baron Winten, commented.

"I do remember." Victor laughed. "It was how he nearly stole all the ladies from us."

They laughed, drawing more attention to them.

The smell of varying colognes and hair products permeated the air, and all at once, Percival found it hard to breathe.

“You have found a perfect match in your wife,” David Stanton, the Viscount Keaton, piped up. “She moves just as well as you do.”

“I might invite you to tea at my manor the day after tomorrow,” Lord Winten added.

“I wanted to invite them to the opera house tomorrow,” Heathonton rebuffed. “You know I have the best seats.”

“You are so snobbish.” Lord Keaton laughed.

They were all having a jolly good time, unaware that Percival was struggling to draw breath. He wished Eli was with him to at least divert their attention elsewhere, but alas, the man was probably off mingling somewhere.

Just as the edges of his vision began to blur, he smelled the familiar scent of roses that dragged him back from the abyss.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Louisa greeted.

“Good evening, Duchess,” Heathonton, ever the rake, greeted with a wolfish smile. “It is a pleasure to meet you. We were just talking about you. It’s a shame we had not been introduced before, or I would have married you.”

Louisa, ever graceful, dipped her head with a polite smile. “Indeed?” she asked. “I guess I’ll keep you as an option if my husband misbehaves.”

The men laughed, and Heathonton gave Percival an approving look.

Percival looked at his wife in a new light, wondering when she had become so confident.

“I’ll keep that as an option.” Heathonton grinned, winking at her.

She smiled back and nodded. “Would you mind if I borrowed my husband, gentlemen?”

“Not at all, Duchess.”

She took Percival’s arm and smiled at the men again before pulling him away to another end of the room.

“I’ve already bid my family and the hosts goodnight if you want to leave now,” she whispered.

He gave her a grateful look and a nod.

She smiled up at him, and they made for the door.

Percival waved to Eli when he caught his eye from across the room but hurried his steps, needing to be far away from the crowd as quickly as possible.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

The carriage ride was silent, but he could see her contemplating whether or not to break it. Suddenly, the carriage ran over a pothole, propelling her out of her seat. But he grabbed her shoulders, steadying her, and her hands landed on his knees. They froze as they realized the position they were in and then jumped apart.

The carriage bounced again, throwing her off her seat. But this time, she didn't fall to the floor. Percival rapped on the roof of the carriage, and the vehicle rolled to a stop.

"Yes, Your Grace?" Wiggings, the driver, called.

"Wait."

"Yes, Your Grace," Wiggings answered without needing further explanations.

"What are you doing?" Louisa asked, startled.

"Come sit beside me," Percival gritted out, tired of watching her struggle.

"What?" she blurted out, her eyes wide.

"Sit beside me," he reiterated. "There's enough space, and I'm tired of seeing you fly out of your seat."

"There's no need..."

"Please, don't argue."

She looked like she wanted to, but then she sighed and moved to sit beside him, her eyes not meeting his as she put as much space between them as she could. He rolled his eyes and rapped on the roof once again, and soon they took off.

The silence he usually found comforting irritated him, and he found himself getting angry that she wouldn't even attempt to make conversation. Not that he could fault her for her silence. She had made every effort to give them a semblance of a happy marriage while he spat on her attempts at every turn.

When the carriage finally slowed to a stop, he climbed out first and then held out a hand to help her down, surprising her. She took it but said nothing even as they stepped into their home.

She turned to leave, but he stopped her with a hand. Her eyes were wide and questioning as they looked up at him.

"I should thank you for helping us leave early," he began, averting his gaze. "I needed to leave and... thank you."

She nodded and then turned to leave, and all at once he was upset. If she didn't want to speak to him, why did she help him then?

He grabbed her hand more forcefully than he had expected, and she yelped, turning to him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Why don't you want to speak to me?" he asked angrily.

"You're hurting me," she complained.

He looked down at his hand wrapped around her arm and released her, dropping it to his side. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

"What exactly is it that you want from me, Percival?" she spat. "You don't want to make me happy, yet you get angry when others do. You pull me closer and then push me away, claiming it was a mistake. What do you want from me?"

"What do you mean by I don't want to make you happy? I married you," he argued. "I saved you from a marriage you didn't want."

"I'm starting to think this was a mistake," she murmured.

He stepped closer to her, hating the way she stumbled back. "Surely you don't mean that."

"Please let me be, Percival," she begged. "I understood when you said what happened between us was a mistake. I accepted the hand fate has dealt me, but you don't get to claim me as yours when you haven't made me yours. You haven't even decided if you want me to be yours. Isn't my grief justified?"

"Louisa, you misunderstand my intentions," he insisted. "I'm trying to protect you."

"From what?" she asked.

"From myself."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“Why?” she asked, exasperated. “I never asked you to.”

“You didn’t need to. You don’t understand.”

She stepped closer to him, placing a hand on his cheek. Her sweet rose scent wrapped around him like a cocoon.

“Then make me.”

He groaned, grabbing her face in his hands and kissing her like he had wanted to since he had seen her descending the stairs in that dress.

She moaned into his mouth, and he knew right then that there was no way he was going to stop himself. He had punished himself for long enough by denying himself the pleasures her body offered.

“Take me to your chambers, wife.”

Chapter Twenty

“Take me to your chambers, wife.”

Percival’s whispered command had her jumping away from him. Had she heard him correctly?

“Have I stunned you into silence, wife?” he asked, nipping her lip and pulling her closer to him. So close that she could feel the evidence of his arousal against her

belly. “You have been trying to get my attention for days. Now that you have it, I do not intend to let you escape me again. Now, lead me to your chambers.”

Louisa nodded and turned to leave, but he pulled her back against him, taking her lips in a kiss that she could only describe as drugging. Slow, languorous, and savoring. His tongue slid into her mouth, and he groaned, his hands kneading her through her dress.

She knew Anne would be upset when she saw the rumpled garment, which brought a smile to her face despite herself.

Percival pulled back with a confused look on his face that made her laugh.

“I’m sorry.” She giggled. “I will try to stop.”

“I’m almost offended that you find something amusing when I’m burning with lust for you.”

“I imagined how angry Anne would be with me when she sees my rumpled dress.”

He stepped closer to her with a naughty smile on his face, which she knew posed only problems for her. He pulled her close again, running his nose down the side of her face, and breathed her in.

“I am sorely tempted to punish you for thinking about something as trivial as a dress when I’m touching you,” he breathed in her ear, which made liquid heat pool between her legs. “Nothing kills a man’s ego worse than what you just did.”

She smiled up at him through hooded eyes as Isabella had told her to. “Does that mean you don’t want to come up to my chambers?” she teased.

He growled, attempting to kiss her but she pulled away from him, laughing as she ran from him and he chased her down the hallway. It would have been embarrassing had there been servants about, aside from a startled Tobias. But since there were not, they were perfectly free to play as they wished.

Percival caught up to her outside her chambers and pinned her against the wall.

“You are a very naughty woman,” he groaned against her.

“Yet, my appeal hasn’t faded?”

“Not one bit.”

He took her by the hand and led her into her chambers, and suddenly, her large room felt too small. Louisa would have wrapped her arms around herself had he not trapped one of her hands in his.

The reality of what was about to happen between them made her feel embarrassed and nervous about being so intimate with him again. His eyes took in her room, and she couldn’t help but wonder if he found the changes she made to it odd.

When his eyes flicked back to her, the heat in them was still as vivid, which had her blushing. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth to quell the nervous energy welling up inside her.

She didn’t know what to do or say for fear of pushing him away again, so she stood there, unable to meet his gaze.

“Why are you looking away from me?” he asked suddenly, startling her.

“What?”

He stepped closer to her and placed a hand under her chin to tilt her head up. His eyes were warm and alight with mirth as he watched her.

“You seem to have developed the habit of hiding in your thoughts, dear wife.” He smiled. “Do I bore you?”

“No,” she answered with a smile of her own. “But you frighten me.”

“Indeed?” he asked. “Why?”

“There is a lot I still do not know, while you seem so... experienced.”

He grinned wolfishly at her choice of words, tilting his head to the side and regarding her.

“And that means you enjoyed having my hands on you the last time?”

It was a statement posed as a question.

She nodded. “Very much.”

He chuckled darkly, spinning her so suddenly that she had no time to react. His hands were on the stays of her dress, expertly working to unfasten them.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are brutally honest?” he asked, pulling the heavy

dress off her shoulders.

“Yes,” she answered breathlessly as he kissed her neck. “Does it offend you?”

“On the contrary,” he whispered in her ear, hands loosening the bindings to the rest of the layers she wore, leaving her in her chemise and stockings. “I find that I like it. Very much.”

She smiled, then gasped as he pulled her flush against him.

“I want to see all of you,” he groaned against her, before falling on his knees to kiss his way up her thigh. “I have dreamt of you every night since I tasted you. Your scent has haunted my every waking and sleeping hour.”

She whimpered as he nipped the inside of her thigh and rolled a stocking down and off her leg. He lavished the same attention on her other leg, winding her up so she had to place her hands on his shoulders for balance.

“Get on the bed, dear wife,” he ordered. “I need to see you spread out before me.”

She obeyed, worrying her lip as he crawled over her. The size difference between them sometimes startled her, but she never had any reason to fear him.

He tore her chemise off her body, his eyes darkening as they roamed over her nakedness.

“You are too beautiful for words, darling wife,” he murmured against her breast.

Her back arched off the bed as sparks of heat shot through her where his mouth and hands touched her. He kneaded and squeezed her flesh, both cooling and stoking the fire burning inside her. He was too much, yet she hadn’t had enough of him. She

wanted to feel him closer and everywhere at the same time.

One of his hands slid down her body, his finger dipping between her folds to slide inside her. He watched her even as she squirmed at the feeling. She was completely naked and vulnerable beneath him, but she didn't feel ashamed. He made her feel alive and desired, and the heat and appreciation in his eyes only ratcheted up her arousal.

He moved his finger deeper, slower and then faster, before he added another finger, his other hand pinning her hips down as she writhed on the bed. Familiar pleasure bloomed in her core, and her cries grew louder.

"Percival," she moaned.

"I'm right here with you," he groaned against her mouth. "Tell me what you want."

"You," she gasped. "Please."

He kissed her, and she kissed him back, protesting when his fingers slid out of her. He lifted his fingers to his lips, popped them in his mouth, and closed his eyes in ecstasy as he sucked on them.

"You taste even better than I remember," he groaned. "You are simply divine."

He trailed kisses down her neck, stopping at her breasts and lavishing his attention on them, nipping and licking and sucking till she pushed her fingers in his hair and cried out her pleasure.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

Her nails dug into his scalp when he bit her nipple, and she gasped when his tongue flicked against the flesh, soothing it. She could tell her breasts were his favourite place as he spent more time on them.

Her body burned with anticipation and the desire to experience sweet relief as she had once before, and she squirmed beneath him to let him know.

He chuckled against her skin, kissing lower and lower till his head was buried in her most intimate place. He inhaled deeply and tasted her with one long stroke of his tongue before his hands spread her out in front of him.

Words escaped her in a flood that she couldn't contain even though she clapped a hand over her mouth for fear that her cries would worry Tobias or Mrs. Owens.

Even though it was only the second time he would be touching her this way, Percival found even more sensitive spots that threatened to drive her insane. She couldn't help but wonder if it would always be like this between them.

He pulled away from her too suddenly, and she feared he would abandon her again. She sat up, pulling the bedcovers around her.

"Are you leaving?" she asked, unable to keep the fear out of her voice.

He turned back to her, cocking his head to study her. "I do not intend to," he answered.

"Oh."

He smiled and began unbuttoning his shirt, not knowing where to look as he did so. When he threw it on the floor, her eyes went wide, not at the scars covering his chest but at the sheer width of him.

He was beautiful. So beautiful that her mouth went dry at the sight of him.

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. When his hands went to his breeches, she closed her eyes. His dark chuckle tempted her to open her eyes, but she kept them firmly shut.

“If you are going to be this frightened, dear wife, then I will have to return to my chambers.”

No!

Her eyes popped open, and she started, not expecting him to be so close to her or that he was practically naked.

Her eyes widened at the sight of his proud, jutting member, and she paled, wondering how he would fit inside her when he was as large as he was.

“You look frightened,” he murmured as he settled above her.

His weight above her signified the intimacy of the moment, and she flushed deeply. She could feel every inch of him against every inch of her and with her legs spread about him, his very excited member was at the core of her woman hood.

“Have I ever told you that I like how beautifully you flush everywhere?” he purred, propping himself up on his elbows to keep his weight off her. “Like a ripe peach. But you taste sweeter.”

He really had such a dirty manner.

He moved over her, and she felt his member nudge her sex, the sensation unfamiliar yet inviting. He groaned, and she decided right then that she had never heard anything more beautiful.

“I don’t know how to pleasure you,” she mumbled vulnerably.

“You already are,” he answered, moving above her again.

His entire body was taut, and she wondered if he were perhaps in pain.

“I don’t think I can go gently, Louisa,” he groaned, lining himself with her entrance.

She felt the head of his member poking her, and she immediately tensed in fear of what was to come.

“Will it hurt?” she asked.

“It will at first, but I will try to make it good for you.”

She nodded then and tried to relax, her eyes closing in anticipation as she felt him slide inside her. It was only the head, but he felt so good inside her that he stole her breath. She moved her hips, needing to feel him deeper, but he stilled her.

“Open your eyes, wife,” he demanded. “I want to see you when I finally claim you as mine.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

She did open her eyes, but it was hard to keep them open as he slid slowly, inch by inch, inside her. She felt the sharp tear and whimpered as he finally claimed her as his, her body tensing at the intrusion, but he kissed her and whispered sweet nothings in her ear to ease her pain. When it finally subsided, she moved her hips to let him know.

He slid out of her and then back in, in one long, deep stroke that had her screaming out in pain and pleasure. He pulled her legs tighter around him and moved in and out of her in gloriously deep strokes that had her clawing at his shoulders and arms.

Everything her sisters had told her paled in comparison to what she was experiencing right now. There were no words to describe the beauty of seeing him atop her, feeling him inside her and the friction of their coupling. She felt whole and complete, and she knew then that she was completely his. If he denied her pleasure after that night, she wouldn't be above begging.

She knew when he neared his release, as his thrusts grew harder and shallower, his grunts coming fast. She wasn't too far behind him, as his fingers had started rubbing slow circles around her pearl.

“Louisa,” he groaned into her hair. “You’re so perfect.”

She felt the world explode about her into a million stars and was only vaguely aware of his hoarse shout before he collapsed on the bed beside her, pulling her into his arms.

Their breathing synchronized, and when they finally came down from their high, he

pressed her to his chest, his fingers drawing lazy circles on her back.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, his eyes still closed.

She couldn’t help but take him in when he looked so sated, with nary a line on his forehead. She smiled into his chest, happy that she had relieved some of his stress, and shook her head.

“You didn’t hurt me,” she answered. “I feel... good.”

He chuckled into her hair. “I would have worried if you didn’t.”

She felt him smile into her hair as exhaustion finally claimed her, the warmth of his body and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat lulling her to sleep.

When she finally came to, it was to realize that she was alone in her chambers. A glance outside her window told her that it was still dark outside. She frowned, wondering why he had left.

Has he regretted what happened between us?

She sincerely hoped that wasn’t the case, or she would be very hurt, considering that she had fallen deeper in love with him after they had finally consummated their marriage.

Her face flushed as she remembered just how beautiful he had looked above her and how whole she had felt with him inside her.

She knew they had crossed a major bridge, and she was grateful for it, but she was well aware they were still a long way from fully trusting each other.

If he chose to be cold in the morning, she would respect the boundaries he put up and hope that with time, he would come to see that he, too, could enjoy happiness.

She sighed, turning onto her other side. She could only hope that with time, he would come to care deeply for her the way she had come to care for him.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Your Grace?” Percival heard Tobias’s voice call out to him.

He pushed back the memory he had been lost in since he had awoken and smiled at the man. “Forgive me, Tobias. I find myself sore and distracted this morning.”

Indeed, he had been since he woke up in a good mood—better than he had woken up in months—and he hadn’t had any nightmares.

He smiled again, remembering just how perfect his wife had been the night before, and couldn’t help the wave of desire that washed over him as he recalled her smooth, velvet softness. He had never felt anything like he did with her, and because he didn’t want her to be too sore, he had pushed down his desire when he had awoken in the middle of the night to leave her bed.

He knew she would be disappointed that he had left her again, but he couldn’t bring himself to frighten her with his night terrors.

“I can tell.” Tobias smiled. “Perhaps we can reschedule the meeting?”

“No, let us continue.” Percival waved his hand. “How are the repairs progressing, so far?”

“They started working on the east wing this morning, so we’ll see how quickly they

finish.”

He nodded, happy that he could finally start repairing his home. He didn't like how Louisa had almost gotten hurt the last time she had come looking for him. He wondered what she was doing now. Perhaps he would take a small break to see her in the drawing room later.

A knock sounded at the door, and he called, “Enter.”

A newly hired footman entered the study.

“Yes?”

“You have a visitor, Your Grace,” the footman announced.

Percival frowned. He wasn’t expecting anyone. Even Eli wouldn’t come without an invitation.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“I do not believe I need introductions, lad, or have you forgotten me so quickly?”

“Sir.” Percival rose from his seat, saluting the man.

“At ease, lad.” The man smiled.

His face was a welcome sight after so long. He had been a father to Percival during his training and even after he was deployed.

“What brings you to town?” Percival asked.

“I am retired now, and since I have no family and too much time on my hands, I decided to pay you a visit,” the man explained.

“You are more than welcome to visit anytime you want.” Percival smiled. “You can even stay for a long visit. I would love to have you here.”

“I intend to make myself comfortable!” the man suddenly yelled.

Percival frowned but said nothing, wondering if his mentor and friend was one of those men who would never truly recover from the horrors of war.

He frowned deeply, dreading the possibility. He didn’t want to picture the lively man shrinking into nothing but a husk of his former self, startled by everything he saw.

“Are you?—”

“Percival, I was wondering... Oh.”

“Percival, I was wondering... Oh.” Louisa stopped in her tracks, noticing three sets of eyes looking at her. “I didn’t know we had a visitor.”

She had hoped to see her husband, using his opinion on curtain designs as an excuse, but now with the fabrics in hand, she felt silly. She hid the fabrics behind her back and stepped closer to the desk, trying to hide the flush that bloomed in her cheeks when she looked at him.

She hadn’t seen him since the night before, and now that she had, she couldn’t help but feel shy. She noticed a spot of red on his ears and wondered if he too was thinking the same thing.

“Well, Percival? Won’t you introduce me to your beautiful wife?” the man asked.

His voice was firm, his posture rigid and his attire pristine. He looked like a soldier. Perhaps he was one of Percival’s superiors.

“I’m sorry, Weston.” Percival smiled, coming to stand beside his wife. “I was just taken with my wife’s beauty this morning.”

Louisa flushed, rolling her eyes at him.

Was he playing the doting husband because his commander was around?

Two could play that game.

The man laughed—a loud, raucous sound that startled her but made her smile nonetheless. He looked like a cheerful fellow given to quick laughter, and she wondered how all her husband's acquaintances seemed so different from one another. Although she could tell that he had a good sense of humor—he just wasn't ready to show it to her.

"I never thought the day would come when I would see you taken with a woman." The man smiled. "It is honestly a refreshing change from your usual companions."

Percival coughed into his hand, shooting the man a glare, but the man gave him a broad smile.

Louisa couldn't help but smile at the exchange. It was nice to see her husband play even if it wasn't with her. Percival needed more happy moments like this.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“May I introduce my Duchess, Louisa Fletcher,” he said quickly, placing a hand on the small of her back. “Louisa, this is Lieutenant Colonel Morgan Weston. I mentioned him some time before. He is visiting briefly but I have invited him to stay with us for the time being.”

“Oh, that would be lovely.” She smiled. “It is a pleasure to meet you finally, Sir.”

“Likewise,” Weston said, taking her hand and bowing over it to place a chaste kiss on the back of her hand. “I see why he is taken with you. You are as beautiful as a spring morning.”

“How long have you been his commanding officer?” she inquired.

“Since he was a boy. Over ten years,” he answered.

“I see.” She nodded, feigning scholarly interest. “It’s a shame he didn’t learn anything about complimenting women from you.”

Weston laughed again, and Percival placed a hand on his chest, feigning heartbreak.

“I like you. I really do.”

“I like you, too.”

She noticed then that Percival had gone towards the door, and she turned to see if he was leaving, but then Weston yelled suddenly, startling her. She turned back to him, noticing his eyes darting around, and wondered if he was all right. Her eyes flicked to

her husband, who was looking worriedly at him. He shook his head at her, not wanting her to say anything. She nodded and smiled back at Weston.

“Would you like some tea, Colonel Weston?” she asked softly. “I had Cook make some nice biscuits with blueberry marmalade, which I think you will enjoy.”

“As much as that sounds delightful, dear, I think I should retire now,” Weston said, shaking his head. “I had a long journey, and these old bones need rest.”

“You are hardly old.” Percival smiled at him.

“I am at least twice your age, lad.” Weston laughed. “I will see you all after I have a good nap.”

“Do you need me to show you to your chambers?” Percival asked, looking concerned.

Weston waved him off. “No, no. Enjoy tea with your lovely wife. I shall ask that pretty housekeeper I spotted earlier to show me around.”

Percival shook his head as a small smile crossed his face.

It was a welcome sight, seeing his concern for the man, and Louisa wondered about their relationship.

When the door closed behind Weston, Percival settled into his seat with a sigh, but she didn't want to ask immediately. So, she asked Tobias to send for tea, needing privacy. She said nothing until Anne set down the tea tray on the desk and left.

“Should I pour the tea, Your Grace?” the maid asked.

“I can do it,” Louisa told her.

Anne curtsied and left.

Louisa rose to pour the tea, before plating a biscuit and some of the marmalade.

“Do you want sugar?” she asked.

Percival nodded.

“Are you worried?” she asked after handing him a cup.

He nodded again. “He doesn’t seem very well,” he sighed. “I fear he’s starting to go senile. War does that to a man.”

Louisa laughed, trying to lighten the mood. “He didn’t seem senile. He seemed perceptive, and his memory was rather intact,” she noted. “What did he mean by companions, dear husband?”

Percival smiled but was quick to change the subject. “Do not tell me you didn’t notice his shouting.”

“He is a retired Lieutenant Colonel, Percival. He just has to adjust to being in polite society.”

“But—”

“Have you forgotten how you behaved at the last ball?” she reminded him. “You weren’t very nice. I seem to recall you being only a single step away from shouting.”

“Very well,” he relented. “You are probably right.”

She nodded and smiled. “So, will you tell me about the companions he mentioned?”

“No.” He smiled, shaking his head. “That is not a conversation for an innocent like you.”

“I’m no longer an innocent, dear husband.” She grinned. “You made sure of it last night.”

The air was suddenly thick with unspoken words, and he smiled, coming around the desk to sit beside her.

“I do hope you did not take offense to my leaving the way I did. I?—”

She stopped him with a finger to his lips, ignoring the way heat traveled up her arm and her pulse quickened so that she could get her point across.

“There is no need to apologize,” she told him. “I understand it is a new territory for you, and I do not want to rush you if you aren’t comfortable with it just yet.”

He nipped her finger, and she yelped, pulling her hand away from his mouth.

“You are a very tempting woman,” he murmured. “I am having a hard time keeping my hands off you.”

“Then don’t,” she urged, leaning into him.

She could feel her nipples straining against the tight bodice of her dress, and the friction was driving her so mad with desire that she wanted to undress right there and then. If he did not touch her now, she was sure she would combust. Sheachedto be filled by him again.

“Aren’t you... Didn’t I hurt you last night?” he asked, looking like he would pull away even though his hands cupped her face.

“You didn’t,” she reassured him. “I feel wonderful, and I feel like I might die if you don’t touch me now.”

He groaned and kissed her, and she buried her hands in his hair, kissing him back just as fiercely. She moaned at the taste of him and the feel of his hands gripping her through her tight dress.

She moved impatiently to unlace her constricting stays, and he laughed into her mouth, stilling her.

“Let me help you with that, dear wife.”

He pulled her up to her feet and turned her around, quickly undoing the fastenings of her stays. Her dress dropped to the floor, and she barely had a moment to savor the relief of having the tight fabric off her before he kissed her again, walking her backward till the back of her knees touched the edge of his desk. He lifted her onto it and stepped between her legs.

He removed the pins from her hair and then massaged her scalp. She moaned at the feel of his hands on her, leaning her cheek into the hand that caressed her face.

“You have no idea how many times I have pictured taking you on this desk,” he groaned, still fisting her hair.

“Tell me.”

He leaned down to kiss her, nipping a line from her chin to her ear.

“The very first day you came into my study, looking for your letter,” he whispered in her ear, “I wanted to flip up your pretty skirt and see if you would taste as sweet as you looked.”

She gasped as he palmed one of her breasts.

“The second time was when you barged in here, demanding that we share a meal.” He smiled against her neck. “I wanted to sweep those damned letters off my desk and show you just what your demanding tone did to me.”

“And then?” she asked, surprised she was able to ask questions, considering he had lowered his lips to her breasts.

“Today, when you came in here, holding those curtains.” He smiled against her nipple. “I couldn’t wait to have you all to myself.”

She smiled as he took her nipple in his mouth, and her back arched as he feasted on her. She didn’t think she could stand his teasing for long. Her hands went to undo his breeches, and he laughed.

“Why so impatient, wife?”

“I need you,” she said, cupping him through his breeches.

He gasped, his member twitching in her hand. He felt so hot and hard yet smooth, and her tongue itched to taste him as he tasted her.

“Can I taste you?”

His member twitched again in her hand, and he groaned, pulling away from her.

“You are certainly full of surprises, but no. Not today,” he answered, kissing her.
“Today, I just want you.”

“You have me.”

He smiled as he lined himself with her entrance, sliding in one thrust that stole her breath. He groaned, using his hands to hold her hips in place as he moved in and out of her in quick, deep thrusts that made her moan loudly.

It was too much, yet she knew it was what her body had craved. Her husband was not a gentle lover, but she didn't mind the way his fingers dug into her flesh. Even if he left bruises, she would smile when she saw them, for they would be a reminder of what they had done.

He pulled out suddenly, flipping her over and bending her over the desk. She turned to look back at him, wondering at the change.

“You are much too beautiful, Louisa,” he whispered, sliding into her slowly and giving her time to adjust to the feeling of fullness in this new position. “So tight and so damn perfect.”

She whimpered as he pounded into her, the edge of the desk digging into her thighs, but she didn’t stop him. Pleasure ripped her in two, and she screamed in ecstasy as his thrusts became erratic. He wasn’t far behind her, crying out his release, and she gasped as she nearly fell when he pulled out of her.

“I don’t think I can walk,” she complained.

He laughed, and she swatted his arm.

Eventually, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her to the couch. He lay down beside her and grabbed the thick blanket draped over the back of the couch, covering them both with it.

“I would have been disappointed if you could.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Percival did not do well with blackmail, and the missive he found on his desk when he returned from his morning ride definitely looked like blackmail.

In his years in the army, he had learned that assignments following blackmail were the easiest way to make oneself an easy target while leaving one’s back vulnerable to a knife or a dagger.

If the letter was about any other matter, he would have tossed it on the pile on his desk that would be used to feed the fire later. He would not have considered taking the risk. But the letter, hastily written in a barely legible masculine hand, told him to

meet its author in some backwater alley in the slums of London. Alone. If he wished to learn what might have caused his brother's sudden death.

Percival looked up in the direction of the room where the elderly colonel slept. Weston had taken him under his wing as a new recruit, protected him, and trained him. He had taught him everything he knew, and it was thanks to his training and his innate survival skills that he was able to survive the war.

He would bet a pretty penny that his former superior would never advise nor allow him to venture out by himself if he was under his command—at least not without a companion.

Weston would at least advise him to allow a guard to accompany him to protect his back while he focused on retrieving the information he sought.

Percival was aware that whatever information the writer of the letter seemed to possess would in no way bring his larger-than-life brother back to life, but it might help lay to rest some of the demons that haunted his sleeping and waking hours.

At the very least, he might bring his brother's killer to justice, and in that way heal the part of his heart that had boiled with rage in the past few months.

He was ready to exact revenge on the criminal who had taken his brother's life, forcing him into a role that he still felt ill-prepared for.

Granted, the sequence of events that had led him to become the Duke of Colborne had also led him to Louisa, who was fast becoming as essential to him as life itself.

Apart from her, he could not think of any other benefits that becoming a duke had granted him. He needed to make sure that justice was served to at least put to rest the guilt he felt for taking his brother's place—for taking over the manor that was

supposed to be his while stepping into shoes that were not his, to begin with.

Besides, whoever had killed his brother had ill intentions towards him as well. The fact that the bounder had gone to such lengths to spread rumours of his supposed death showed that someone wanted the Dukes of Colborne extinct. But for the life of him, he could not figure out why.

That was why he had to find answers to the questions churning in his head, or else they would drive him insane very soon.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

No matter how he thought about it, going alone was the better option. He would rely on his stealth while being vigilant. Having an escort would just cause more problems, as he could not be sure if they would exercise the level of vigilance that his years in His Majesty's army had hammered into his consciousness. The added burden of keeping another person safe would only leave him vulnerable to any attack.

With his mind made up, he left his study, starting up the stairs to his chambers to change out of his sweat-drenched riding habit. Just as he stepped onto the landing, he was greeted by chaos as many of his servants hurried back and forth, carrying away some rotten pieces of furniture and cleaning up the mess left behind.

He could hear his wife's low voice instructing his butler who, in turn, relayed her instructions to the workers. It appeared that she was efficiently supervising the repairs at the manor.

In recent days, she had made a lot of changes in the manor, slowly returning it to the home he had grown up in. So far, she had restored many of the rooms in the south wing of the house, where their bedchamber was located, replacing the windows so that the cold air no longer seeped through cracks.

The old hinges of the doors were replaced along with the doorposts, and the doors now boasted a healthy sheen, brought about by several coats of paint.

With each change, Percy swore that he felt the fog that had pervaded his head in the last year or so lift slightly. When he had informed his lovely wife of this new development, she had laughed and denied that her renovations could perform such a miracle.

He was happy, and beyond the repairs, Louisa was the light that lit up his house and the walls of his life. The sound of her disembodied voice threatened to unravel him, but he had errands to run. If he gave in to the need to see her, he would distract both her and himself, leading to them being unproductive. Perhaps when he came back, he could check on the ongoing repairs.

She had said something about changing the bathtub and getting one that drew water directly from the lake on the estate to reduce the servants' load.

It was no wonder that his staff loved her and followed her instructions to the tee so that the house ran like a well-oiled machine, especially as she hired more servants. She was thoughtful and cared about their well-being rather than being self-absorbed as many ladies of the ton were.

On his part, he was curious about how the new bathtub would be built. He bet that it would require a lot of engineering to manage such a feat, and he was definitely looking forward to enjoying many erotic baths with his wife. The idea of having a bath whenever one wanted without waiting for buckets to be hauled up was a novelty.

The activity in the manor that morning suited his purposes, since he aimed to leave as quietly as possible without alerting her to the danger his quest involved.

He padded to his chambers and then cleaned up with the water in the basin at the edge of his bedroom. Then, he changed into a simple tunic, not bothering with his hair. He stepped out of his manor, ignoring the puzzled look on the stable hand's face as he took in his attire and the fact that he had chosen to use a hackney instead of his favored stallion.

The lad would soon learn to live with a lot of absurdities if he was to work long at the estate. Besides, Percival had dressed that way with the hope that his tunic and his disheveled hair might help disguise the fact that he was a nobleman. Now that he

thought about it, perhaps he should not have bothered with the disguise.

Percival acknowledged that at a physical level, he looked nothing like the average commoner. Not with the toned muscles that spanned most of his body and the darker hue of his skin wrought by the countless hours spent under the punishing sun. That, along with the multiple scars that marred his torso and face, made him look dangerous and nothing like the typical gentlemen, who knew little about physically demanding work and the dangers of battle.

As the hackney moved further away from his estate into the more populated town square, he hoped that his outward appearance was enough to deter any potential assailants and afford him protection of some sort.

As the hackney moved deeper into the slums of London, he was hit by the pungent smell of human excrement and unwashed bodies. The streets were littered with dirt and a lot of hungry children. The soulless, helpless looks on their faces reminded him of a time he would like to forget. The time when his regiment had run out of food and the enemy had ambushed the routes, making it difficult to receive fresh supplies. He had watched, ravaged by hunger, as his comrades had fallen one after the other, felled by exhaustion and mind-boggling hunger.

It was in those moments that he had understood and hated the reality of war. The helplessness to help oneself and his friends. Fighting against an unseen enemy while weapons lay out of reach. It was terrible and possibly the most inhumane way to die.

Presently, he avoided looking at their faces, shutting the door on the dark memories that haunted him. It was enough that they haunted his sleeping hours, he would do his best not to allow them to haunt his waking hours as well.

Besides, he needed to keep his wits about him because hunger, while it can be debilitating, can also give people uncommon courage and push them to do anything

to have their next meal.

Even the most innocent of children could become beasts if it gave them a better chance at survival. He was not willing to become an unwitting victim to some street urchin who wanted to obtain a handkerchief or some flimsy item from him.

So many gentlemen had met their deaths on these streets simply because one street urchin had wanted things as flimsy as a handkerchief and was willing to do anything, even take a life, to buy themselves the food that would warm their belly and stave off death at least for the day.

He understood the helplessness that came with the uncertainty they faced every day, not knowing where the next meal might come from. The helplessness that came with such a situation bred anger, resentment, and ruthlessness.

The streets were a jungle where the ones who lived in it could only kill or be killed, and it was unfair that innocent children lost their innocence very early on. But life itself was not fair, and the reason why some people had lives easier than others was one of life's unanswered questions.

Why some people had to face death a thousand times, losing a part of their soul in the process, while others led a life untouched by misery? He had learned over time not to allow comparisons to take what remained of his sanity. His only hope now was to protect his life the best way he knew how for the sake of the many people who depended on him.

He might not have cared about his life before, but now he had a wife and potentially children who would depend on his survival and his protection. He would do everything within his power to make sure that his beloved Louisa was protected and well cared for, especially now that there was a chance she was carrying his child.

Going merely by how frequently he took her, it was safe to assume that she might be carrying their child, and no power on earth could prevent him from doing his best to stay alive and be the best father possible to their babe, whether it was a boy or a girl.

Standing at the mouth of the alley, his back to the wall, he kept his eyes peeled for his quarry, but after an hour passed and another one, he decided he had either been pranked or his quarry had balked and decided to cancel their appointment.

Whatever the reason, Percy was not particularly happy that he had wasted most of his morning hours waiting aimlessly while risking his back in such an unsavory neighborhood.

Leaving the alley, he hailed another hackney that took him home. He just hoped that the next time he came for such an assignation, his informant, whoever he was, would have the decency to keep his word.

In no time, the hackney came to a halt, and he paid the driver before making his way to the manor. He was greeted at the entrance by Tobias.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

The elderly butler greeted him, his eyes widening as he took in his clothing, but whatever he going to say, he kept to himself, allowing him to make his way inside.

The first thing Percival noticed when he stepped into the manor was that it was quiet—a stark contrast to how busy it was when he left that morning. It seemed that the artisans who had been working earlier must have finished their duties for the day.

As he made for the stairs, he almost ran into a maid carrying a bowl of water.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” the girl stuttered, her voice high-pitched with terror.

A close look at her face and he recognized her as Louisa’s shy, freckled-faced lady’s maid.

“It is quite all right, Anne. Is my wife in her chambers?” he asked gently so as not to spook her.

“No,” Anne replied in a slightly wary tone. He guessed he had not been able to reassure her. “She is not in her chambers, Your Grace. She said something about going to the library to retrieve a book after the artisans left. I think she might be there.”

“Thank you,” he replied, a smile tugging at his lips.

Of course, his bibliophile of a wife would most likely be found curled up on a sofa, with her nose buried in a book, losing herself in some story woven by some author.

Forcing himself to walk slowly so as not to give away his excitement, he ascended the stairs, finding his way to the library. But a brief look into the room told him that his wife was not there.

He thought that perhaps she had borrowed the book from his study, but she was not there either, and a look into the drawing room and her bedchamber told him much the same.

He then made for the music room. So many papers were scattered across the floor that it looked untidy. They were possibly remnants of her brainstorming session the previous night. His wife had an uncanny habit of waking up in the middle of the night to compose music, after all. She claimed that it was in those ungodly hours that she got most inspired.

He had let her be simply because he was incredibly proud of her achievements and wanted to support her in all her musical endeavors.

His wife was talented, that much was true, but it was unfair that a person like her had not been allowed to play outside the confines of their townhouse for fear of being sneered at by the vindictive members of the ton. He had a plan to launch her music into London Society soon. So, for now, he resolved to allow her to practice.

He picked up the papers, his eyes eagerly scanning them for any clues to her whereabouts, but they weren't helpful... unless she started writing codes through musical notes—but that was quite impossible.

Going back to her room in the hope that she might have returned, he found it still empty. Papers, unfinished letters, more unfinished manuscripts, and the like were strewn all over the floor, but all of them lacked what he truly wanted: information about her whereabouts.

He knew the total disarray of her room and other rooms in the manor should offend his sense of order, but instead, he felt a pang of fear at the thought that she might never return to make a mess again.

He decided to ask Tobias and the servants and see if they had a clue as to the whereabouts of his wife.

“No, Your Grace,” Tobias replied, shame turning his face a ruddy colour. “We have not seen her in the past hour. We just assumed that she was still in the library.”

“You mean to tell me that no one bothered to check in on her throughout the last two hours?” Percival asked, his eyes blazing in anger at the small group of servants who gathered at the bottom of the stairs, their heads bowed in shame. “Some intruder had gained access to my home and kidnapped my wife without anybody’s knowledge?”

He turned to his butler. “Tobias, you do not mean to tell me that my wife was kidnapped and carried away through those doors,” he said, pointing in the direction of the front doors. “Without your notice.”

“I have been here since noon when the workers left. Lieutenant Colonel Weston left just shortly after—something about meeting up with an acquaintance in town. I instructed one of the new footmen to flag down a hackney. I can state confidently that no one was carried out the front doors.”

“If they had not gone through there, then how did they leave?” Percy asked, furrowing his brow in confusion.

The answer came to him like a hurtling train, knocking the air out of his lungs. His eyes searched those of the servants before him. When they landed on Tobias, the alarmed look on his face confirmed his suspicions.

He turned on his heel and bolted up the stairs, not bothering to slow down until he stepped into the library. Moving to the shelf in the room, he drew back a copy of the Shakespearean play, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, until he heard a click and the sound of a pulley system engaging. The shelf slid open until he was staring into inky darkness.

Sure enough, as he suspected, there were large footsteps that led towards the end of the passageway, which opened onto the bank of the lake at the edge of his estate.

The existence of this passageway was a well-kept secret, known only to members of the Colborne family and their trusted servants. The fact that his wife was kidnapped and taken away via that secret passageway was evidence enough that it was done by family.

But who could it possibly be?

Panic seized him. It constricted his chest, turning his insides to ice until it became difficult to breathe. His vision blurred, and a fine tension spread in his muscles as he came to the conclusion that his wife was, in fact, missing.

He almost exploded at that thought.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

It was evident that someone had taken his wife, but who was it? His time in the army meant that he had gained a lot of enemies from both sides of the battlefield, but the chances that they would follow him to his home and take his wife were slim to none, especially since they had to have worked with a trusted member of his staff to achieve it.

The other scenario was that she was kidnapped for ransom. But even that was unlikely, since it was common knowledge that his dukedom was impoverished because of his brother's excesses.

But then this might also be connected to his brother's killer. Perhaps the boulder had gotten bolder and decided to take his wife after killing his brother.

At that thought, a red haze descended across his vision until he was vibrating with rage. Whatever his brother's killer thought he could do, he would never let him kill his wife. Not now, not when she had stolen his heart and never intended to give it back.

Hurriedly, he left the manor, ignoring the pitying looks that many of his servants gave him. He asked for his horse to be brought around, swiftly mounted it, and then tore off in a cloud of dust towards the only other person who lived close by and knew his wife intimately—her twin sister, who also happened to be the Duchess of Fangsdale.

The kidnapper, whoever he was, was quite strategic. He had been watching them for some time, Percival was sure. He must have bided his time, waiting for the moment when both he and Weston were away. When the manor was defenseless and he had ample time to strike.

A part of Percival wanted to resent the servants for being unaware while their mistress was carted away. But on second thought, he guessed that they must have been busy with their duties, assured that their mistress was enjoying some quiet time in the library. There was no way they could have suspected that their mistress was abducted.

Finally, he arrived at Fangsdale Manor in a cloud of dust. As the horse came to an abrupt halt, he hurriedly dismounted just as the great oak front doors flew open and an unscarred version of his wife emerged.

Before Louisa's accident, a lot of people had sworn that they were unable to distinguish between she and her sister, Isabella. But Percival was sure that even without the scar, he would have recognized his wife. They might have the same face, but they were so different in spirit and mannerisms that he could tell the difference even from afar.

His wife moved with such grace that she looked like she floated across the floor. While she favoured brighter fabrics, her older sister preferred muted colours. He liked to believe that their preferences in colour reflected their characters. His Louisa was bright, a fiery hellion that broke down his walls, while her sister was more reserved.

Apart from their difference in lifestyle, there was the effect she had on him. Whenever she was close, his skin would come alive, longing to meld with hers. Her mere presence stirred his desire such that he spent every time in her presence in a persistent state of arousal. The fact that Isabella's presence elicited nothing within him was enough evidence that she wasn't his dear wife.

"Duke," she greeted in a concerned tone as she approached him with brisk strides, the train of her dress held firmly in her hand. "I hope all is well with you. I saw you approaching so fast as if the devil himself was chasing you."

It might as well be, and the devil just might catch up with him and maim him if he lost Louisa.

As if she heard his thoughts, Isabella opened her mouth to say something. Perhaps to ask about her sister.

“Is Louisa here?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

The perplexed look on her face was answer enough. Hope sputtered out in his soul like a candle.

“She is not here. Why would you think she would be here?” she asked, something similar to fear blooming in the brown eyes that looked familiar but different from his wife’s.

Because she is not with me either.

Ice spread to his veins, a strange numbness taking over.

“How is Louisa? She is well, I hope?”

“I came to make sure that she is. Is the Duke here?” he asked, trying as much as possible to keep his voice gentle so as not to send her into a fit of panic.

“He is upstairs. But...”

He did not wait for her to finish. He ran into the manor, desperate, taking the stairs two at a time so that in no time he was standing in front of the Duke of Fangsdale’s study. He knew it was the study because the door was slightly ajar and he could see the Duke’s dark head bent over some books.

Pushing the door open wider, he stepped inside.

Fangsdale's head jerked up, surprise flickering across his face.

"Colborne," he greeted, rising to his full height.

The look on Percy's face must have alerted him to the nature of the situation because his pleasant expression turned into one of wary determination.

"Someone didn't die, I hope?" he asked, stepping out from behind his desk to approach Percival.

"Not yet, but someone will when I get my hands on the fool who kidnapped my wife," Percival gritted out, anger radiating from him in waves.

"Lou is missing?" Isabella cried out behind him, causing him and Fangsdale to turn to her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

In his haste to meet the Duke, he had not realized that she followed him upstairs.

He rubbed a frustrated hand down his face while Fangsdale comforted his wife. Distantly, he could hear the man's soothing words drawing his wife out of the panic that had seized her at the thought of her sister missing and in danger.

Percival didn't blame her. The same fear had gripped him when he first realized that his sweet, soft, beautiful Louisa was stuck in the hands of some criminal, possibly injured, in danger—or even worse, maimed.

His mind wandered in many directions as he wondered who on earth could possibly hate him or his wife enough to punish them this way, because while Louisa was the only one who was abducted, he might as well be, with the way he was going out of his mind with worry.

Now, he understood how disastrous love could be. Trying to live with your heart outside your body, where it was vulnerable to injury.

Louisa had claimed whatever remained of his battered heart, fixed it, and made it hers, and now she was in danger. He didn't want to consider the possibility of living without her.

He didn't think he would be sane enough to live a good life. He might be better off dead.

Even now, he regretted pushing her away in the early days of their marriage, when she had sought his attention. In hindsight, he was so stupid for keeping her at arm's

length, even while he longed for her warmth. If he had entered his marriage with an open mind, they might have fallen in love earlier, and he would have enjoyed being in her arms for longer.

“Colborne,” Fangsdale called from behind him, causing him to turn around.

The Duke was standing with his arm wrapped around his wife’s shoulders, their faces a picture of determination and rage.

Good, maybe with that state of mind, they could manage to think of a way to find Louisa. Their determination grounded him, halting his spiraling thoughts.

Following them back to the desk, he took a seat, while Duncan led his wife to the seat opposite him, content to remain standing.

Duncan folded his muscular arms across his chest, his dark eyes fixed on Percival as if he could extract information about his sister-in-law’s whereabouts simply with the force of his stare.

It was public knowledge that the Duke and Duchess of Fangsdale held Louisa in high regard. It was speculated that their influence had contributed to the dwindling number of people who disparaged her.

No one in their right mind would try to anger the Duke of Fangsdale. Apart from the power of his title, the man was built like a prize fighter, and Percival could attest to the fact that he fought like one as well.

His wife Isabella was the only chink in his armor, and he guarded her with a ferocity that a lion protecting its pride might envy. The fact that Louisa had paid the price for the vindictiveness of his ex-fiancée with the unblemished quality of her face meant that the man protected her ferociously as well, in a way that was just shy of

overprotectiveness.

“When did you last see Lou, Duke?” Isabella asked in a quiet voice, her eyes trained on Percival’s face.

“This morning, before I went on an errand,” he replied, keeping his voice bland.

“Were there any clues from your servants?” Fangsdale interjected, a frown on his face.

“Not enough. I don’t have many servants anyway. They were all busy with their duties. They did not realize she was gone until it was too late,” Percival explained, feeling the rage boiling over in his veins. He was so close to combustion.

Standing up, he paced the length of the room, hoping to work off the restless energy. Turning suddenly mid-stride, he fixed his eyes on Isabella’s face, ignoring her surprise at the sudden movement.

“Do you think the Viscount did it?” he asked, his hands shaking with anger.

“What Viscount?” Isabella asked, perplexed. But then her eyes widened as realization dawned on her. “You mean Owen Dowding, the Viscount Pemberton?”

“I believe that is his Christian name.”

“Yes, it is. I do not think Lord Pemberton is the culprit. While he was a horrible match for my sister, he is a kind man at heart, even if he is a little bit snobbish. So I have difficulty imagining him doing anything of this sort. Besides, he had no great love for my sister. He had only wanted her to replace his dead wife. He holds no great passion for her, so he is very unlikely to pursue her out of some misguided devotion born of infatuation,” Isabella replied.

That answer did not reassure Percy in the least. It just crossed one more suspect off his list, leaving him even more clueless than he had been an hour ago about the identity of his wife's kidnapper.

Even if Lord Pemberton was the culprit, Percival still had not solved the puzzle of which member of his household had aided the kidnapper. No matter the way he thought about it, it was unlikely that his butler, housekeeper, and the cook, who had virtually raised him, would betray him in such a fashion. But if they did not, then who did?

Running a shaking hand through his hair, he prayed to God, whoever that all-seeing being was, to help him. He could feel the familiar weight of helplessness trying to consume him. This time, he prayed that it did not win. He would not allow it to win.

He was going to save his wife. He must.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

Louisa woke up to darkness. For a moment, she wondered if she had drifted off and was just now waking up when it was dark. But the room was too drafty to be her room, and her position was quite an awkward way to fall asleep.

Her head felt a little heavy and woozy, as if she had indulged in spirits, but she wasn't one to drink, so that was unlikely. Her neck felt sore like it had been hanging at an odd angle. Perhaps it was because of the way she had slept. Even now, she still felt sleepy, not totally in touch with reality, like she was watching her surroundings in a strange, muted, dream-like sequence.

Trying to lift her hand to rub her face in an attempt to clear her vision, she felt a tug on her wrists, restricting her movements. She tried to stretch her legs only to feel a burning sensation in her ankles, just like in her wrists, as the rope bit into her skin.

That only meant that her feet and hands were tied to a chair as if she were a criminal.

All this brought her to the conclusion that she was kidnapped.

Heart hammering, she searched the room frantically. At first, she could make nothing out in the inky darkness, but as her eyes slowly adjusted, she realized several things.

First, the room she was in was definitely not her chambers back in Colborne House. This room was wide and had a dusty smell reminiscent of a room that had been abandoned for so long.

Her guess was that she was in a warehouse.

The light slipping beneath the edge of the door told her that it was daylight, and with how quiet her surroundings were, she guessed that she was being held hostage somewhere in the woods.

Slowly, her memories returned to her in fragments. The last thing she remembered, she had headed into the library to retrieve a book she had been reading for some time. She remembered sitting down to read her most recent book when she was distracted by the sound of shuffling feet.

She had risen to investigate the source of the sound. She traced it to the shelves, and when she rounded the corner of the shelves, she was shocked to see a tall man standing there. Before she could open her mouth to shout, a strong hand grabbed her, trapping her between his hard body and the wall, while he pressed a slightly damp cloth over her nose and her mouth so she had to struggle between trying to breathe and screaming for help.

She remembered feeling suffocated while whatever the man had soaked the cloth with invaded her nostrils, weakening her limbs until all she knew was darkness and she woke up in this strange, dark room.

She wondered if Percival was looking for her at this moment. How worried he might be when he discovered that she was nowhere to be found. She had not seen any sign of him early in the morning, and she had concluded that he had gone on a morning ride. The absence of his horse when she visited the stables proved her right.

If her guess was correct, it would take a while for him and the servants to discover that she was missing, especially since she had informed Anne of her plan to devour her new book while enjoying a quiet moment in the library.

The subtle implication that she didn't want to be disturbed was enough to make the servants reluctant to check on her. She wondered even now if they already knew that

she was missing. Even if they did, it might have been late, hours after she had been carted away by her kidnapper.

A sound outside the door jolted her out of her thoughts, forcing her to look up. The sound came again, sounding distinctly like footsteps. Instantly, her hopes soared. The presence of another human being was a good development if she made adequate use of it.

“Help!” she screamed. “Please, help me!”

Her throat protested the strain, especially since it felt like she had swallowed sand. It felt dry and scratchy. She needed water, but that need fell second to her need for freedom.

Just as she drew breath to scream for help again, she heard the bolt on the door groan as it was pulled back.

The door opened, and someone stepped in, the sunlight illuminating their frame while hiding their features.

“Well, Your Grace,” the familiar voice drawled, smug amusement carrying to her on the breeze. “Here we meet again.”

“Where do you think you are going?” Duncan asked Percival in surprise when the other man stopped mid-pace and bolted out of the study, his face the picture of determination.

“To find my wife,” Percy replied grimly, not breaking his stride.

“Do you know where she is?” Duncan asked, hurrying after him as he rounded the corner and flew down the stairs.

“No, I do not, but I certainly will not get a clue while attempting to wear a hole in your carpet. I will search the entirety of London if need be. I must find her somehow. The longer I stand here, debating options with you, the longer she is in danger. I appreciate your help, Fangsdale, but I must now search for my wife by myself.”

As they approached the front door, and just before he pushed it open, Percival turned back to Duncan, his eyes burning with feverish intensity. “I have to find my wife. I would welcome your help. Otherwise, I have no qualms about going alone.”

Without bothering to wait for a response, he pushed the door open and hurried down the stairs. But he skidded to a halt when a coach rolled to a stop in front of the house and a cloaked figure darted out, hurrying towards the stairs.

Upon closer inspection, he recognized the person as his wife’s youngest sister, the fiery Diana. She had pulled off the hood of her cloak mid-run, allowing her dark tresses to flutter in the wind.

“Diana,” Duncan said when she stopped before them. “What are you doing here?”

“Lou... Lou has been kidnapped,” Diana said between pants as she tried to catch her breath following her short sprint up the front steps.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“How do you know that?” Percival asked, surprised. “I came here looking for her. How do you know that she had been taken?”

“I saw it myself,” Diana said, her voice strangely steady now as she straightened to her full height. “I was close to your manor when it happened. I had hoped to visit her to inform her of my engagement to Owen,” she added in a rush.

“Owen? Wasn’t he Louisa’s previous suitor?” Duncan asked, perplexed. “Do not tell me he has decided to jump from sister to sister. It has not been that long since his courtship with Louisa was canceled.”

“It is nothing like that, I assure you. We are in love with each other. This last month since Lou left afforded us a lot of time to meet whenever I went for walks. We talked, and I realized that he was a fine gentleman who was probably vilified because he was taken at face value,” Diana said defensively.

That had just eliminated one of the suspects. If Lord Pemberton was busy trying to woo Diana, then he was less likely to kidnap his ex-fiancée, especially when she was the sister of his new flame.

The match between the fiery Diana and the rather tepid Viscount was quite unlikely, in Percival’s opinion, since they were direct opposites. But then opposites have been known to attract—probably for novelty and curiosity’s sake.

Later, they might explore the motivation behind this match, but right now, they had more important matters at hand.

“Anyway, that’s not the main issue,” Diana continued, echoing his thoughts. “I went to Lou to tell her the news when I saw a plain hackney behind your manor and two burly men dragging her out of the house and throwing her into the vehicle. She was so still,” she said, her voice cracking. “I guess they must have drugged her to keep her docile. After forcing her into the hackney, they got in and drove off swiftly.”

“Did you see their faces?” Percival asked, eager hope in his voice.

“No,” Diana replied with a shake of her head, pity flickering in her eyes when Percy deflated in disappointment. “They were masked, and they were too far away for me to make out their features. Thankfully, they did not see me. I was able to follow them discretely, thanks to Felix, the family driver—he was excellent. We followed them into the woods where they are holding her.”

She stopped to catch her breath, exhaling through her mouth.

“Where?” Percival asked, his voice hard.

He was already walking towards his horse, forcing Diana to run back down the stairs and follow him.

“There is an abandoned cottage in the woods, south of your estate. I guessed it was probably used by game hunters during hunting season. They are holding her there.”

“Take me there,” Percival said, already mounting his horse.

Whoever it was that had kidnapped Louisa, he planned to torture him in a thousand unimaginable ways. He was going to kill him, and he would do it as slowly and as painfully as he could, just as soon as he found his wife and confirmed her safety.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Louisa had often been at the receiving end of people's malice. The moment she got injured and became scarred as a consequence, she had a first-hand experience of just how malicious people could be.

Members of the ton who had hated her and thought her a snub had relished the opportunity to sneer at her under the guise of sympathizing with her, so much so that she was almost consumed by the thought that she might have become worthless, since her only asset—which, in their opinion, was her beauty—had been taken away from her, reducing her chances of making a good match.

She thanked the good Lord that she had her family's support in those moments. Her mother had wrapped her in her arms while she wept, on those nights when their barbs had hit vulnerable places in her heart. Her family had helped her heal and come back stronger, allowing her to ignore people while consoling herself with the thought that they just needed her as a scapegoat to take out the pain and hatred that was eating them from the inside out.

That much was true because she had come to realize that most members of the ton carried terrible wounds that were invisible to the eye. They hid them behind heavily powdered faces and fans, and most of them had taken up malicious gossip as some kind of entertainment to fill the gaping holes in their souls. Of course, it did not justify their cruelty, but it helped her not to take their barbs to heart.

The thought that she also had her family to welcome her after such exhausting encounters helped her stand strong in the face of their malice.

When she agreed to marry Percival, she understood that the marriage would be one of convenience, but she had at least hoped deep in her heart to gain a new family.

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that one day, she would be betrayed by a relation. She had heard tales of some ladies of the ton being kidnapped by bounders

in retaliation for crimes—real or imaginary—that were committed against them by their victims’ spouses. But then even those crimes were hardly committed by close relatives and friends, so her confusion and denial were valid when she realized that her captor’s voice was familiar.

Too familiar for comfort.

No, it cannot be.

“I am afraid it is true, Your Grace,” the familiar voice replied as if reading her thoughts, his tone brimming with smug amusement. “Are you surprised?” he asked, walking to the window and slowly raising the shutter until sunlight spilled into the room, illuminating his features and confirming her suspicions.

His tall frame leaned carelessly against the wall beside the window, the sunlight glinting off his pale skin so he looked even paler. Those familiar grey eyes smiled back at her, glinting with dark amusement. But they were also shadowed and swollen, as if he had gone several nights without sleep, and she swore she could smell the alcohol on his breath even from where she was.

The Baron of Gillingham, why?

“But then I guess you should not be, especially considering what you have done.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“Why?” Louisa choked out. “Why would you do this to me? What have I done to you?”

“You married my brother,” he said with eerie calm, coming to stand in front of her. He crouched down so that she was staring directly into his face. “You might have been spared from all this drama if only you stayed away from my brother,” he sighed, spreading his hands to encompass the room.

“But then it is always the innocent-looking ones. They always have a thing for playing with fire. The only problem is that no one informs them that they could get burned, or they are just stubborn, refusing to yield to good sense.”

Brother?

Percival and the Baron were brothers?

She had noticed the uncanny resemblance between the two men but had shoved the thought aside considering it wasn't something worth mentioning.

“I assue from your surprise that your dearhusbanddidn't even think to tell you.” He spat.

“Lord Gillingham,” she said, shifting in her seat and licking her dry lips to moisten it. “If we are family, I don't see why you would do this...”

“Family!” he scoffed, before bursting into maniacal laughter, the sound so disturbing that it caused her to squirm uncomfortably in her seat.

The longer she talked to him, the more evident it became that he was unhinged, and for some reason, he seemed to love those tiresome monologues that villains sprouted in the pages of some books she read.

Perhaps if she fed into his love for theatrics, she could get him to talk and buy herself some time while she came up with an idea to free herself, or at the very least keep him distracted until help came. Because somewhere in her heart, she knew that Percival was looking for her. Even now, she imagined he must be scouring the entire countryside in search of her.

She prayed that he would find her. She definitely did not want to die, not when she was only now enjoying her husband's attention. There was also a chance that there was a little one in her belly, especially with how often Percival ravished her the previous days, she thought with a blush.

She peered up at her captor from beneath her lashes to see if he had noticed the flush on her cheeks, and she was relieved to note that he was still laughing.

Just as it had started, the maniacal laugh stopped, pulling her focus to the man before her.

"You really think we are family?" he asked, a mad glint in his eyes. "Do you treat your family the way Percy has treated me? Like some dirty secret to keep?"

"I do not think Percy would have treated you so poorly. If you had ever shown interest in perhaps visiting or..."

"You think they would have welcomed me with open arms?" he snorted, a bitter twist to his lips. "The spotless sons of the Colborne dynasty were more comfortable meeting me in the obscure corners of the city, treating me like a dirty secret to be hidden. They are the ones who were supposed to be hidden. I am the eldest. I would

have inherited the dukedom if my whore of a mother had played her cards right. My father had the audacity not to claim me, to leave me to the mercy of the wretched, vindictive man who raised me as his son. I will never forget the pain I suffered at his hand.”

“Sometimes I think he might have discovered my mother’s perfidy and decided to take out his anger and frustration on the poor, defenseless product of such a filthy union. I tried to escape time and time again!”

He stomped his foot suddenly, causing Louisa to jump in her seat.

“Yet somehow, he always found me. This continued until one day, I brought it to an end,” he continued, a sinister, cold smile playing on his lips. “It was just a matter of getting a tincture from the local apothecary and putting a little in his brandy, and soon he was dead—made it look like he died of a heart attack, I did,” he said, proudly nodding his head.

“Mother might have known, but she never said anything to me. She was content to be free from his tyranny as well. She was a lusty woman, my mother, and the death of her husband seemed only to give her the opportunity to take as many lovers as she wanted. It wasn’t uncommon to stumble upon several gentlemen in our house at several stages of undress. It never occurred to me that my mother’s whorish nature was not only born of her recent freedom but also a trait... until the day Michael approached me with the truth about my birth.”

“I confronted her, and she finally confessed to foisting me on the Baron, who raised me as his son. I was so angry with her for denying me a life that could have been better than the hell I had to endure, but soon she left on some prolonged journey to Bath. We did not exchange letters until several months ago, when I heard that she died from a disease. I would say it was quite a fitting end for such a lying whore.” He shrugged his shoulder nonchalantly. “If Michael had known he would have kept that

secret to himself. He ruined my life!”

“He only wanted to make amends...”

“More or less he was feeling guilty for his father’s mistake and thought he could buy my forgiveness with a token of friendship yet rather than declare our relationship, he kept the secret hidden.”

“If you didn’t grow up with your brothers, how did you know to come in through those passageways?” Louisa asked, keeping her tone curious.

“That?” he drawled, feverish delight radiating from him in waves. “It was the Duke.” At her doubtful frown, he flashed her a droll smile. “Not your husband, little Duchess. He is far too guarded for that. I meant Michael. Poor, little Duke was lonely when his father cocked up his toes and died and his brother joined the army. He had no other family, since their mother died when they were children. Then, he remembered me. His father’s bastard son. He decided to befriend me, spilling all his problems to my most eager ear. Soon, he was sharing secrets as well, and that was when he told me about the passageways. The poor sod.”

“Eli, you could have still had it worse in the Duke’s household. For one, the fact that he did not acknowledge you was all the indication you needed to know that he was not truly a good man.”

“Yes, he might not have been a good man, but at least I would have been the heir to the dukedom. I wouldn’t have had to climb up the social ladder from the bottom, enduring the barbs and the sneers of the dukes and earls who governed it. I could have been high on Society’s food chain, where everyone deferred to my words. Instead, my words were useless. Nobody wanted to listen to my ideas because I am no Duke.”

“It has not been easy for the dukedom either. They have been in debt for so long, and the manor is in such a state of disrepair...”

“That was because of Michael’s vices. But I could care less about that old manor. Michael, and now Percy, had never realized the privilege they were born with—a place in Society where their ideas were listened to no matter how useless they were, simply because they were the sons of a duke. That is why fate was only fair by taking Michael early. Percival would have been dead as well, but somehow the brat had returned alive. Dratted inconvenience.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“I don’t know who started the rumours that Percival was dead, but I was grateful for it.” Percival heard him laugh. “Michael went crazy trying to get information from the army, and in that desperation, I saw he was no longer fit for the title. He was so mad with grief that he often drank himself into oblivion, and I stood by, comforting him but biding my time. Somehow, the Duke had only birthed weak sons. But it didn’t matter. My title was just within my grasp, and it was almost too easy.”

“But he is family, surely you would not wish him dead,” Louisa said tentatively while her eyes searched the room for a means of escape.

“Have you not been listening to me, Duchess? I am quite capable of killing family. Hell, I killed my own father, and I am responsible for Michael’s death as well, I am afraid,” he intoned, his face splitting in the most sinister smile she had ever seen.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Here, Your Grace,” Diana announced, showing Percival the abandoned warehouse that sat in the middle of a small clearing miles away from his estate.

He nodded and returned her to the waiting carriage.

“Thank you for your help, Miss Diana,” he told her. “But I will need you to help me a little more.”

“What is it, Your Grace?” she asked, her eyes wide.

Diana had surprised him with her spine of steel. He had expected her to burst into

tears, but she had shown resolve, asking relevant questions and keeping silent whenever he needed to think.

“I need you to return to my estate. The constables should have arrived by now, and you’re the only one who can lead them here.”

She nodded and let him hand her into the carriage.

“I will return quickly. But...” She held on to his hand. “Do not do anything till we return. Louisa will be heartbroken if anything happens to you.”

“Thank you for your help, Miss Diana, and I am sorry this happened,” he sighed. “I should have been there with her.”

“There was nothing you could have done. You were tricked into leaving her alone,” Diana said with a small smile. “Do not blame yourself.”

How couldn’t he?

His wife had probably been kidnapped because of him. He sincerely hoped that she wasn’t being tortured for something he had done, even though his mind could not point to anything in particular.

“I cannot help it,” he admitted. “It was a stroke of good luck that you had arrived in time, or I would have had no clue about her whereabouts.”

“Indeed, it was. You mustn’t worry about Louisa. She is fairly capable of taking care of herself,” Diana reassured him. “if she could face down a knife at the expense of her life to save our sister, there is no danger she cannot overcome.”

“That doesn’t assure me as much you hope it would.” He laughed.

“I should hope it does. My sister is a strong woman. You just have to have faith that she will be fine till we rescue her.”

Percival really wanted to, but he couldn't help but worry about his wife.

“I must be off now if we are going to save her in time. Please wait till I return, Your Grace,” Diana warned. “It would do her no good if you move too quickly and she is hurt in the process.

He nodded and closed the door of the carriage, waiting till she was safely out of the woods before returning to scout the warehouse. It was late evening and with the sun gradually setting, the scene would have been picturesque hadn't it been the circumstances surrounding his presence there.

The place was oddly quiet, but he remembered Diana mentioning that two men had carried Louisa out of the house. But he was yet to see any of them.

He could see the light inside the warehouse, but he couldn't hear anything from where stood. He dared a closer look but stopped when he heard the sound of a branch breaking behind him.

He turned around, narrowly dodging a blow from a man he hadn't noticed before. He rose to his full height, looking around for his accomplice.

“Well.” The man smiled. “What do we have here?”

So much for not doing anything.

“I want my wife,” he gritted out, frowning as he readied himself for the fight to come.

The man laughed, squaring his shoulders. “Oi, Fred,” he called out. “The Duke wants

his wife.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

His friend emerged from the trees to his right, bearing a nasty grin. They had matching yellowing teeth, and from their smell, they hadn't washed in a while.

Rage filled Percival at the thought that they put their filthy hands on Louisa. She must have been so frightened when she awoke to see their faces.

He was grateful to see that they were not farmers who lived on his estate, so he wouldn't feel guilty once they were jailed. He only hoped that he wouldn't kill them in anger if they chose to fight him.

"He expects us to obey 'im just because 'e says so, Rowan." The one called Fred laughed.

"That's the problem with all of 'em noble folk," Rowan sneered, spitting on the ground. "They always expect us to obey their every command. Just like that slimy bastard who employed us."

"I do not want to hurt you," Percival told them. "I just want my wife."

They laughed and started circling him.

"You should be more worried about us hurting you, Your Grace," Fred snarled.

"She's not going anywhere," the first man said. "And neither are you."

Percival watched their movements, studying their body language. They didn't look like trained men but those who used their sizes to their advantage and their stances

told him all he needed to know.

It would be nothing short of a nuisance to deal with them, but since they insisted on being stubborn, he wasn't against showing them that they had crossed the wrong person.

They lunged, but he'd been expecting that and dodged their blows, which showed strength rather than skill.

They moved fast, swinging their fists without clear direction, and from the looks of things, they would tire quickly.

Percival used their lack of skill to his advantage, weaving through their twin attacks, dodging their blows until he could see and hear their laboured breaths.

He chose to fight then, each blow and kick meeting its target. They unsheathed their daggers then, and he knew that if he didn't end things quickly, he would end up with two more deaths on his conscience.

"You do not have to do this," he warned. "Whatever you're being paid, I can double it."

He wanted to give them the option to at least leave peacefully before the constables arrived, but it seemed they had chosen violence.

"What would happen to our reputation, then?" Fred laughed.

They lunged with their daggers, and he had to dodge even quicker than before, not wanting to be nicked by the honed blades that glinted in the moonlight. With the day now truly dark, there was an ominous feeling in the air as his senses honed from years of battle kicked in.

He hadn't had to fight for his life since his return to London and he didn't like the feeling.

With a final kick and blow, he rendered the two men unconscious just as the constables appeared at the edge of the clearing. They took in the scene and rushed towards him. Diana was right behind them, looking as tired as he felt.

"You just couldn't wait, could you?" She smirked, coming to inspect the scene.

"They came out of the trees and attacked me first," Percival answered with a grin of his own.

"Are they dead?" She asked stepping closer to them.

"They're not but right now I'm sure they wish they were."

She smiled brightly, straightening and he could see Louisa reflected in the mischief swimming in her eyes.

"Tie them up and hold them," he ordered the constables.

"Your Grace, I am Captain Mallory Briggs," one of the men said. "I was sorry to hear about what happened to your wife."

Percival waved off the man's sympathy and pointed at the warehouse. "I believe my wife's sister already told you everything she knew. My wife is being held in there, but I didn't see any more men, and I couldn't ask how many were inside," he told him. "That is all the information I have currently."

"We'll go ahead from here, Your Grace," Captain Briggs told him. "You have done enough for your wife. Leave the rest to us."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

Percival shook his head. There was no way he could leave saving Louisa in their hands. She would be frightened, and if she didn't see a familiar face, she might not truly recover from the ordeal. He didn't want her to be haunted by the nightmares she was sure to have after something as traumatic as this.

"I have to go with you," he insisted. "I need to make sure that my wife is all right. I won't interfere, but do not forget that I am a retired soldier."

The Captain muttered under his breath, then gave silent orders to his men, who followed him at a safe distance.

Percival turned to Diana and put a hand on her arm, stopping her. "I think you should wait here, Miss Diana," he advised. "We do not know what we'll be walking into, and I do not want you to get hurt. I will get Louisa back."

Diana shook her head stubbornly, reminding him so much of her sister. She even had the same stubborn look in her eyes.

"Do not try to stop me, Your Grace," she argued. "I want to help my sister just as much as you do."

"It will be dangerous."

"I do know that, but Louisa braved danger to save our sister," she said with a smile. "I think it's time someone braves danger for her."

Percival nodded. "Stay close to me, but at the first sign of danger, I want you to run."

Louisa won't forgive me if I let you get hurt."

They approached the warehouse slowly, their steps quiet against the wet grass surrounding the building. The closer they got, the harder Percival's heart beat in his chest.

I'm coming to you, my darling.

He sent a silent message to her even though he knew she wouldn't hear it.

Please, help me save her.

He prayed for the first time in a while.

He peered through the window in front of him and spotted Louisa sitting in a chair, her hands and feet tied, facing in his direction. A man was standing in front of her, his silhouette vaguely familiar. Percival squinted, trying to see if there were other people in the warehouse.

They seemed to be talking, and Louisa looked otherwise unharmed. Relief flooded him as he saw the stubborn set of her shoulders.

He moved silently towards the side of the building and peered through another window, but there were no other people visible from this angle. He was about to step away from the window when a beam of light fell on the man's face. His eyes widened in shock as he took in the face of the man he had once considered a friend.

Eli was standing before Louisa, glaring down at her, but Percival couldn't hear what was being said. He stumbled back from the window in shock.

Why would Eli kidnap Louisa?

“Your Grace, we found a way to get into the building without endangering the Duchess,” the Captain told him. “I’ve told my men to?—”

“No, this is personal. I will save my wife.”

“Your Grace, it is our job to?—”

“And she is my wife,” Percival spat, but then he remembered to keep his voice down. “I have to do this myself.”

He didn’t wait for permission and moved towards the gap in the wall they had found, slipping through it quietly. He could hear their voices better now, but he waited for the perfect time to move. He sincerely hoped Eli didn’t have a weapon. That would complicate things more.

He racked his brain, trying to come up with an explanation for his half-brother’s madness.

“You think they would have welcomed me with open arms? The spotless sons of the Colborne dynasty were more comfortable meeting me in the obscure corners of this city, treating me like a dirty secret to be hidden. They are the ones who were supposed to be secrets. I am the eldest. I would have inherited the dukedom if my whore of a mother had played her cards right. My father had the audacity not to claim me, to leave me to the mercy of the wretched, vindictive man who raised me as his son. I will never forget.”

Percival made sure to keep his steps soft and silent as he approached them. The task was extremely difficult, as some of the wooden floorboards were old and prone to creak, but he was grateful that Eli was so caught up in his rant that he didn’t seem to hear anything beyond the words spewing out of his lips.

“I don’t know who started the rumours that Percival was dead, but I was grateful for it.” Percival heard him laugh. “Michael went crazy trying to get information from the army, and in that desperation, I saw he was no longer fit for the title. He was so mad with grief that he often drank himself into oblivion, and I stood by, comforting him but biding my time. Somehow, the Duke had only birthed weak sons. But it didn’t matter. My title was just within my grasp, and it was almost too easy.”

Percival frowned as he tried to process the shock of Eli’s betrayal. The more he listened, the angrier he became. But with the knife pointed towards Louisa, he didn’t want to push the man to hurt her with any rash movements on his part.

So, Eli had had a hand in Michael’s death, after all.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

Percival was grateful that he hadn't involved the man in his investigations, but nonetheless, he wouldn't have thought it possible for Eli to repay Michael's kindness with such wickedness.

"I was honestly disappointed when he decided to marry you, but I didn't mind because, with that hideous scar on your face, I knew it was definitely not going to be a loving marriage. You were not his type, I thought, but how wrong I was. I saw the way he looked at you at that ball and knew that if I didn't move quickly, you would get with child soon."

Percival wondered if his half-brother really thought it would be that easy to inherit the dukedom when he was an illegitimate son. If he wasn't so angry, he would have laughed at the man's ambition.

So, Eli had killed his brother and kidnapped Louisa with the intent to kill her, and would have probably killed him too just because he was after a title that would never be his?

Percival shook his head, already picturing how he would deal with the man who had caused him so much pain already. To think, he had thought Eli was his friend. He had been right to warn Michael about associating with him, but his brother had always been too kind.

"You see, I can't allow that to happen," Eli went on. "I do not need you to produce little beasts like the two of you to continue the line of inheritance. The title is mine by right. It is what I'm owed as the Duke's firstborn!"

“I do not mind if you insult me, but do not call Percival a beast! If anyone is, it’s you, for you are a beast who kills his own family for a title,” Louisa snapped, looking angrier than Percival could have imagined. “Percival is nothing like you. He is kind and thoughtful and beautiful. The scars he has are only a testament to how bravely he fought for his country. He is not a coward like you. He doesn’t hide in the shadows and let someone else fight his battles for him.”

“You know nothing!” Eli growled. “You know nothing about my struggles. You’re just a pampered chit who has lived her whole life shielded from the horrors of reality.”

Louisa scoffed at him. “I do not wish to, for they are a coward’s battle,” she shot back. “You could have stood up to your father and asked him to acknowledge you. Instead, you chose to hurt the men who decided to bring you into their fold even when you were nothing more than the sniveling son of a baron!”

“Silence!” Eli barked, holding the knife to her neck. “Yours is a life I won’t regret taking. When Percival learns about your death, he will be even more heartbroken and will kill himself for not saving you from his curse. I will be right there to snatch the title from his cold, dead fingers. Goodbye, Duchess. It is a shame that your joy was only short-lived.”

Percival didn’t wait a second longer. He lunged at Eli.

“You wish, you bastard!”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Have you not been listening to me, Duchess? I am quite capable of killing family. Hell, I killed my own father, and I am responsible for Michael’s death as well, I am afraid.”

Louisa's eyes went wide at Eli's words, not expecting that he could have been so cruel. How could the man with ready smiles and jokes have turned into such a sinister creature?

It was almost unbelievable.

She tried to reconcile the man she had seen at the ball with this mad thing before her. His eyes were unfocused, as though he had been drinking, and he flicked the dagger so carelessly that she tried leaning further back in her chair if only to prevent any accidents.

He seemed to take her silence as a sign to continue his rant.

"I don't know who started the rumours that Percival was dead, but I was grateful for it." He laughed. "Michael went crazy trying to get information from the army, and in that desperation, I saw he was no longer fit for the title. It was almost too easy, using his desperation to find Percival to send him on a wild goose chase. Of course, I didn't need his blood on my hands, so I had someone else do it and make it look like an unfortunate accident. I wouldn't want anyone to trace it back to me."

Her head spun, whether from the effects of the drugs that had been used on her or the many truths that were being revealed, she didn't know.

Percival had grieved his brother, investigating in secret because he had suspected that Michael's death was no mere accident. She wondered how he would take the news if he discovered that he had been right all along, and worse still that it had been his half-brother who did it.

"I was honestly disappointed when Percival decided to marry you, but I didn't mind because, with that hideous scar on your face, I knew it was definitely not going to be a loving marriage. You were not his type, I thought, but how wrong I was. I saw the

way he looked at you at that ball and knew that if I didn't move quickly, you would get with child soon. You see, I can't allow that to happen," Eli went on. "I do not need you to produce little beasts like the two of you to continue the line of inheritance. The title is mine by right. It is what I'm owed as the Duke's firstborn!"

Her anger flared at his words. She was tired of people referring to her husband by that moniker simply because he preferred to stay away from the ton rather than subject himself to mindless gossip.

"I do not mind if you insult me, but do not call Percival a beast! If anyone is, it's you, for you are a beast who kills his own family for a title," Louisa snapped. "Percival is nothing like you. He is kind and thoughtful and beautiful. The scars he has are only a testament to how bravely he fought for his country. He is not a coward like you. He doesn't hide in the shadows and let someone else fight his battles for him."

The ropes dug into her hands, but she didn't care. He needed to understand that he didn't have the right to insult Percival when he was the one who behaved like a beast.

"You know nothing!" Eli snapped. "You know nothing about my struggles. You're just a pampered chit who has lived her whole life shielded from the horrors of reality."

"I do not wish to, for they are a coward's battle," she shot back. "You could have stood up to your father and asked him to acknowledge you. Instead, you chose to hurt the men who decided to bring you into their fold even when you were nothing more than the sniveling son of a baron?—"

"Silence!" Eli barked, holding the knife to her neck. "Yours is a life I won't regret taking. When Percival learns about your death, he will be even more heartbroken and will kill himself for not saving you from his curse. I will be right there to snatch the title from his cold, dead fingers. Goodbye, Duchess. It is a shame that your joy was

only short-lived.”

Her life flashed before her eyes, but rather than weep for herself, she wept for Percival, who would no doubt blame himself for her death. She sent up a silent prayer that he wouldn't grieve her for too long.

She closed her eyes, expecting the knife to pierce her skin at any moment, but she was shocked when she felt a rush of air and heard a familiar voice that made her heart soar.

“You wish, you bastard!”

She opened her eyes to see Percival lunge at Eli, making the man lose his grip on the knife. She noticed him wince in pain, and a bright red spot appeared on his arm. Somehow the dagger had cut him, even though he had moved quickly.

Eli stumbled back, his eyes wild with anger. He tried to fight back but fell to the floor. Percival raised his fists, but she didn’t want him to have Eli’s death on his conscience.

“No!” she cried out. “Please, don’t kill him. You do not want to have this haunting you.”

“He deserves to die!” Percival snarled, swinging back his fists.

“I understand, but let him be tried by the court.”

Percival looked almost wild with anger. His fists shook, but then he stepped back, his body vibrating with repressed energy.

“I do not need you to fight my battles!” Eli snapped at her, attempting to rise to his feet.

Percival pushed him back down, glaring at him. “Do not tempt me to hurt you, Eli,” he growled. “I just might kill you.”

“You would be doing me a favour,” Eli jeered. “You do not deserve the title, and I

would rather die than see you take what is rightfully mine.”

“Percival, ignore him.”

Louisa’s words seemed to resonate deep inside him because he moved closer to her and wrapped a protective arm around her.

“I feel sorry for you,” he hissed, looking down at Eli.

The man staggered to his feet, looking close to tears. “Fight me, Percival!” he yelled. “Damn you, fight me!”

“You’re not worth the effort,” Percival spat. His entire body shook with rage and grief, and Louisa longed to comfort him. She could tell Eli’s betrayal hurt even more than the grief of losing Michael.

“You can come in now,” he called loudly, before turning to her. “Are you all right, Louisa?”

Worry flickered in his eyes, and she knew that even though he put on a brave front, he had been frightened by the entire ordeal. His arm was still around her back.

Louisa nodded, letting her eyes run over him. She too had been frightened, but not because her life had been in danger. The thought of never seeing him again had scared her even more than she could admit.

He worked quickly to free her from her bonds as the constables came in to arrest a struggling Eli.

“The title is mine!” he yelled as he was dragged out. “I deserve it! This isn’t over, Percival! You will never keep the title!”

“Perc—”

“Louisa!” Diana cried, running to hug her.

The force with which her sister had slammed into her winded her, but she wrapped her arms around her nonetheless.

“You’re hurting me, Diana,” Louisa complained when Diana’s arms pressed against her sore ribs.

“I’m sorry, Louisa.” Diana pouted, releasing her. “I was so worried that you were harmed. Did that man hurt you in any way? I was so happy that His Grace came to Isabella’s estate. If I hadn’t seen him there, we might have never been able to save you so quickly.”

“It was indeed a fortunate thing that you came to visit.” Louisa smiled at her sister, ruffling her hair. “You’ve finally had some adventure. How does it feel?”

“Not as exciting as I thought,” Diana scoffed. “I was so scared. I thought I would never see you again.”

“I don’t intend to disappear any time soon.” Louisa smiled and turned to Percival. “Thank you for?—”

He pulled her into his arms suddenly, hugging her tightly. She hugged him back, burying her face in his chest and breathing in his warm, spicy scent. He breathed her in too, cradling her head, and any bit of residual fear dissipated.

He was so warm and solid that she couldn’t help but burrow further into him. Her body grew warm at his proximity, and she wished he would tilt her head up and kiss her like she had dreamed of since she had met him.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

A cough beside them reminded her that they weren't alone, and she found herself hiding her flushed cheeks in his chest. How could she have forgotten that they weren't alone?

"I'm going back home. Mother and Uncle must be worried sick," Diana announced with a naughty smile.

"You can stay with us tonight," Louisa offered, not wanting her sister to be out so late. "It isn't safe to be out so late, Diana."

Diana winked at her conspiratorially. "It is hardly late." She smiled. "Besides, I believe you two need some time alone."

"Diana!" Louisa hissed.

Percival chuckled softly and gently squeezed her hand. "I will have one of the constables escort you home, Miss Diana," he offered. "And please send word to the Duchess of Fangsdale that Louisa is safe and sound."

"Ah yes! Isabella would be worried out of her mind now," Diana cried. "I had better be off, but I will visit again tomorrow to ensure you are well, Louisa. Goodnight, Your Grace."

Louisa watched her sister wave goodbye to her husband, who waved back and smiled at how her sister no longer seemed to fear him.

"You really must tell me what happened while I was gone," she said, rubbing her

hands together as a cold draft blew past her.

Percival chuckled and wrapped one arm around her shoulders, pulling her into him again. She melted into him instantly. Then, she remembered the cut on his arm.

“You need to get your cut tended to,” she told him.

“I will once we are safely home.”

She nodded and allowed herself to be led out of the warehouse, shivering when they stepped into the cold night air. A wave of exhaustion hit her so suddenly that if she hadn’t been holding on to Percival, she would have fallen.

Sensing her weakness, he led her to the carriage and helped her inside, and she curled up against him as soon as the carriage set off for home. She was barely awake when they finally arrived, and rather than wake her up, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her to her bedroom.

“Oh, thank you for rescuing the Duchess, Your Grace!” Mrs. Owens cried, clasping her hands together. “The poor girl must have been scared senseless by those brutes.”

He felt Louisa stir in his arms and pulled her closer against his body, adjusting her weight in his hands.

“I am well, Mrs. Owens.” Louisa smiled at the kind woman. “A little bruised but otherwise well.”

“Please get the footmen to draw a bath for the Duchess and send for the doctor,” Percival ordered.

“I do not need all that, Percival,” Louisa protested. “I am well.”

“I won’t feel comfortable if he doesn’t check you for injuries. You’ve suffered a great shock.”

She placed a hand on his chest. “You worry too much.”

He frowned at her. “For good reason.”

“I will be back shortly,” Mrs. Owens announced, smiling at them both before scurrying away.

Percival gently laid Louisa on the couch in her room. She couldn’t help the smile that crossed her face as he took her small hands in his large ones, his thumb caressing the red bands around her wrists where the ropes bit into her skin.

“Thankfully, it doesn’t look like it will scar,” he remarked, still looking at her hands. “It might bruise a little, but it will fade with time.”

She nodded, swallowing. There were so many things left unsaid, but she didn’t know if he wanted to talk about it.

“What is it?” he asked, suddenly looking amused. “If you have something on your mind, just say it.”

“I just... I can’t believe you were right, after all,” she admitted, bowing her head. “I’m sorry that your brother was murdered. And I am more sorry about Eli’s betrayal.”

She watched emotions flicker across his face and hoped that she hadn’t hurt him by opening a wound he would have rather healed from in private.

He nodded, still looking at her hands. “I have been seeking the truth for so long, and

now that I have it, I don't know what to do with it.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

She squeezed his hand. “At least the suspect was apprehended,” she tried. “You can finally rest and grieve properly.”

He chuckled, rubbing her wrists again. “Perhaps I should have let you hit him.”

“I might have killed him if you had,” she mumbled with a frown.

He laughed then. “I wouldn’t have let you stain your delicate hands with blood.”

“I still can’t believe such beasts exist,” she scoffed, shaking her head. “Why would anyone take someone else’s life?”

“Are you talking about me?” he asked seriously, even though his eyes were filled with mirth.

She rolled her eyes at him, shoving him away. “I would never.”

“I know,” he said, nodding.

He looked thoughtful for a moment, and she wondered what he was thinking of.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, playing his game from earlier.

“You and what you said at the warehouse,” he answered honestly. “I can’t help but wonder if you were being honest or if you were just buying yourself more time.”

“I meant everything I said, Percival,” she answered. “You are so kind and thoughtful

and everything a woman would want in a husband. It... It has made it so hard for me because I don't think I can continue this marriage of convenience we agreed on. I understand that you might not feel the same way, but I have fallen in love with you, and I say it now if only to let you know, so you can make your decision. If you choose not to be with me, then I would understand..."

Her words were silenced with a kiss that said everything Percival didn't. She couldn't help but bury her hands in his hair, pulling him closer as he moaned into her mouth.

They pulled apart after a while, and he cupped her face in his hands.

"I love you too, Louisa."

He kissed her again, and this time, she poured all the love she felt for him into the kiss. His hands roamed over her body and hers his, their breaths mingling as he pulled her closer.

His hands moved to her stays, and her hands tugged at his shirt, but before they could go any further, a knock sounded at the door.

"I can't have a moment of peace in this house," he grumbled.

She laughed and leaned close to him. "We have our whole lives ahead of us, husband."

"But I want you now, wife."

"Your Graces." The knock came again. "The doctor is here."

"Show him in, Mrs. Owens," Louisa called, slapping Percival's hand away, which had been inching up her thigh. "You need to get that arm checked, remember? I don't

want you to have any more scars.”

“But this is one I’m proud to wear.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She frowned. “I feel guilty enough as it is.”

“All right,” he relented. “I’ll comply.”

“If you behave, I might be a little more willing tonight.”

“You’ve become more naughty, wife.” He smiled, nipping her ear.

“Only because I have a naughty teacher.”

Percival watched the doctor examine Louisa and was grateful when he pronounced that she was not harmed. When it was time for his own examination, he ignored the doctor’s wide-eyed stare at the scars crossing his chest.

He coughed to break the man’s stare and urged him to look at the cut on his arm.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“You will need stitches, Your Grace,” the doctor announced.

“All right.” Percival nodded and then turned to Louisa. “Can you wait in the other chamber? You do not need to see this.”

She smiled and came to take his hand in her own. “You forget that I have had my own experience,” she said, pointing to her face. “You will need something strong.”

She rang the call bell and Anne answered almost immediately.

“Please get Tobias to bring a bottle of the duke’s favourite scotch.” She told the girl.

“Yes, your grace.”

The doctor prepared his instruments while they waited.

A knock sounded on her door a few minutes later and she gave admittance to Tobias who had brought the bottle as well as a glass. The man looked visibly worried at the amount of blood that had stained the shirt he had been wearing but said nothing.

“I will be fine Tobias.” He told him with a smile. “It is only a flesh wound.”

“Indeed, your grace.” He replied.

Tobias poured him a finger of scotch, which he downed in one gulp. It wouldn’t be enough, but Percival didn’t want to drink in front of his wife.

“If you need more, you should have some. I do not mind.” She told him.

“I do not want to over imbibe with you present.”

“I would understand if you did it this once.” She said with a smile touching his hair.

“I had to do the same when they stitched mine.”

He frowned despite himself as he recalled how she had gotten her scar. She must have been in so much pain yet she still smiled and tried to comfort others.

“I do hope you were given the justice you deserved.” He frowned.

She nodded.

“She was exiled from England. Had she not been a nobleman’s daughter it would have been worse for her.”

He nodded and was silent for a moment. The doctor cleared his throat reminding them he was still present.

“You really must drink some more, Percy.” She told him, eyes begging.

He nodded and accepted the glass from her, drinking as she poured until he felt the fringes of alcohol induced sleep.

She held his hand and nodded at the doctor to start, wincing each time the needle pierced Percival’s flesh. He was grateful for the small, soothing circles she rubbed on his hand and how she didn’t swoon at the sight.

“You will need to keep it clean so it doesn’t get infected. Change the bindings tomorrow morning,” the doctor told Louisa. “I will come again the day after

tomorrow to see how well he is healing. Until then, Your Grace, do take care with your arm.”

The meaning behind his words was clear, and Louisa flushed.

It was still a marvel how shy she was even after everything they had done. Percival would have to remedy that soon. He liked her innocence, but she needed some corruption.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Tobias showed the doctor out, leaving them with their much needed privacy.

The second the door clicked shut, Percival pulled his wife into his lap.

“He just told you to be careful with your arm, Percival,” she scolded him. But she didn’t move away, wrapping her arms around his neck. “You never seem to listen.”

He shrugged, smiling naughtily at her. “It would have kept me away from you, so I didn’t see any reason to obey.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

She threw her head back and laughed, and he decided right then that it was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

“I love hearing you laugh,” he confessed.

“Really?” she asked.

“Indeed,” he said, running his nose down her neck. “It is just one more beautiful sound you make.”

“Is that so?” she breathed, tilting her head back. “What other sounds do you find beautiful?”

He cocked an eyebrow at her question and grinned. She learned really quickly.

“I like the sound you make when I kiss your neck.”

That statement was followed by the corresponding action.

“And the sound you make when I palm your very beautiful breasts.”

She gasped when his hands did so, and he smiled. He really did like that sound.

“And the sound you make when I slide inside you.”

Her breath hitched as his fingers slid up her thigh to her core. She was already drenched for him.

Percival felt his member twitch in anticipation, but he didn't want to frighten her if she wasn't ready. He wouldn't blame her, considering the ordeal she had been through.

"You say the naughtiest things," she gasped as his finger slid inside her.

"Hmm."

He continued teasing her till she started riding his fingers. He groaned as with each movement of her hips, she ground against his straining member, and if he didn't move her, he would spill his seed in his breeches.

He sensed her getting closer to her peak and pumped his fingers into her, holding her as she screamed out her pleasure.

He really did love that sound.

She fell limply against him, and he lifted her, moving her to her bed so she could sleep comfortably. He brushed her hair from her face and pulled the blanket over her.

Her breaths were deep and slow, causing him to smile at how quickly she had fallen asleep. He, too, felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him, and he rose to return to his chambers. Hopefully, he would be able to have a couple of hours of sleep before the nightmares came.

"Don't leave," she begged, gripping his arm suddenly.

He paused and slid back into her bed.

"I thought you were asleep," he murmured, wrapping the blanket tighter around her.

“I was, but I felt you move.” She pouted. “Must you go? I would feel safer if you were here beside me.”

He wanted to refuse, but seeing the fear in her eyes, he pulled her closer and kissed her forehead. “You should sleep, Louisa.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” he asked worriedly. “Are you afraid you’ll have nightmares?”

She shook her head. “There is an uncomfortable heat in my sex,” she whined.

“Louisa,” he warned. “I do not want to exhaust you.”

“Please, husband,” she begged, running her hands over his chest.

He groaned, giving in to her.

He was sure the entire manor would hear her cries, but if this was the only way he could comfort her, then he would.

When she screamed out her pleasure and finally fell asleep, he slipped out of her bed to head to his study.

The dynamics of their marriage had changed, and now that his feelings had been laid bare, he feared the future.

What if he couldn't be the man she needed him to be?

"Are you having trouble sleeping, Your Grace?" Tobias asked, stepping into the study.

Percival nodded, pouring himself a drink.

"Why? Are you still having nightmares?"

"No. Well, yes, but not this time," he answered. "That is not why I'm still awake. I... I told her I loved her, and now I do not know what to do."

"You love her," Tobias stated, as though it were an obvious thing.

"I don't know how."

“Have you tried asking her?”

Percival stared blankly at the butler, wondering why he hadn't thought of it when it was clearly the most simple thing to do.

“I... I haven't,” he answered honestly.

“There's no way you will be able to love the Duchess the way she needs to be loved if you do not ask her.”

“You're correct, Tobias.” Percival nodded, rising. “I will see you in the morning.”

The butler nodded and smiled before leaving.

Percival had spent so long ignoring all the little things his wife had said and done to show him her heart. He would start by doing the one thing she had asked for, and then he would spend the rest of his life loving her the way she wanted him to.

“It is a shame that a peer would stoop so low as to kill his own brother,” one of the constables leading Eli to the carriage said.

Eli struggled against his bonds. How dare they treat him like some criminal when it was he who had been wronged? It was Percival who should have been arrested for denying him his birthright.

He struggled again, hitting one of the constables and pushing the other down as he attempted to escape. If he ran into those useless cutthroats he had hired, then perhaps he would still be able to get his revenge.

“Stop, My Lord,” the constable warned, brandishing a gun.

Eli laughed to himself because he knew there was no way they would shoot him. Not if they didn't want to lose their heads.

"Stop, or I'll shoot," the constable warned again.

Eli heard the sound before he felt a burning sensation in his abdomen and fell to his knees. They had dared to shoot him?

"Damn, you shot him."

As the world faded into pain and nothingness, the last thing he heard was, "Send word to the Duke. His brother is dead."

Epilogue

"I think we need a bath," Louisa announced as she felt Percival trail kisses down her neck.

She had finally fallen asleep after Percival had comforted her in the way he deemed most appropriate, but it seemed her husband's desire for her wouldn't let him leave her to rest even though they both needed it.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

She understood that he had been frightened by the whole ordeal and shocked by the truth of his brother's demise, but since he wasn't prone to discussing his feelings, he could only express them physically. Previously, he would have gone to his room to work off the excess energy, but it seemed her body had become a better alternative.

Her body grew hot instantly as his lips traveled even lower, desire coursing through her veins. She couldn't help but wonder if it would always be like this between them.

"Husband, I feel positively dirty, and if my nose is correct, then you are too," she protested, trying to free herself of his hold.

"I do not mind at all, wife," he said playfully. "You're always too proper anyway."

She shook her head and pushed at his shoulders. "We need a bath and food."

"Fine," he grumbled, looking so much like a petulant child that she couldn't help but laugh.

He rose from the bed, and her eyes widened as they landed on his jutting member. The darned man didn't seem in the least bit disturbed. He even stretched out his arms above his head, winking at her.

"Enjoying the view, aren't you?" he teased with a naughty smile.

She shook her head, tossing a pillow at him. "Get dressed quickly," she ordered. "Or you'll give Anne a fright."

He laughed and then thankfully shrugged on a robe before ringing for the maid.

“Won’t you get dressed too, dear wife?” he asked with a raised eyebrow. “Or do you want to give the young footmen a good view?”

Louisa shook her head and rose, walking past him shyly to get a robe. She could feel heat everywhere his eyes caressed her, which made her dress even slower.

He stepped closer to her, wrapping a hand around her waist and pulling her back into him, and for a second, she wondered if he would take her from behind as he had the night before. A thrill shot through her at the thought.

“You’re much too beautiful for me, Louisa,” he whispered, turning her around to face him. “Much too beautiful.”

He lowered his head to kiss her but then stopped as a knock sounded at the door. He groaned, causing her to giggle.

“Come in,” Louisa called.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Anne greeted.

“Good morning, Anne.” Louisa smiled. “His Grace and I would like to have a bath and some food.”

Anne curtsied and left, only to return moments later with a large tray laden with more than enough food for the two of them. Tobias’s nephews followed behind her with the huge bathing tub.

Louisa caught the fond look Anne gave Lawrence, who had finally proposed, and smiled as she recognized it as the same look Percival gave her.

They ate as the men filled the tub, surprised by their appetite as they cleared the tray.

“Will that be all, Your Grace?” Anne asked once the bath was ready.

“Yes, Anne,” Percival answered for his wife. “The Duchess and I are not to be disturbed for the rest of the day. If anyone needs anything, I believe Tobias and your mother are capable of sorting it out.”

Anne nodded, blushing, before she hurried out of the chambers, much to Louisa’s chagrin. She swatted her husband’s hand, shaking her head at the unrepentant look on his face.

“You have positively scandalized her,” she scolded him.

“She is to be married soon,” he argued. “She needs to understand early enough.”

“I do not think it is our job to educate her on such matters.”

“Didn’t your sisters educate you on such matters?” he asked pointedly.

“They did, but?—”

“Anne doesn’t have sisters, and she would rather not ask her mother about such things. You’re around the same age, so be prepared to encourage her when the time comes.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

Louisa flushed as she imagined the conversation she'd have with the maid. She still remembered how the conversation had gone between her and her sisters, and it hadn't been an exciting adventure she would like to relive. She certainly hoped Diana wouldn't need her advice on such matters because there was no way she could discuss such intimate matters with the same straight face her sisters had.

"Come, wife. The bath is getting cold," Percival called, disrobing.

"You surely don't mean to?—"

"You're overdressed," he interrupted. "Come here."

She sighed but obeyed, allowing him to help her into the tub. It was much easier to obey him than to have him tease her until she finally gave in.

The water was warm and soothing against her skin, and as she was fully submerged, she let out a sigh of relief as all the knots in her muscles loosened.

He slid in behind her, pulling her back against his chest, and the moment couldn't have been any more perfect. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against his chest, heaving another long sigh.

"Happy?" he asked.

She could hear the mirth in his voice and nodded. "Very," she murmured. "You?"

"Very."

She smiled, lifting her hand to ruffle his hair before reaching for the washcloth. He snatched the fabric before she could and tutted at her.

“I want to do it.”

“I can do it,” she protested.

“I know you can, but I want to help.”

He gently moved the cloth down her neck, then the valley between her breasts, and then her abdomen and lower, but when her breath hitched, he moved the cloth away from her heated core.

Wretched man.

He washed her slowly and methodically, letting him pamper her. But when she offered to do the same, he tried to deny her.

“That is not very fair,” she protested. “You bathed me.”

“Because it is a husband’s pleasure to do so,” he answered smugly.

“It should be a wife’s pleasure to do the same.” She pouted. “I also have a right to your body.”

He smirked, handing her the cloth. “You do indeed, wife.”

She turned to face him, her face turning red at the intimacy of what she wanted to do.

“Have I frightened you, wife?” he asked.

“No. I was just wondering where to begin.”

He barked out a laugh, and her tension dissipated.

She moved the cloth as methodically as he had, not letting herself linger too long anywhere. When her hands dipped lower to his abdomen, she tried not to let his proud, jutting member intimidate her, moving the cloth over him.

He had never let her touch him there, and now that she had, she marveled at the velvet-smooth yet steely hardness.

“If you keep teasing me like that, we might not get out of the bathtub.”

She smiled and pulled back, putting the cloth away.

He cupped her face in his hands, his eyes searching her face. His thumb caressed her scar, and he placed a kiss on it, shocking her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“I love you, Louisa,” he said suddenly. “Much more than I could hope to express.”

Her heart swelled at the confession, and she kissed him back.

How had she ever thought he was repulsed by her?

“Take me to bed, husband.”

She giggled as he lifted her out of the tub, barely letting her breathe out her surprise before he took her lips in a kiss.

As Percival watched his wife sleep, he couldn't help but smile at the soft frown on her face as she held tightly onto his arm. He wondered what it was that she was dreaming about that had put such a look on her face.

He resisted the urge to kiss her forehead, as he knew she would wake up and scold him for doing so, when they had barely slept.

She breathed deeper, moving even closer to him, and he felt his desire for her stir again. He wondered why he could never get enough of her even after the many times they had made love yesterday.

Even more so, he was shocked when he realized it was already dark outside. Somehow, he too had slept, and to his surprise, if he hadn't been roused from his sleep by his growling stomach, he would have slept even longer.

He wanted to laugh, but he held it in.

He had finally slept without being haunted by the nightmares that had plagued his waking and sleeping hours since he had returned to London. He looked down at his sleeping wife again, unable to deny that somehow she had helped him forget the burdens he had been holding on to.

Her eyes opened, startling him, and he hoped he hadn't woken her up. She smiled at him, looking so beautiful that his heart stuttered in his chest. He couldn't help the smile that threatened to split his face in two.

"Did I wake you?" he asked, kissing her forehead.

She shook her head, burying her hands in his hair. "No. I just felt like I had done nothing but sleep today." She laughed.

"You have done other things," he teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

She slapped his shoulder, sitting up. "That is all you ever think about."

"Only because I am thinking about you."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "When did you become so sweet, darling husband?"

"I have always been sweet," he answered, pretending to be offended.

She shot him a look and then nodded her concession. "I won't argue with you."

"Are you hungry?" he asked, rising from the bed. "I feel like I could eat a horse."

"I'm in the mood for a race," she announced, beaming. "If I lose, I'll make us a plate, and if you lose, you will."

She rose quickly and donned a night gown, wrapping a robe about herself, smiling when she felt him hug her from behind. She turned to face her husband, wrapping her hands around his neck, burying her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck.

Percival smirked against her lips, nipping softly.

“You do realize I have the upper hand,” he pointed out. “You still get lost on the way to your chambers. How do you expect to win this game?”

“Like this,” she announced, before taking off.

He threw back his head and laughed at how playful she was.

With her in his life, he knew there would be no room for the darkness of his past. She was a breath of fresh air, bringing life to the formerly cold halls of his home.

Watching her run down the hallway, laughing without a care in the world, he couldn't help but smile. She would teach him to be young and happy again without even knowing it.

He decided to compete and laughed when he heard her protest behind him.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:34 am

“You won,” she said, pouting when they finally caught their breath outside the kitchen doors.

They had startled a few servants and earned some amused looks, but otherwise, no one had been hurt in their childish game.

“That I did.” He smiled.

“Well, what do you want?” she asked, still pouting.

“You,” he answered, pulling her close and kissing her.

She smiled against his mouth, burying her fingers in his hair and letting him know that she was no longer upset at her loss.

“As much as I like that idea, I would rather have actual sustenance right now,” she murmured, pushing him away.

She pushed past the doors, saluting cook and the kitchen staff who stared at the two of them with surprise. She waved off their attempts to stop her and eventually chased them from the kitchen as she wanted to focus.

He sat back and watched her make a plate for both of them, and while she did, he couldn't help but wonder what he had done to deserve her. She didn't know just how much he had been drowning before she came into his life and saved him. Perhaps he would let her know with time.

Tonight, he would thank her in the way he knew they would both enjoy, but first, he had to replenish his energy.

The End?